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A Ghost Among Us

One woman's journey to the brink of what's possible on the Pacific Crest Trail

by Megan Michelson

photography by Nick Hall

She wasn't like the rest of them. ¶ They knew that. It was June 7, for one, much later than the others had come. Temperatures in the Sonoran Desert, the southern terminus of the Pacific Crest Trail, were spiking at 120ºF. The hundreds ahead of her had started their hikes as early as March. Now there were the stragglers and the maybe-gonna-make-its, and there was her. ¶ Barney and Sandy Mann have seen all types in the nine years they've been offering their San Diego-area home as a PCT staging ground. At mile zero, most of their guests are fresh-faced and clean-clothed, their boots unscuffed, their pride and plans intact. They range from the scared and ill-equipped to the bullheaded and eager, and they carry nervous laughter about them like a weather system. "In the late season, we get two kinds of hikers," Barney says. "They either really know what they're doing or they don't know what they're doing at all. We make sure they have our phone number because they're probably not going to make it very far."

She didn't say much when she arrived. How do you tell strangers that you're hiking to free your soul? She just busied herself organizing her pack and devouring a worn copy of *Yogi's PCT Handbook*. Most hikers go by their given names at this point, but she referred to herself simply as Anish (pronounced ah-NISH).

She wore a white, collared shirt, a knee-length skirt, and trail running shoes, giving her the look of a sneaker-commuting schoolteacher. Her shoulder-length brown hair bordered full, rose-colored cheeks and wild, hungry-looking eyes. She carried a small backpack, loaded with a beat-up sleeping bag, a one-person tent, a Therm-a-Rest, a wispy rain jacket and wool baselayers, a compact headlamp, 6 liters of water, and snack food pre-portioned into small meals.

The next morning, June 8, 2013, Barney, Sandy, and Anish piled into the Manns' Prius at 5 a.m., and drove the 75 miles to the trailhead in Campo, California, near the Mexican border.

Nobody spoke as they pulled up to the monument, four weathered pillars of wood at the start of the PCT. More than 2,500 trail miles—crossing desert, forest, canyons, and mountain after mountain—lie between this spot and Canada. As Anish had told the Manns, she planned to hike that distance faster than anybody ever had. She gathered her belongings while Sandy took a few photos and said goodbye. "She seemed very confident, but there was no braggadocio," Sandy recalls.

At 6:27 a.m., Anish signed the trail register: *Well, here goes. To Canada. -Anish.*

In the previous two months, hundreds of hikers had signed the register. But Anish wasn't like them, and none of them knew she was coming. In time, everyone on the trail would know her name. And they'd all be hoping to catch sight of her.

BY HER SECOND DAY on the trail, 2-inch blisters bulged off both her ankles. The arid heat dried out her sinuses, causing her nose to drip a steady patter of blood into the dust. But she stopped only to dump sand from her sneakers. She didn't have a moment to spare.

Anish knew from the start that every minute of the two months she planned to be out there would matter. At the time, the self-supported speed record was held by Scott Williamson, a man who'd made a career out of setting and breaking PCT records. Williamson thru-hiked the PCT in 64 days, 11 hours, and 19 minutes in 2011. That attempt bested his previous record by a single day. At the pinnacle of athleticism, endurance records are won a few steps at a time. And almost entirely, they're held by men (see Fleet of Foot, next page).

Indeed, in 2013 there wasn't even a known speed record for women on the PCT. The simple fact that Anish would be first would have given her license to set her target comfortably slower than the men's record, but she wanted to measure herself by the same bar: to be the fastest, no asterisk, no separate column. Yet this wasn't a women's empowerment thing. "I figured I'd go for the record that did exist," she later explained. "My motivation wasn't coming from a competitive place. I just wanted to see what I could do for myself. I wanted to see what was possible."

What *was* possible? Could she set her mind free by pushing herself so hard and so long that the effort drowned the voices that had been nagging her as long as she could remember?

Anish was born Heather Anderson, the daughter of a former Navy man turned farm and factory worker and

Heather "Anish" Anderson in the forest near her Bellingham, Washington home.

his wife, a social worker, in rural Michigan. She was sharp at academics, but struggled with her weight. By third grade, her peers labeled her "the smart, fat one" and exiled her to the margins of grade-school society.

"Heather was very shy as a kid, always in the back or apart from the main crowd," says Darcie Schueller, a childhood friend. "She hated having her pictures taken and would scowl or frown in all of them."

Heather turned to exploring the woods behind her house alone. The deep forest intrigued her, but she was scared, too—of wild animals, of getting lost, of never being found—so she'd bring her dog and her dad's hammer. Out there among the cedars and oaks, she found a sense of belonging she hadn't known before. There was no judgment out there. She was free.

BEYOND A DOZEN or so day-hikers, Anish saw almost no one until the second week of her hike. She passed other tents, but under the veil of darkness. The most common experience others had of Anish was footsteps in the night.

At mile 454, a collection of trailers and canvas tents make up a place called Hiker Heaven, an unlikely paradise for trail-seasoned trekkers who arrive to wash laundry, drink beer, check email, and gorge on burgers and fries. Hikers gather on hay bales around the campfire, swapping stories about the trials of the first four weeks.

It was dark when Anish arrived, just 10 days and 12 hours into her hike. She dropped her gear and went to the garage to get loaner clothes so she could shower and do laundry. Another thru-hiker approached and asked her, "Are you the Ghost?"

"No," she responded, a little confused. "I'm Anish."

It seemed like a weird question. But thanks to word of mouth on the trail—partly from chatter on social media, partly from hiker-to-hiker gossip—many thru-hikers had heard about Anish. They knew little, just a few shadowy details. Some knew that she'd hiked the Appalachian Trail, Continental Divide Trail, and Pacific Crest Trail (the Triple Crown of hiking) once before, but without fanfare and at an unremarkable pace. Anyone who dug deep online might have discovered that she'd started running ultramarathons recently, but again, without raising any heads. Mostly, they just knew two things: She was attempting to break Scott Williamson's hallowed speed record, and only a lucky few had seen her. One day, word on the trail was that she was en route, but by the next day she was already gone. So early on, thru-hikers took to calling her by another name: Anish the Ghost. Or simply, the Ghost.

By 6 a.m. the next morning, when Hiker Heaven's owner went to raise the garage door and open for the regular breakfast hustle, the ghost was gone.

BY THE TIME she was in high school, Heather was using food as a crutch.

"I hated my body and myself," she says. "I consoled myself by eating bowls full of Oreos and milk as though they were cereal. But somewhere deep inside, I knew I was capable of doing something more."

When she graduated in 2000, she carried 200 pounds on her 5'8" frame, and could barely summit a flight of stairs without sucking wind. She felt alone. She felt like she deserved to be.

During her freshman year at Indiana's Anderson University, she signed on for a Grand Canyon summer with a program called A Christian Ministry in the National Parks. She's not sure what motivated her, but something clicked. She felt transfixed by the canyon's depth. It made the world feel bigger, like there was a place for her in it. "I remember not feeling scared anymore," she says now. Her roommates invited her on a hike down the Bright Angel Trail. Though she felt familiar self-doubt, she decided to go for it.

In 115°F heat, most of the group decided to turn back partway, but one girl, who was tall, slender, and athletic, was set on making it to Indian Garden. And Heather was set on being that kind of girl, if only she could break free of the one she already was.

On the way back up, she ran out of food and water and nearly succumbed to dehydration. Leaning against the canyon wall, letting the mules pass her by, she felt like her heart might give up. Then she determined that she wasn't going to quit. "I knew I couldn't stop, couldn't give up. No matter how horrible it was, it had to be done," she says. "I had to dig deep and I'd never had to do that before." It was baptism by suffering, and by the time she climbed out, she was new.

"Once I recovered from that hike, I realized I wanted to do it again. Removing all the pain from it, descending through the layers of the canyon made a huge impression on me," she says. "I lost my heart and soul to it right away."

She logged 150 miles in the Grand Canyon that summer and, instead of Oreos, she devoured trail, ultimately losing 70 pounds and gaining confidence over the next few years. The day after she graduated college, in May 2003, she handed her diploma to her parents, got a ride to Springer Mountain in Georgia, and hiked the 2,180-mile Appalachian Trail. Along the way she started calling herself Anishinaabe, after her family's Native American heritage. Anish,

FLEET OF FOOT

There's no official keeper of long-trail speed records, but the website fastestknowntime.proboards.com collects honor-code submissions.

Appalachian Trail

2,180 miles
Supported Jennifer Pharr Davis, 46 days, 11 hours, 10 minutes (2011)
Self-supported* Matt Kirk, 58 days, 9 hours, 40 minutes (2013)

Pacific Crest Trail

2,650 miles
Supported Josh Garrett, 59 days, 8 hours, 14 minutes (2013)
Self-supported Heather Anderson, 60 days, 17 hours, 12 minutes (2013)

Wonderland Trail, WA

95 miles
Supported Kyle Scaggs, 20 hours, 53 minutes (2006)
Unsupported Richard Kressler, 27 hours, 16 minutes (2013)

John Muir Trail, CA

223 miles
Supported Hal Koerner and Mike Wolfe, 3 days, 12 hours, 41 minutes (2013)
Unsupported Bret Maune, 3 days, 14 hours, 13 minutes (2009)

Colorado Trail

500 miles
Supported Scott Jaime, 8 days, 7 hours, 40 minutes (2013)
Unsupported Shawn Forry, 10 days, 19 hours, 5 minutes (2012)

Long Trail, VT

271 miles
Supported Jonathan Basham, 4 days, 12 hours, 46 minutes (2009)
Unsupported Travis Wildeboer, 6 days, 17 hours, 25 minutes (2010)

**Self-supported means thru-hiker style: no pre-arranged support, and walking in and out of towns for resupply. Unsupported means carrying everything at once.*

for short.

By 2007, she finished the Triple Crown, married fellow PCT thru-hiker Remy Levin, and got a job in Bellingham, Washington, designing ebooks at a software company. And that's where the story is supposed to end: girl finds herself, marries boy, lives happily ever after. But that's not what happened.

That life meant saying goodbye to the woman who had slept outside for hundreds of nights, hiked alone for thousands of miles, and fallen in love with the sound of her own footsteps. It meant saying goodbye to Anish, and Heather wasn't ready. She wrote on her blog: *Why am I not like other people I know? Why can't I be happy with the things that made my parents, my friends, my siblings happy?*

She tried to be content with life's ordinary things—a 9-to-5 job, a marriage, a home. But none of it was enough. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she felt lost again.

In 2012, after five years of marriage, Remy was happy to settle down and Heather the polar opposite. They divorced. Soon after, either in crisis or recovering from it, she quit her job, sold all of her belongings, and bought a one-way bus ticket to Ashland, Oregon, and the trailhead to her comfort zone: the PCT in Oregon and Washington. It was the one place she knew she could be herself again, where she could find Anish.

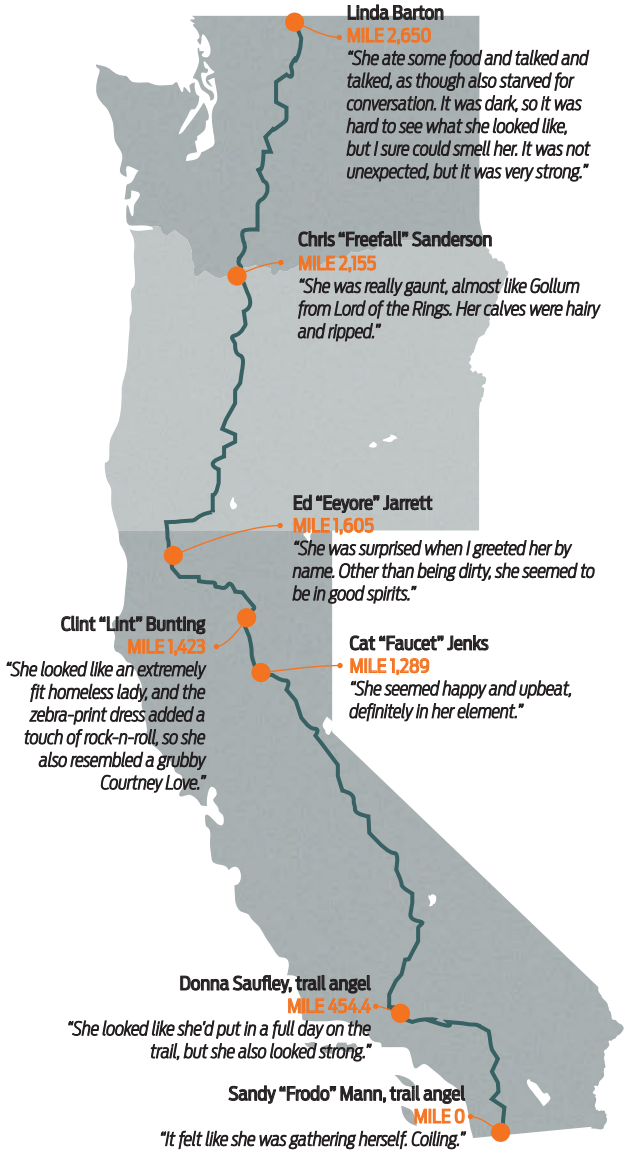
"I was very broken in a lot of personal ways," she says. "I was unhappy in my job, in my relationship. I knew I needed to leave, but it was also hard to go. So much of my life felt unstable."

On the trail, she moved at her own pace, and at last, she felt in control of motion and emotion; stability reclaimed. "Trails and the wilderness have this amazing capacity to heal. They are for you whatever you need them to be," she says. "When I went through Oregon, I bawled and screamed and cried about what my life had become. But by the time I finished that 1,000-mile hike, I was happy again."

Before she even crossed the Oregon-Washington border, she decided to attempt a speed record the following year. "It wasn't about being the fastest. It was more the personal push," she says. "For years, I always wondered, 'How fast could I do one of these trails?' It had been stewing for a long time and the time was right to finally find out."

SIGHTINGS OF THE GHOST

Impressions of those who spotted Anish along her 2,650-mile journey from Mexico to Canada.



SPEED HIKING IS AN EXERCISE in self-denial. There's irony in moving fast through scenery that makes most people want to slow down, take it all in. But the singleness of purpose, the surrender to discomfort and suffering, is its own reward.

Day after day, Anish rose before 5 a.m. and began to walk within minutes. She'd sometimes fall asleep mid-stride, a quick blink of the eye that would send her into a brief, semi-conscious state. She stopped only for a few seconds when the hourly alarm on her watch reminded her to grab food from her pack.

She didn't move particularly fast—roughly 3 mph—but she walked. And walked. By 11 p.m., with her legs nearly crumpled underneath her, she'd pitch her tent on whatever surface she could find and gulp down a protein shake. She'd punch in a journal entry on her phone, staring at a sticker on the case that read, "Never, never, never give up."

By early July, she'd caught the main wave of northbounders, passing many who'd started weeks before her. Near Belden, California, around the 1,289-mile mark, thru-hiker Cat "Faucet" Jenks and her boyfriend, Harry "Sharkbite" Hamlin, were eating energy bars on a trailside boulder when a woman in a zebra-print dress came whirling around the bend.

When thru-hikers meet on the trail, they usually talk food, shared acquaintances, and weather, then say goodbye, promising to pass messages back or look for each other up the way. This year, something else was going on, and Jenks and Hamlin had been on the lookout for Anish. They imagined a grizzled woman with concrete for legs, intimidating even just in myth.

They weren't expecting a scrawny hiker in a zebra dress, which Anish had recently purchased at a thrift store in Sierra City for $1. And her pack looked too light for a self-supported thru-hiker. Could that be her? But as Anish got closer to them, they saw her focus and had no doubt.

They tried to grill her about her pace, but the conversation

was brief. Anish had to push on. "See you guys up the trail," she hollered, already past them.

"Yeah, right!" Jenks called after her.

A few miles ahead, nearing the trail's midpoint, thru-hiker Craig "OTC" Giffen, a husky guy with a long beard and shaggy hair, was walking the trail when a woman trotted past, nodding a quiet hello. He initially mistook her for a dayhiker—her pack was so small and she seemed to bounce along the trail, a rarity among haggard long-distance hikers.

Giffen had heard of Anish's record attempt in a PCT email blast. By now, she was logging consistent 45-plus-mile days, and the trail community had taken notice. So when she appeared out of nowhere on the trail beside him, Giffen quickly connected the dots. "You must be Anish," he said.

He was in awe of the fact that she was hiking the trail just like he was—without help or pre-arranged support, walking into and out of towns for resupplies—only much, much faster. Giffen had been at it for 82 days, Anish for 31. "It was kind of like running into Keith Richards on the street," he said later. "No use asking him if he likes playing the guitar."

He trailed behind her for the remaining few miles to Belden Town, then joined her in devouring fish and chips. But instead of a post-meal siesta, even a short one, Anish stood up and said quietly, "I'm going to squeeze in a few more miles tonight." With that, the restaurant's door swung shut, the ghost departed into the night, and Giffen never saw her again.

In the afterglow of his celebrity meeting, Giffen tried to replicate Anish's pace. The effort nearly broke him after just three days. Anish was moving so fast.

AROUND MILE 1,350, just north of Mt. Lassen, the towering chunk of volcanic granite that overlooks translucent alpine lakes, mossy forests, and marks the entrance to the Cascades, Anish turned 32. It was a celebratory day—she'd crossed the halfway point of her hike—and one that made her reflect, thoughts scribbled across her journal.

No man can ever fully have my heart, for I am already wedded to the mountains, to the wild places. It is there and there alone that I am whole, contented and at bliss. It is the beauty of the land that has me so enthralled that the miles fly by effortlessly.

Sounds like the opening lines of a loner's manifesto, but Anish always knew she'd have to return to the civilized world. To the cabin in Washington she shares with her boyfriend, Kevin, and the constellation of part-time jobs that now support her—cashier, race director, tulip farmer, freelance writer. (Kevin says he understands that the trail may always come before him: "She is for the wilderness and the wilderness is for her.")

Later that day, in California's MacArthur-Burney Falls Memorial State Park, she met up with veteran Triple Crowner Clint "Lint" Bunting, a strong mass of a man with tatts covering permanent trail legs.

Bunting has seen a lot of things on a lot of trails, but when Anish caught him, her time- and energy-saving tricks still took him by surprise. She pees standing up, for one, hitching her zebra dress up to her waist to avoid squatting and putting pressure on her legs.

For three days, they passed the miles. It was the longest interaction Anish had with another person for her entire hike. Bunting said he enjoyed her company, and could tell she was happy to have his, but he got the sense she was fighting something. She'd go silent for miles at a stretch, staring at the horizon like a finish line she had yet to reach.

Anish left him at a road crossing outside Etna, California. He was out of food and beelined for a burger. She had more miles to go and wrote in her journal, *I'm constantly amazed at the transformation from athlete into machine. My body has become a calories-in, miles-out machine.*

Only my mind can stop me now.

NEAR THE 2,000-MILE MARK, in Oregon's Diamond Peak Wilderness, the dizzy spells hit. Her legs cramped, her vision went fuzzy, and twice, she collapsed into the dirt. Her body was giving up. For the first time, the prospect of not finishing entered her mind. *Inside I am a mush of self-doubt, fear, and uncertainty,* she confessed in her journal.

Hiking more than 40 miles a day for weeks on end is an Olympian feat, to say the least, but there are no cheering crowds on the PCT. No supportive family members to prop you up.

At Big Lake Youth Camp in Sisters, Oregon, Anish sat for four hours and cried. She could forgive herself for not setting a record, but not finishing the hike? Unacceptable. "I decided that even if I didn't break this record, I was going to finish this hike," she later said. "If I were to quit, it would feel good for a few minutes and then I'd be devastated."

But why? She'd already hiked the Triple Crown and its 7,000 confidence-boosting miles. But this hike was different. By pushing herself to see what was possible, she could finally win the inner fight, she could make the lost girl she once was disappear completely.

I wonder daily what I am thinking by

taking on a task so huge. Who am I to think that I can do this? The truth is, I don't know if I can or not, she wrote in her journal. *Whether I succeed in the ultimate goal or not, I will push myself beyond my current limits and find a stronger, braver woman in the process.*

She added lots of protein to her diet and the dizziness went away. She crossed Oregon in nine and a half days, marching toward her home state. The cheerful, bouncing hiker was gone; this was a slugfest now, and she moved with brute-like intensity.

In late July, at mile 2,150 near Cascade Locks on the Oregon-Washington border, Chris "Freefall" Sanderson, a thru-hiker and friend of Anish's, spotted her booking down the trail. He knew she was coming—everyone did, and now they wanted to make sure they saw her.

"The thing that really struck me was how focused she was," Sanderson says. "She was on a mission."

She looked gaunt, her legs hairy and muscular, a sharp jawbone replacing her once ruddy and full cheeks. She'd dropped 20 pounds from her 145-pound frame. They walked 7 nonstop miles together to Cascade Locks—it was the fastest stretch of trail Sanderson had hiked in ages. In town, Anish took a quick shower, resupplied her pack with military-like precision, and got back on the trail to do another 14 miles before bed.

She anticipated dropping her mileage for the final stretch, as the terrain through Washington is some of the most challenging on the trail. Instead, she added more, rising earlier and walking up to 50 miles each day. "There's a feeling you get to toward the end—in ultrarunning, we call it smelling the barn," she says. "You think you're already at your limit, but there's something inside that can go even more."

Just over 60 miles from the Canadian border, Anish's boyfriend, Kevin, surprised her at Rainy Pass. She spent just 30 minutes with him, then pushed on to keep hiking into the night. "I will be at the Canadian border by midnight tomorrow night," she told Kevin. He planned to travel by car to meet her at the end.

"I could tell she was tired—I could see it," Kevin says. "But she had this look on her face that said, 'I'm getting this done.'"

The next morning, on August 7, she rose, once again, before dawn. It was her 60th day on the trail and she hoped it would be her last. She paused for no one on that final day. To other hikers, she was an ethereal blur in an animal-print dress.

Her singular focus had led her here, outside her own head. She discovered what was possible, but she knew it couldn't last. She knew the lightness and freedom she'd built up would fade as soon as she reached the final trail marker.

On the last few miles, before she even knew what she was doing, her pace built into a run. Darkness set in and she began to fly downhill. Her limbs lost feeling—numb to the branches scratching her body. When she tripped and slammed her knee on a rock, she just stood and continued, as free as she'd ever felt.

She reached Monument 78, the northern terminus of the PCT, at 11:42 p.m., 60 days, 17 hours, and 12 minutes after she started, smashing the record by four days. She heaved open the metal casing, adding one last note to the register: *Anish was here.*

Did she find what she was looking for? No doubt a stronger, braver woman walked away from the monument that night, but this was a woman who knew that her hike would never really be done, that her transformation was ongoing, and always would be. "I live somewhere else, but my home is on the trail," she says.

She'd expected to find Kevin waiting nearby, but she found only darkness. A little ways up the trail, Kevin and another friend were asleep in tents, their vigil abandoned. A noise jolted them awake, a primal yell that was part human, part animal. Part ghost. ■

Megan Michelson is the freeskiing editor at ESPN.com.

CAN'T STOP NOW

For almost three decades, George "Billy Goat" Woodard has been on a thru-hike with no end. *By Bill Donahue*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB STEFKO

IT'S RAINING AT RAINY PASS, Washington. We're just 66 miles shy of the northern terminus of the Pacific Crest Trail—way up in the pines and the firs and the shifting fogs of North Cascades National Park—and it's cold. Even now, in the middle of August, there are still patches of snow in the creases of the steep, sharp-ridged mountains above. It's hypothermia weather. And earlier, as a trail angel named Monte drove us up a mountain road to the 4,800-foot pass, he waxed grandiose, telling us, "You guys are stepping onto the Trail of Death." Now, I look out the car window, skeptically.

The most venerated hiker in PCT history is outside, however, standing beside the large wooden sign that welcomes visitors to Rainy Pass trailhead. Billy Goat, a retired railroad conductor from Maine, has hiked the entire length of the PCT eight times and most of the route two additional times. He is 77 years old and, ever since retiring at age 49, he has hiked roughly 150 days a year. He is not just another backpacker who enjoys being out in nature. No, Billy Goat *is* nature. Or at least he's more comfortable in it than most. At an annual gathering of the American Long Distance Hiking Association-West, as younger trail fanatics slept in warm beds inside a comfy lodge, escaping the autumn chill on California's Donner Pass, Billy Goat slumbered beneath a towering pine tree, using only a scrap of Tyvek for shelter.

In many ways, Billy Goat looks as old as weather itself. His hair, untrimmed since 2004, is an unruly tangle of gray cascading down from the rim of his broad khaki hat, and his long beard, likewise untrimmed, is a bounteous mist of tiny white whorls. The man could reasonably be cast as God in a movie.

But there is something boyish about Billy Goat as well. He's a slight fellow, only 5'7", and jaunty, so that walking behind him you can see the muscles in his wrinkled, gamey calves coiling and springing. Sometimes on the trail, he spontaneously breaks into his signature ditty: *It's a long way to Canada, but we won't get there today. We'll walk and talk and sing and play because Canada's a long waaay awaaay.*

Right now, at Rainy Pass, Billy Goat is not singing. He's standing beneath the small roof sheltering the trailhead sign and holding his palm out, into the rain, deciding whether it's prudent to commence our planned four-day, 40-mile hike now, in a storm, at four in the afternoon. Should we say goodbye to Monte, whose battered but heated Honda idles nearby? "I've got a lot of respect for this kind of situation," Billy Goat says, his voice a wise and reedy yelp bearing the distinct inflections of northern New England. *Ruh-spekt.*

A clap of thunder reverberates in the distance. "Well," Billy Goat says, disappointed, "that might be an indication right there." We get back in Monte's car, and as we're riding downhill, I'm already thinking about a hotel room and a hot shower. I wonder if we might find a place to drink a beer. Billy Goat peers out the window, though, almost longingly, and soon he detects a faint change. "Look!" he says like a kid who's been confined on a summer day. "The clouds are lifting!"

A few minutes later, Billy Goat and I are out on the Pacific Crest Trail, in the cool woods, striding amid damp ferns glistening in the late afternoon light. The dirt is soft under our boots and when we come to a little gap in the trees, Billy Goat rejoices. "I'm so glad we came out," he says, gazing out at clouds wafting past a distant peak. "This is where I belong, out on the trail."

Billy Goat uses a "signature" ULA Ohm backpack; that is, the company stitched his name on it and gave it to him.

FOR MANY PCT HIKERS, it's hard to imagine the trail without Billy Goat. "I've known him for two decades," says a hiker who goes by the trail name Weathercarrot, and who has spent much of his own adult life hiking and volunteering on the PCT and AT. "Why is he such a legend? First, there's the way his personality, demeanor, and passion capture the spirit of the community so beautifully. And then there's his sheer persistence. When you wander around as long as he has, you start to span several different eras, with changing communities."

Indeed, he's been roaming the PCT for so long that he's become a character known only by his trail name. (Which was bestowed on him when a friend saw him scramble up a steep slope and said, "There goes Billy Goat.") As he puts it himself, "Thirty years ago I was George Woodard. Then slowly, gradually, I *became* Billy Goat."

But of course the number of mountain streams he'll bound across, hopping from rock to rock, is ever dwindling. The man is fragile these days. Three years ago, Billy Goat underwent quadruple bypass surgery. He's had diabetes for more than two decades. And in 2013, a kidney stone lodged itself in his innards, painfully, forcing him to abandon the PCT and rush to the VA hospital in Seattle, stopping every so often to vomit. The incident caused a gap in his PCT legacy, a 9.5-mile section that he wanted to hike out and back on that trip. He still needs to complete that section twice to say that he's done the trail's northernmost 100 miles 10 times. On this 2016 hike, we start at Rainy Pass so he can knock off that missing link before tackling a longer section to the south.

Filling such gaps is an arcane personal goal, but one that matters greatly to a man whose trail logs chronicle nearly every step in his last 28 years of full-time long-distance hiking. Most thru-hikers complete one long trail, savor the achievement, and move on with life. A few chase the Triple Crown. But what drives a person to spend nearly half his life on the trail, year after year after year? I've come along to witness Billy Goat cement his PCT legacy and to find out why this unrelenting hiker keeps going—and how he contends with the slowing down and the falling apart that awaits all of us. What happens when he must stop?

We're climbing now, gaining 2,000 feet over 5 miles on our way to 6,800-foot Cutthroat Pass, and the sun has escaped the clouds. We walk very slowly, a little more than a mile an hour. It's possible that I, being a long-legged guy 25 years his junior, push the pace slightly. Three miles in, as we near treeline at dusk, he collapses trailside, complaining of chest pains. For a moment he just sits there, gasping, his head pressed to his knees. "Four years ago, this never would have happened," he says. "I might just have to give up on my effort to hike the PCT. I'm feeling weak and dizzy. Oh, I just can't do it anymore!"

Back in Monte's car, Billy Goat's bad heart had been an abstraction. Now it dawns on me that he could die in my presence. "If anything happens," I ask, "what do you want me to do?"

Billy Goat peers up for a moment, thinking. "I don't know," he finally says. "I don't know."

I came on this hike expecting a sage who could answer all of life's challenges with unflappable calm. He's a legend, yes, but he's also human.

Eventually, Billy Goat musters enough energy to set up his tent. Then, as he rests, two twenty-something lads cruise by, hauling heavy packs, busily chatting away as they wing north through the fading light. "Just listen to those young horses," Billy Goat says. "Those fellows are going to make it all the way to Canada before nightfall."

WHEN YOU HIKE WITH Billy Goat, you are constantly reminded of his celebrity. Young women in particular bathe him in adoration. At Rainy Pass, a hiker named Hatchet, taking shelter in her tent, beckoned us over to share some grapes she'd bought in town. Then, shyly, faltering, she asked, "Are you—are you Billy Goat?" Another hiker we met, trail name Miss Washington, reminisced aloud about a chance Billy Goat sighting she'd made a few summers earlier. "You were eating a pickle," she said.

"Isn't that something?" Billy Goat responded warmly.

To his fans, the man embodies all that's great about thru-hiking. He's out there year after year because he loves life on the trail. He's not trying to break speed records or tell others how to hike. Casual trailside conversations have left many with the impression that he's simply the PCT's gentle and beloved grandfather. But his trail persona belies a complex backstory.

George Woodard grew up in northern Maine, within sight of Katahdin. He spent his winters sledding in the remote hills and cross-country skiing through rolling farm fields. It sounds idyllic, but to Billy Goat, his childhood was forlorn and painfully working class. "We didn't have much of anything," he says of his family. "We didn't have indoor plumbing. One house we moved into, we put in electricity, and we thought that was a big deal. And there was nothing to do—no clubs, no Boy Scouts, nowhere to go after school. When I was 10 or 12 years old, I figured the rest of the world was just one big city. I wanted to run away."

Billy Goat says that he wasn't comfortable at home, in part because his mother was intrusive and possessed of "an anxiety and nervous disorder" that also afflicts him and his son Toby Woodard, 46, who lives in Maine. Toby says simply, "She henpecked him to death and he couldn't wait to get out of there. Something really bad happened with his mother. He didn't even go to her funeral, and to this day he won't talk about it."

When Billy Goat was 17, he followed his uncle into the railroad business. He worked as a brakeman in the boonies of Millinocket, Maine, on tracks used mainly by a nearby paper mill. It was cold work—a matter of digging the switches out of the snow at 3 a.m.—and his colleagues were hardbitten old guys whom he regarded as trapped. One man kept telling Billy Goat that as soon as he retired, he was going to Florida with his wife. "He'd never been there," Billy Goat says, "and as he was driving down there, he died. He died somewhere in North Carolina. I decided, 'That's not going to happen to me.'"

To that end, Billy Goat left his job at age 20 and joined the army. He served two years in Germany during the Cold War. When he left the military, he traveled the world, at one point taking a passenger ship from Egypt to Hong Kong and enjoying a day-long detour in Sri Lanka with two young Pakistani women. "We rode around in a taxi cab and saw elephants in the river, and rubber trees and forests. I felt so lucky," he remembers. "I kept thinking, 'I have three sisters back in Maine and they wouldn't even know how to change trains in Chicago.'"

After that, Billy Goat's life might have blossomed into a hippie daydream. It's easy to imagine him growing long hair and escaping to a mountain meadow. But he didn't. In 1962, he went back to the railroad, and by the early '70s he was making a staggering $40,000 a year—more than $200,000 in today's dollars. He was married with two children. He owned a brand new house in New Hampshire and drove a 1972 Plymouth Satellite. But he couldn't enjoy the American dream. "I wish I knew how to make myself happy back then," he says. He hadn't yet realized what is now his life's guiding principle: "If I get too bored, if I don't move around, I can get depressed."

Billy Goat has never chased trail records, but with 47,700 miles (to date), he's one of the world's most prolific hikers.

Billy Goat's marriage ended in 1976. Afterward his son, Toby, lived with him full time for two years. Billy Goat was confident that hiking would be good for his son, but his efforts were met with mixed success. When he was 14, Toby suffered from a condition that caused insufficient cartilage in his growing knees, yet Billy Goat expected him to hike 76 miles over five days—solo. "In the morning," Toby wrote in a recent essay, "I have to use my hands and arms to pull myself upright, then walk for up to an hour like Frankenstein with my knees locked." Eventually, at age 17, after three summers of hiking section by section—mostly with Billy Goat—Toby completed every mile of the AT. But he still didn't feel he'd satisfied his dad. "Even into my thirties," says Toby, who says he suffers from chronic depression, "I was still trying to please my father."

Billy Goat's daughter, April Woodard, who is 48 and an artist in rural Massachusetts, likewise

describes her dad as demanding. "With him," she says, "you'd better know how to make a good campfire. Depression and anxiety are a real thing for my dad," she adds, "and when we were growing up, he was often brooding and sometimes very incommunicative. His coping mechanism is hiking—the longer he's off the trail, the harder he finds life to be."

ON THE SECOND DAY of our hike, I awake at dawn. Billy Goat is already outside his tent, rummaging around in his backpack. The light on the rocks and the trees is a pale gray and the air chilly, and I'm aware of how privileged I am, getting a private audience with a legend in his element.

We shoulder our packs. "Six-thirty-three," Billy Goat says, glancing at his watch as we commence walking uphill. Later, he will write down this departure time, along with the distance we hike, in a notebook. He'll record how long each of our rest stops are. Ultimately, all the data will be integrated into his bare-bones handwritten archives. "It's interesting to look back," he says, "and to see how many times I started out before five in the morning, and how many 14-hour days I've done."

Hiking is Billy Goat's job. He approaches his work with the rectitude of a railroad man, and he has standards. He is appalled by the profusion of ill-equipped soul seekers that have washed up on the PCT since the 2012 publication of Cheryl Strayed's memoir, *Wild*. "I see a lot of hikers who have no idea what's in front of them," he says during a break later that day. "They just want to drink beer and smoke pot, like the Pacific Crest Trail's nothing but one big party."

As he speaks, Billy Goat fishes into his backpack and pulls out a 1-pound block of Shurfine Monterey Jack Cheese and begins eating it, directly from the package. The single-item snack is an exact repeat of his breakfast, and during our first two days together I never see Billy Goat eat anything *but* that cheese. I'm able to mark the passage of time by the dwindling of the block, and all the while I'm awed by how little Billy Goat carries in his 12-pound pack. He doesn't have a stove, opting for ready-to-eat food. He carries no water filter (he trusts the streams) and he doesn't bring a book. "All I do," he tells me, "is eat and walk and sleep."

There's an animal quality to the way Billy Goat fits into the landscape. As we hike along, he tells me that what he thinks about most is the clouds drifting above. He delights in the purple wildflowers we see, but has no interest in learning the names of these plants, and he walks, always, with a kind of primal intent. He's not out for a wander.

Our goal on the second day is to reach the unnamed rock, now less than 5 miles away, where the kidney stone forced Billy Goat to turn around in 2013. We're hiking to the spot and back. Billy Goat climbs Cutthroat Pass slowly, refraining from prolonged conversation. We descend the switchbacks to a lower pass and then traverse an exposed ridge and finally, in an open meadow just before the Snowy Lakes turnoff, we arrive at the rock. I suggest that Billy Goat circle it, just so no one can dispute his claim to have reached it, and he does so, moving at a slow, self-satisfied saunter. "Well," he says, "that one was plaguing me for three years."

Clockwise from top: Billy Goat and his son Toby at the AT's Windsor Furnace shelter in Pennsylvania in 1985; finishing a southbound AT thru-hike in Georgia in 1987; totally exhausted after a Grand Canyon rim-to-rim dayhike in 1976.

PHOTOS BY COURTESY OF BILLY GOAT (3)

We turn around without pausing and hike for another mile and then Billy Goat stops and slips off his pack. "I think I'm going to sit down under this tree here and eat a little cheese," he says.

THESE DAYS, WHEN he's not hiking, Billy Goat hangs his hat in Syracuse, New York, renting a room in the home of a woman he describes as a "very good friend." Amoeba (she prefers to go only by her trail name) is a 72-year-old retired insurance underwriter who accompanies him to all his doctor's appointments—and like everyone else, calls him Billy Goat. "I enjoy helping him," she says, "and it's nice having him here, too. I have a big old house with a lot of room."

Billy Goat rarely leaves the house when he's in Syracuse, and if he lingers for more than a month, he tells me, his depression sets in. "I just lie around and do nothing and I can't seem to pull myself out of it," he says.

In 2014, Amoeba coaxed Billy Goat to try psychiatric counseling, but he balked after one visit. "This woman wanted me to do these breathing exercises," he says, speaking of the therapist. "It was just a lot of hokey pokey. My cure"—he gestures at the towering mountains nearby and the blue sky above—"is right here, on the trail. When I get out here, I just forget what all my troubles are."

That's easy to see just by watching him interact with other hikers. He's charming, smooth. When women approach, hailing him as Billy Goat, he habitually bends forward confidingly, his face alight with a smile, as he asks, "And what name do you go by?" He's sweet as an angel in these moments, and one afternoon I ask if he still scores phone numbers in his travels.

"I do," he says, his voice rising with glee. "I do! *I do!*" He tells a story about meeting a woman in her 60s while waiting for a bus just two days earlier. "If you're ever going through Ashland, Oregon," she told him, "give me a call."

For all his bluster, I sense that Billy Goat only goes so far down the playboy path. He speaks fondly of Amoeba, calling her his "ladyfriend," and he admits that he needs her. "I've got a good situation going in Syracuse," he says. "I wouldn't want to mess that up. When you get older, I guess what you look for is companionship."

I try to get Billy Goat to imagine a time when companionship might be his only salve. What would his life look like when he is too old to hike? "I don't like to think about that," he says with stiff discomfort. "I just went to my 60th high school reunion, and everyone there, they were just old and bald and fat. They had great-grandchildren and canes and walkers. I don't want to be old. I just want to keep hiking."

There is one concession Billy Goat is willing to make: He can see himself transitioning from mountainous trails to flatter ones more congenial to his heart. He has his sights on the Ice Age Trail in Wisconsin, as well as the Potomac Heritage Trail stretching from Pennsylvania to Virginia.

Toward the end of our second day, we pass some overhanging rocks on an exposed ridge and Billy Goat says, "I'm always looking for places like this, where you can wait out a storm. I don't want to die up here."

"But I guess if you had to pick a place to die," I say, "here might not be bad."

"I don't see it that way," Billy Goat says. "I don't want to die anywhere."

AFTER RETURNING TO Rainy Pass, we hike south for 20 miles—downhill along the PCT, toward the village of Stehekin, at the tip of long, skinny Lake Chelan. It's sunny and cloudless. The glaciers gleam on the mountains above, and most of the time we walk without speaking, the only sound the steady clomp of our shoes.

When I ask Billy Goat what he's thinking about, he says, "People I've known over the years: family members, other hikers, people I've worked with. All the memories I have when I'm out here are positive." He tells me that in recent years he's grown closer to Toby, his son. The two men now talk on the phone several times a week. Toby says Billy Goat has mellowed over the years. "He's told me, 'It doesn't matter what you do. You'll always be my son.'"

Perhaps because I'm not his son, I sense a nearly unwavering lightness about Billy Goat. And though I'm hiking with a borrowed pack and far less outdoor knowledge, he never casts judgment. Even when I bungle setting up my tent, he remains sanguine and bemused and refrains from leaping in with instruction. He has no interest in running my show, but he seems attuned to how I am feeling. And so when we lunch by a creek in the afternoon of our third day together, he can see that I'm impatient, with stores of vigor and bounce in my younger

After his 2016 PCT hike, Billy Goat kept going on Wisconsin's Ice Age Trail.

legs. He proposes that I go ahead and meet him in Stehekin.

I do. I hike solo for 10 miles and then, per Billy Goat's recommendation, I dine at the Stehekin Ranch, receiving a cool reception as I skulk into the line for the buffet. "You can only fill your plate once," the server says, eyeing me warily.

The next morning, I repeat this line to Billy Goat and he rolls his head back, cackling with delight. "Oh," he says, "they've seen old Billy Goat one too many times."

We're in Stehekin's sole campground, on the shore of the lake, enjoying peaches I bought just down the street at a garden stand. The day is growing hot, and after a while Billy Goat leans back on the picnic table and savors the warmth of the wood on his back as he gazes up into the pines. "I sure do like it here in Stehekin," he says.

I realize I'm going to miss him. In an hour, I'll take a ferry down the lake, toward civilization, as he preps for his next adventure—108 miles south along the PCT to Stevens Pass, Washington. After collecting resupply boxes, he'll set off carrying 12 days of food along a remote section of trail.

I look at his slight frame and know that he could die between Stehekin and Stevens Pass. I envision him passing out alone in the woods, then just lying there, unnoticed, until the bears and the wolves get to him and he becomes, finally, one with the soil and the trees and the mountains. He's taking a risk. But Billy Goat is who he is because he makes decisions we're trained to regard as audaciously wrong—like hitchhiking after the age of 70.

As we make our way down the road toward the boat dock, I try not to worry about him. The man himself is in high spirits, particularly after a bus pulls up and a young woman steps out, tall and lean and blonde. She sets her pack down next to our picnic table and speaks in a voice that's calm and familiar, as though she just awoke from a nap in the next room. "Hi, Billy Goat," she says with a southern accent.

When I leave, the woman is sitting at Billy Goat's table, marveling that he drinks straight from mountain streams. "You don't purify?" she says. "That's awesome! I'm not there yet."

Thirteen days later I get a phone call. Billy Goat. He made it out of the woods; now he's sitting in a Motel 6 in Wenatchee, Washington. "I've been eating for two or three hours straight," he rejoices. "Cheese, bread, pickles, pears, nuts. And now I'm just about to dip my feet in the bathtub. Oh, what a luxury this place is! Oh, it's just wonderful!"

The next morning, he boards an Amtrak train. He rides for almost two days and then meets a friend in St. Paul and gets a ride east into the wilds of Wisconsin. The Ice Age Trail lays before him now, gentle and rolling and lined with maples and cedars. Fall is coming and the leaves will soon be changing. But hiking season is not over. ■

Bill Donahue lives in New Hampshire, where he is halfway through hiking the state's 48 4,000-foot peaks.

A Man and His Mountain

On California's Mt. Baldy, Sam Kim found spirit, grace, and fulfillment summit after summit after summit.

BY WILL COCKRELL

SAM WAS LATE.

Evening had slipped into night, night had faded into dawn, and the driveway in the Culver City neighborhood of Los Angeles where Sam's car normally sat remained empty.

It wasn't unusual for Sam to keep odd hours, but his wife Sunny and his son David worried all the same. *What in the world was a man of Sam's age doing climbing mountains?*

It wasn't the first time Sam had stayed out overnight—he would sometimes sleep in his car so that he could hit the trail at sunrise—but it was the first time he hadn't returned home without calling. The next morning his phone was going straight to voice mail. Sunny was worried enough to call one of Sam's friends to see if he had heard from him. He hadn't.

David, who lived just a few miles away from his parents, tried to fight the anxiety by reminding himself how tough his father was. Sam had survived the L.A. riots of 1992, been robbed at gunpoint, and had hiked millions of vertical feet, many of them after his 60th birthday and on the most difficult trails in Los Angeles County. He had come through it all with the grit of those who seek better lives in America. And he had always come home.

Sam clocked more miles the older he got. At age 75, his current obsession was Iron Mountain. With a 7,200-foot ascent up a rock-strewn StairMaster, and 15 miles round-trip, it is considered by many the toughest dayhike in the San Gabriels, a mountain range imposing enough to halt L.A.'s sprawl on the northern edge of the city.

Sam was known to set grand goals and it surprised no one when he vowed to climb Iron Mountain 100 times in a single year. And having already summited dozens of times, he was on course to reach the goal before his 76th birthday. He was a year-round creature of the mountains, so much so that it was impossible to imagine anything happening to him. And so David and Sunny did what Sam would have wanted them to do—they waited.

Finally, Sam called from the road to say he was on his way home. And, sure enough, a little after noon, he strode through the front door as if time were as loose and casual as he considered age to be. He was 5'5" standing straight, which he always did, and his slightly oversized blue jacket draped over a wiry, mountain-made frame. Sunny doesn't remember being angry with him.

Sam explained to her in Korean that he'd become benighted without a cell signal, but had stumbled across a perfectly comfortable abandoned cabin, stayed the night, continued his descent at first light, then jumped in his car for the nearly two-hour drive back across Los Angeles. And less than 24 hours later, he'd do the drive in reverse, returning to the base of Iron Mountain.

Over two decades, Sam's dedication to the mountains had slowly become the most important thing in his life. His wife, four children, and five grandchildren had watched him evolve from hiking enthusiast to evangelist, from an every-Sunday Catholic to someone who'd skip church to climb a mountain.

Indeed, Iron Mountain was only one of his obsessions, and not even the most potent one at that. Sam had climbed 10,064-foot Mt. Baldy, the tallest peak in Los Angeles County, nearly 300 times by the time he even set foot on Iron Mountain. And he'd vowed to climb Baldy 1,000 times before his 80th birthday.

Sam and Sunny explored the high country all over Southern California together. Opposite page: Sam filled memory cards with selfies and photos he took with other hikers he met on the trails across California.

"The first time he told me about his goal, my reaction was 'why?'" David recalls. "'Why do you need to do that? What does it mean?'"

SAM WAS AN EXPERT at uphill climbs. When he came to America in 1981, he arrived as Seuk Doo Kim, 43 years old, a well-respected manager for the Bank of Seoul, and a father of four. After 17 years working in the South Korean capital, he was offered a position managing an American branch that served the growing Korean-American population in Los Angeles. So he became Sam.

Three years later, when his job transfer expired, he resigned so he could remain in his adopted home, later attaining citizenship in 1988. Together, Sam and Sunny opened a gas station and convenience store on the corner of Venice Boulevard and Vermont Avenue, south of Koreatown. It was a dangerous time in a dangerous part of the city, but Sam and Sunny manned the cash register 15 hours a day, seven days a week, for nine years straight. It was a routine punctuated by the occasional robbery, none scarier than the day Sam had a gun pointed at his head. That nearly broke him.

Sam began to seek strength through a higher power. He grew up without religion, but his wife Sunny became Catholic in her 20s and her invitations to join her in church began to sound comforting. (Sunny, now in her 80s, speaks little English and chose to translate her thoughts and memories through her son David for this story.) Sam was baptized in his 50s, became head of the lay ministry at St. Agnes Church in Koreatown, and busied himself welcoming new people to the flock. He and Sunny alternated going to mass on Sundays in order to keep the convenience store staffed.

Business was good, but after a decade without a break, Sam grew weary of the toil, the tension, and the violence. He and Sunny sold the convenience store and opened a gift shop in Burbank, a part of L.A. that might be described as boring if it weren't for its famous film studios. They no longer felt obligated to personally staff the store at all business hours. Their newfound calm—and leisure time—compelled Sam to reconnect with his past. He began to daydream about hiking the hills beyond the city.

He started out hitting the trail on weekends and holidays. As Sam would tell anyone who would listen, Koreans have a special relationship with the outdoors. Seventy percent of the country is mountains and the trails around Seoul fill up with ethusiastic hikers every weekend (see page 92). Hiking in his native country was an expression of national pride and Sam often reminisced about his own childhood spent galloping around the countryside where he lived.

At age 69, 13 years after opening the gift shop, Sam retired. He began spending every free moment he had in the San Gabriels, gravitating toward long uphill slogs that require as much mental toughness as they do quad and lung strength. But as he neared 70, Sam had more questions about his life than answers. His relentless pursuit of the American Dream left little time for looking inward. In church, he found community but little inspiration to reflect. So he went looking for answers in the mountains.

"My father was a very spiritual person and this became his time to reflect on his life," David says. "He began to say he felt God's spirit in the mountains more than at church."

Sam first hiked to the summit of Mt. Baldy in early 2000. But it wasn't until June 7, 2007, when he hiked to the top via the less-traveled—and less-forgiving—Ski Hut Trail, that he fell in love. He felt an instant bond with the mountain's steep switchbacks and returned to hike to its summit every chance he got, quietly accumulating ascents. He found freedom there and peace like he hadn't anywhere else. He was home.

SAM ENTERED A NEW, freer phase in his life. He was finally able to give himself fully to hiking, often with Sunny by his side. The next year, in 2008, the two began making annual trips back to Korea to section hike the 450-mile Baekdu-daegan Trail. Sam later wrote a guidebook about the trail.

Meanwhile, he continued making his weekly—sometimes daily—pilgrimages to Mt. Baldy. By the end of 2013, David estimates that his father had climbed Baldy roughly 300 times (only Sam kept the true count). At the same time that Sam was becoming disenchanted with orthodox religion—and what he would call its "hypocrisies," often referencing things like sexual abuse scandals—he was finding an alternative in the wilderness. He eventually told David that he had found a new way to show God how much he loved Him. "I really think my father was happiest at the summit of Baldy," David says. "Sometimes he stayed there for hours, just sharing food and talking to other hikers."

The camaraderie Sam found on the mountaintop extended to the quirky off-grid community in Baldy Canyon. Through brute repetition and an outgoing personality, he endeared himself to the locals.

He took a particular liking to a man named Dick Tufts, a former Marine and truck driver, who lived just above the Baldy trailhead in a small cabin with his black lab Bullet. Tufts is an impressive outdoorsman, even in his early 70s. But he and Sam shared more than stomping grounds. "Sam and I had both more or less given up on churches," Tufts says. "I guess we sort of considered this our heaven."

But while Sam got to know Tufts and other locals, his only regular hiking companion was Sunny, who has climbed Baldy at least a couple hundred times herself and says she could probably walk to the summit with her eyes closed. "It was fun—it's what he always wanted to do," Sunny says laughing. "Ever since we were married, we were always together—at the store, at the gift shop . . . always together." But as the years got on, only she seemed to get older, and she left her husband to his summits.

Sam invited his children to join him, but they were busy with families of their own. In his grandchildren, however, he saw an opportunity to pass on what he'd learned in the mountains: Tradition, strength, and integrity were the touchstones in Sam's life and central to his Korean identity. Hiking was the physical manifestation of all three. His eldest grandson Brandon was 6 when Sam first

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVID KIM







Clockwise from top: The north face of Mt. Baldy under a blanket of snow; Sam and his grandsons at his friend Dick Tufts's cabin near the Baldy trailhead; Sam led these two lost hikers off the summit in a snowstorm.

PHOTO BY JAMES W. YOUNG (MT. BALDY)

brought him to the top of Baldy. Three years later, when Sam brought Brandon to the top of Iron Mountain, they celebrated what Sam would refer to as "the indomitable spirit of Koreans." Brandon wrote: "[These hikes] are the greatest gift my grandfather ever gave to me. He gave us a taste of that same happiness he felt."

One year after Brandon's first Mt. Baldy climb in 2010, his grandfather brought him back to the mountain, this time stopping to say hello to his friend Dick Tufts before their drive home. Tufts mentioned how many times he had been to the top of Baldy—more than 1,000—and gave Brandon an antique candy jar as a memento. His example inspired Sam to reach the milestone himself. Sam insisted that he, Dick, and Brandon sign and date the jar to commemorate the moment: "Dick Tufts Mt. Baldy Cabin; To Sam, Brandon; 1,000 times; 3-28-11."

While it was a typically ambitious proclamation for Sam, David barely registered the significance when he later saw the candy jar in Brandon's room. Sam and Sunny had only just finished their hiking project in South Korea; Sam had yet to begin his effort on Iron Mountain. Even those closest to Sam had no idea that he intended to follow through with this promise.

THE SAN GABRIELS ARE a hulking, 1,000-square-mile spine that runs east-west along the northern border of Los Angeles. Right where the city stops, the San Gabriels shoot up from near sea level to 10,000 feet, over just a dozen miles, with the peaks holding a thick frosting of snow for much of the winter. The range's highest summit is properly known as Mt. San Antonio. But anyone who has been to—or even seen—its bare, wind-scoured summit hump knows it simply as Baldy.

The San Gabriels are so big, they can easily be seen from Sam's home near the coast. But visible never means accessible in L.A. Each time he went to hike there, he would have to navigate a 60-mile stop-and-go labyrinth of concrete.

A single road snakes its way to the base of the mountain from the south, following a ravine that steepens and narrows as it climbs to the trailhead. First, it passes through the small mountain village of Mt. Baldy, then 5 miles later it dead-ends at Manker Flats. From there, the only way to continue is on foot. Giant lodgepole pines shade the gravel parking area and obscure views of the summits above.

It's an unforgiving, nearly 4,000-foot ascent over 4.5 miles to the top. Beyond the map kiosk, the route starts out on a deceptively gentle fire road. Just 1 mile in, the steeper Ski Hut Trail zags away from the main Baldy Road trail and up toward the Sierra Club's San Antonio Ski Hut. At the 80-year-old green cabin, the trees thin and the steep, scree-covered amphitheater of Baldy Bowl looms ahead.

Those who built the trail on the top third of the mountain didn't waste any time trying to find the gentlest ascent. They just put their heads down and began chopping steps. Nearing the top, the gnarled, thinly spaced junipers look soaked in acid and the views stretch toward the sea in one direction and the desert in the other. It's rock and dust underfoot for the final few hundred yards, until the pile of rocks that serves as a wind break beside the summit plaque.

It was here, on the summit, that Sam saved the life of Ethan Pontz. In late November 2016—the same year Sam climbed Baldy 250 times—Pontz and a friend were trying to sneak in an ascent before the summit was consumed by an approaching storm. Pontz and his climbing partner did in fact make it to the top. However, by the time they arrived, so had the weather. "Clouds engulfed us," Pontz remembers. "Winds gusted over 40 mph and sleet pounded our faces. And it was so cold my phone battery died."

A few steps after starting down, just as Pontz was beginning to panic, he spotted Sam, who was on his way up. "His eyelashes were covered in snow," Pontz says. "I asked him if he would guide us back down. He said he would, under one condition: that we return to the summit with him for a selfie".

Once, when Deputy Richard Farrow of West Valley Search and Rescue was looking for four lost hikers who had gotten stuck high on the mountain after dark, he ran into Sam at 2 a.m. Farrow asked Sam if he had seen anyone on the mountain. "Sam tells me, in his broken English, 'Don't worry, they're not injured, they're just lazy,'" Farrow recalls. "Sam said he offered to lead them down to safety but that they wouldn't follow him. The funny thing is that when they called and said they were lost, they also said there was some crazy guy up there."

By the end of 2016, Sam had climbed Baldy more than 750 times. He was known to set off at all hours and in all conditions and his routine captivated other hikers. People started calling him the Spirit of Mt. Baldy. He first made the news for his accomplishments in 2014, when he and Sunny were featured in Mammoth Lakes' local paper, *The Sheet*. In 2016, the *L.A. Times* ran a story titled: "Hiking Mt. Baldy? You'll probably meet Sam, a 78-year-old Mountaineer."

Later that same year, local CW affiliate KTLA aired a short segment about him. Not surprisingly, his legend was growing among the Southern California hiking community. Local bloggers posted about him and message boards lit up with Sam sightings. "Mr. Kim is amazing," one commenter wrote. "It was my first time up Mt. Baldy and he encouraged me to push forward. He is the patron saint of the mountain." One author on socalhiker.net said he ran into Sam half a dozen times on Baldy: "And every time I'd look at his infectious smile and think, *Damn, this old guy is awesome.*" Almost all of those he met recall Sam asking their names, ages, and if he could take a picture with them.

As for his family and friends, Sam's quest was a lesson in acceptance. They had come to terms with the idea that his spiritual fulfillment far outweighed the physical risk.

In the spring of 2017, David was due to return from a family vacation in Europe and Sam was set on picking him and his family up at the airport. But because he didn't want to miss any hiking, he climbed Baldy the previous day, slept in his car at the trailhead that night, then climbed it again the following morning before driving back to Los Angeles in time to greet his son.

Sam returned to Baldy again the following day, and, of course, the day after that. On the morning of Friday, April 7, 2017, Sam waited longer than usual for the freeways to thin out. He parked up at the Manker Flats trailhead that afternoon and set off up the Ski Hut Trail a couple hours before sunset, with clouds descending. Shortly after he began his hike, the weather turned ugly. "It was really bad, and by evening it was horrific," Deputy Farrow recalls. "I lived in Claremont, at the bottom of Baldy Road, and if I can hear the storm outside my house, that means that at 10,000 feet it would be coming down hard: rain, snow, and whiteout conditions."

Nevertheless, Sam had climbed Baldy in extreme conditions before, many times. Whatever he walked into that day wasn't anything he hadn't seen.

Clockwise from top: Hiking was a family value Sam passed onto his grandsons, seen here at the summit of Mt. Whitney; Sam's children David and Heather and their children at the Baldy summit; Sunny and Sam hiked together in California and South Korea.

"I noticed it had rained that afternoon," David says. "And I remember thinking about him that evening. I wasn't worried, but I wondered if he was cold."

David woke up the next morning to sunny skies in L.A. He called his mother to see if Sam had returned. He hadn't. But, once again, David thought his father just had other plans that day. Or perhaps he had bunked down somewhere near the mountain, or slept in his car and was already headed up the mountain again. He always came home.

By late Saturday, there was still no word from Sam. David called his mother over and over, asking if she had heard from him. Finally, they both went to bed, fending off dueling emotions about Sam's invincibility and his vulnerability. He was a solo hiker nearing his 80th birthday, but also someone who knew Baldy better than almost any other human on the planet.

"Even as I fell asleep, I still thought he would come home," David says. "I could even picture him leaving again the next morning to do another hike."

David woke up before sunrise and drove by his parents' house. The moment he noticed the empty driveway, his heart sank. He immediately began driving toward Mt. Baldy. On the way, he phoned Dick Tufts to ask him if he could see his dad's car in the parking area. Tufts confirmed that Sam's white Land Cruiser was there. He also immediately laced up his running shoes, grabbed a backpack, and set off up the Ski Hut Trail with Bullet.

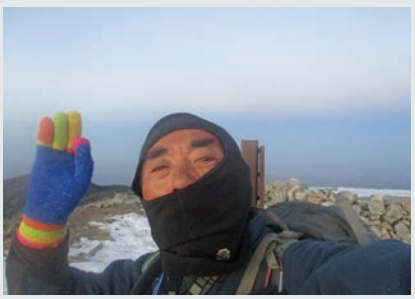
When David arrived in the village of Mt. Baldy that morning, he stopped at the visitor center to file a missing persons report. It landed on Deputy Farrow's desk. "When we had to search for Sam, we weren't just searching for an individual, we were searching for a friend," he says. "I just couldn't believe it."

The final summit selfie, taken the day before he died (top); Sam's son Kenneth rests on the summit of Baldy during the search for his father.

SAM HAD ALWAYS TRIED to encourage his son David to hike more, but David, who is a physician, says he was never really an "outdoorsy" guy. Even his two young sons had been up Mt. Baldy more times than he had. That Sunday, however, David wanted nothing more than to climb Baldy to help search for his father. But the SAR crew insisted it would be safer for David to remain at the fire station. Instead, 30 or so trained volunteers fanned out toward the Sierra Club Ski Hut while David waited nearby for any word about his father.

The next morning, Sunny and her other son Kenneth arrived in Mt. Baldy Village. David and his younger brother were finally allowed to join the search, while their mother remained at the command post. As David and Kenneth made their way toward the top—for what would be David's 15th ascent and Kenneth's first—they shouted their father's name and hoped for a miracle.

By Monday, more than 50 members of West Valley Search and Rescue were scouring the mountain looking for Sam, including a specially trained alpine unit. At 2 p.m. on Tuesday afternoon—a full four days after Sam set off up the trail—Deputy Farrow got a call on his radio saying that the helicopter had spotted a body, face down on the trail-



less north side of the mountain, about 2,000 feet below the summit. There was no mistaking the blue jacket.

Sam was found in a steep, rocky bowl, which would have been rimed in snow and ice the last day he climbed Baldy. "I honestly believe that when he began descending, he simply didn't turn far enough," Farrow says. "He lost his bearing, ended up just slipping and going down that chute." The medical examiner suggested Sam likely died before his body came to rest.

Everyone from Sam's family to Deputy Farrow are quick to point out one thing they are all certain of: Sam summited that day. At the time of his death at age 78, he had climbed Baldy more than 800 times and was on track to reach 1,000 by his 80th birthday.

But despite Sam's own obsession with setting goals, numbers are not what defined him. Every climb mattered. That's something those left behind take comfort in. They may never fully understand what drove him to the top of that mountain again and again, but Sam did.

Dick Tufts misses his friend but sees the poetry of Sam dying while doing what he loved. "I still feel like he is around me at times," he says, "especially when I'm out there on the trail."

Since his father's death, David has hiked Mt. Baldy nine more times, and says he will continue to do so every Father's Day. "It's the ultimate tribute and it makes me feel closer to him," he explains. "The cemetery where he is buried is only a couple miles from where I live, but when I go there it doesn't seem like he's there. He's on Baldy."

L.A.-based writer Will Cockrell climbed Mt. Baldy while reporting this story. It was his first summit.

A month after Sam's death, 200 people whose lives he touched returned to Baldy's summit to celebrate the man and his mountain.

Like many hikers, Aubrey Sacco walked into the Himalayas with the joyful excitement of a pilgrim entering the Promised Land. But

PHOTO BY ANDREW BYOLON

she encountered a dark side of Nepal all trekkers should know about.

Now her family can't rest until they know how she vanished.

by tracy ross

PHOTO BY ANDREW BYDLON

The first day's walk up central Nepal's Langtang Valley delivers exactly what a trekker might hope for: suspension bridges draped with prayer flags, lush hillsides where white langur monkeys swing from larch trees, a glacier-fed river pouring out of the Himalayas. It makes most hikers feel like skipping. It makes Paul Sacco feel like vomiting.

Paul, a wiry, 57-year-old father of three, left his home in Greeley, Colorado, nine days earlier, after his 23-year-old daughter, Aubrey, failed to return from a weeklong trek in Langtang National Park. She'd been traveling in Asia for five months, keeping in near-constant contact with her parents, when she started a solo hike in Langtang on April 21, 2010. A week passed, and a few days later her worried mother, Connie, contacted the U.S. Embassy in Kathmandu. Embassy officials told her that civil unrest—a Maoist uprising—might have delayed Aubrey in the mountains. But worry turned to panic after another three days passed with no word. On May 16, Paul flew to Kathmandu, vowing to bring his daughter home. With his elder son, Crofton, then 25, he joined a search already in progress. Now, as Paul hikes through the idyllic scenery, limping because of a recent surgery, he bounces between the sharp horror of imagining Aubrey lying dead at the bottom of a cliff and the bright hope that he'll simply stumble upon her, walking down the trail.

The physical pain doesn't stop him, though it slows him down. Weeks earlier, he underwent hip surgery, and now the joint grinds in the socket. He fears it will pop out, paralyzing him in the muddy forest. Yet for days he hobbles amid searchers from the U.S. Embassy, local villages, guide services, the police, and the Nepali Army. With the help of a translator, Paul questions locals, calls for Aubrey, and searches—above the river, in the woods, in dark caves within the woods.

Between May 4 and July 1, some 200 people will scour the vast alpine valley that slopes steeply toward the Tibetan border. By air, by foot, and by rope they search the main Langtang trail, both sides of the bloated, rushing river, all smaller paths, and remote monasteries tucked in the hills.

An American named Scott MacLennan joins the search. He led medical trips in Langtang for a decade, and tells Paul that he suspects Aubrey fell victim to the young Army soldiers who act as rangers in Nepal's national parks, and who have a reputation for abusing women. "None of the girls who ever worked for me in my medical clinic would stay the night because it was next to an Army post," he says.

Then again, it could have been the river, as some locals suggest. The trail hugs the steep banks in places and crosses the churning water numerous times. Aubrey wouldn't be the only trekker to fall victim to Nepal's treacherous terrain.

But everyone has a theory. During the initial search and in the coming months, local Tamang villagers and others offer a bewildering number of ideas. Some say they saw Aubrey board a helicopter in Langtang Village. Others blame hunters who walk at night, killing animals and people. One Dutch ex-pat, who runs a rescue organization in Pokhara, claims Aubrey's death was sacrificial, the work of witches who worship Kali, the Hindu goddess of death. Several Nepali men blame Aubrey, saying she must have acted "too free and frank," inviting her own rape and murder. Or she's being held by lamas in a remote monastery. Or she was abducted by sex traffickers and spirited away to Pakistan. A teenage Tamang psychic claims that three boys buried her beneath a pile of rocks, where the forest transitions to dun-colored tundra. If she was assaulted, it wouldn't be the first time a lone female trekker was attacked.

The possibilities would make anyone dizzy. Paul is a business lawyer and judge, accustomed to order and predictable rules. All he can think is *Why, Aubrey? Why did you come here?* He can't see the epic mountains that drew her. Where she was excited by an exotic culture, he sees primitive people who can't be trusted. By his fifth day on the trail, he can't force down one more bowl of bland rice and gritty lentils. His hip feels like it will tear through the scar left by the operation. He continues to search, as do others, but not a single shred of evidence regarding his only daughter turns up. On June 6, he and Crofton leave Langtang, and Crofton flies home to Colorado. Paul remains in Kathmandu, scheduling interviews, meeting with the police and embassy officials. In mid-June, he Skypes Connie to tell her, through a choke, that he will not be delivering on his promise to bring Aubrey home.

As his crowded Lufthansa jet climbs above the Himalayas, Paul looks down on the vast alpine kingdom. He sees billowing white clouds, miles of lush jungle, ice-encrusted mountains. He knows Aubrey is out there, somewhere, and that he has failed her. He turns his entire body into the window so no one can see, and weeps.

▲ 21,085-foot Langshisa-ri rises above the foothills in Langtang (top); searchers posted missing-persons fliers with Aubrey's photo, like this one on a bridge over the Langtang River.

PHOTOS BY BERNARD CASTELEIN / NPL / MINDEN PICTURES (TOP); TRACY ROSS

IN RECENT YEARS, Langtang National Park, just 20 miles north of Kathmandu, has gained popularity as the less-crowded, easy-access alternative to the Everest and Annapurna regions. On a weeklong journey up the Langtang Valley, trekkers climb toward the Tibetan border and the towering Himalayas. The track passes shaded forests and scattered farms, offering occasional views of fin-shaped, 23,711-foot Langtang Lirung. Almost all trekkers stop in Kyanjin Gompa, at 9,800 feet, to taste the famed local yak cheese. Brightly colored stucco teahouses in the Buddhist villages along the way offer cheap beds and a steady supply of *dal bhat*—all-you-can-eat rice, lentil soup, meat, and curried vegetables. Ancient stone monasteries welcome visitors who want to witness a way of life that hasn't changed in centuries. It's no wonder Aubrey—who majored in Eastern philosophy—chose to hike there.

When she arrived in Nepal, Aubrey was nearing the end of a post-college adventure, during which she'd made a point of going beyond the beaten path. In Sri Lanka, she'd searched for octopus in the Indian Ocean with a boy she had a crush on. Later, she volunteered at an orphanage and studied yoga at an ashram in sweltering Mysore, India. Afterward, to escape the heat, she traveled to Darjeeling, India.

It was there, from a hostel rooftop, that she gazed at the vast, white Himalayas for the first time and decided she must visit Nepal. A two-day journey to Kathmandu, a day of renting gear, and a seven-hour bus ride to the trailhead, and Aubrey was at the start of a life-list trek any backpacker would covet.

It was April, one of the best seasons for trekking in Langtang because the days reach the 70s and rhododendrons paint the hillsides red, pink, and purple. The roaring Langtang River, swollen with snowmelt, pours over falls and crashes around giant boulders. Walking down a two-track road, Aubrey arrived at a simple, open-air checkpost staffed by a Nepali military policewoman. Despite the thousands of people who pass through yearly, Aubrey made an impression. The soldier later reported that Aubrey signed the trekkers' register, beamed her wide, toothy smile, walked through the checkpoint, and waved.

Hiking north, Aubrey passed sun-drenched hillsides, mist-filled hollows, and farms ringed by wild marijuana plants. She also would have encountered a steady stream of people—porters hunkered beneath rice and fuel, trekking guides with clients, and villagers dressed in colorful *kirtans* and hand-me-down puffies. The porters, carrying loads twice their body weight, likely wouldn't have acknowledged her. But the compact Tamang women, themselves carrying bulky loads, would likely have smiled back if she smiled at them. And everyone who knows Aubrey agrees the odds are good she smiled. This was a girl who, at the University of Colorado in Boulder, organized a Campus Dance Day, and who was known by her friends as "Aubrey Glitter" for her habit of carrying a bottle of the stuff and sprinkling it on people, to remind them to live life to the fullest.

Her exuberance had been unleashed in college, where she frequently went to raves. But Amanda

Left to right: Aubrey Sacco in Mysore, India, where she volunteered at an orphanage and taught kids the Hokey Pokey; Lama Hotel, the village where disputed ac counts place Aubrey on the last day she was seen; an Army checkpost en route to Langtang National Park.

Sacco, Aubrey's best friend and future sister-in-law (she married Crofton in 2011), says she changed in Asia. When Aubrey called her from India, says Amanda, she could tell the party girl was gone. "She didn't need all of that to feel energized and happy."

In Langtang, she must have had plenty of zip. By 10 a.m., she'd covered a distance that usually takes four hours, arriving at the Namaste teahouse, a red, blocky building above the river. She may have sat on the sun-warmed deck overlooking the water, marveling at her surroundings. While lingering there, she met a young trekking guide, Renzin Dorjee Yonzan, who grew up in Langtang Valley and guided tourists during breaks from his studies at a Kathmandu university.

Locals say Aubrey and Renzin hit it off. They talked for hours—about travel, volunteering, and the local Tamang culture. At one point, Renzin gave Aubrey a book—*Ethnic Groups in Nepal*. Later, they retired to separate rooms, and then, say some, to the same room. Only the two of them know what happened between the parchment-thin walls of the Namaste. But the following morning, after hugging and promising to meet again in Kathmandu two weeks later, Renzin hiked down the valley, while Aubrey went up.

NEARLY FOUR YEARS after Aubrey Sacco left the Namaste teahouse, any would-be trekker who Googles images of Langtang National Park to get a preview of the scenery will see Aubrey at the top of the page. She's smiling, her shoulder-length brown hair disheveled. She's wearing a blue halter top, her round, expressive face pressed close to a yellow dog. In another photo, she's sitting on a rooftop, wearing a bright orange skirt and strumming a guitar. Go ahead and Google it: It's eerie to see her smiling there, amid the snowcapped peaks and colorful prayer flags, as if she's still in the park today.

But the Google search doesn't tell the whole story. It doesn't show the other young women whose lives were ended, or profoundly altered, during treks in or near Langtang National Park. In 2005, Frenchwoman Celine Henry and German Sabine Gruneklee vanished five weeks apart. Investigators found blood, clothing, and pages from both of their passports in a hiking park called Nagarjun Forest, on the southernmost edge of the Langtang-Helambu trek. Police told the *Nepali Times* that they felt certain a serial killer was "raping women, killing them, and burying them." Yet no killer was found.

In April 2010, just days before Aubrey arrived in Langtang, three French girls reported being sexually assaulted by the soldiers manning a checkpost in Ghora Tabela, near where Aubrey disappeared. Later, two American women were attacked in the same region in separate incidents, one in 2011 and the other in 2012.

If the Nepali police keep records of exactly how many female trekkers have been the victims of violent crime, they won't say (the police didn't respond to repeated requests for information for this story). For that matter, it's hard to determine how many trekkers, male or female, have gone missing over the years, whatever the reason. Tourists in Nepal come from dozens of countries, meaning news about them gets scattered across the globe. According to Christopher Patch, Deputy Consular Chief at the U.S. Embassy when Aubrey disappeared, dozens of Western trekkers have vanished on popular trekking routes in the last decade. That's an alarming number for anyone contemplating a trip in Nepal.

Paul and Connie knew none of this when Aubrey called from Darjeeling to tell them she intended to trek solo in Langtang. By Connie's own admission, she couldn't have located Nepal on a map back then. Still, they tried to dissuade Aubrey from going. Paul was scheduled for hip surgery on the same day Aubrey wanted to start her hike. Connie pleaded, "Can't you at least wait until Dad is out of surgery? What if something happens?"

On the desk in Aubrey's room, Connie kept a clock counting down the days until Aubrey's return (she was scheduled to fly back from Sri Lanka on May 22). Near the light switch in Aubrey's room, Connie hung a map dotted with pushpins, each marking one of the towns or cities in Southeast Asia that Aubrey had visited. Red thread linked the pins together, like a mandala calling her home. Yet another thread would stand between them and seeing their daughter return. But when they tried stopping Aubrey again, she summoned the voice that indicated, on this one, she was the authority.

"Guys," she said. "Don't worry. It's a national park. It's teahouse trekking. It's safe."

AFTER SAYING GOODBYE to Renzin and leaving Namaste, Aubrey continued hiking alone, ascending the valley. Here, she may have seen other people—a smattering of trekkers, the ubiquitous porters, Tamang families in trail shoes donated by travelers. The path narrows above Namaste and then crosses the Langtang River on a suspension bridge. From there the track switchbacks up a steep, soft-dirt hillside, where a person could slip and tumble into the churning rapids. But Aubrey didn't slip, according to witnesses who saw her at another village several hours up the trail. (National parks in Nepal are not empty wilderness areas.) At Lama Hotel—actually a town of a half-dozen teahouses flanked by a vegetable garden, prayer flags, and a tent platform overlooking the deep, shadowy valley—she may have aired her feet, or layered up against the cold air coming off the silver river. Locals later reported seeing her eating a pizza, drinking a Coke, and holding the book Renzin had given her.

In the Sherpa Lodge, according to locals, Aubrey sat down at a long wooden table. Three young men, in their late teens and early 20s, struck up a conversation. At first it was lighthearted. But when Aubrey said that she wanted to continue to the next village, Riverside, the atmosphere allegedly turned sour. It was early afternoon, and the men told Aubrey that Riverside was too far for her to trek to safely so late in the day. But this was Aubrey, who in her journal described herself as a "strong traveling woman." On the table she'd spread out her map. When the men tried stopping her again, she stood up, pointed up the valley, and said, "Riverside is only an hour from here. Don't lie to me." And she left.

The walk from Lama Hotel to Riverside usually takes about two hours for a reasonably fit person. When trekkers reach a teahouse there, they're encouraged to sign a register. But Aubrey left no signature at Riverside. There's no evidence she ever made it. Did she decide to go farther? The next village, Ghora Tabela, is another two hours beyond. It's also the location of an Army checkpost (near where the French girls reported being assaulted by soldiers). But Aubrey didn't sign this mandatory register either. Somewhere between Lama Hotel and Ghora Tabela, she disappeared.

According to the U.S. Embassy, dozens of Western trekkers have vanished on popular trekking routes in the last decade.

The Saccos learned what had occurred at Lama Hotel from Ramesh BK, a local kayaking guide who questioned villagers in the weeks after Paul's initial search. When nothing came of the information through official channels, Paul returned to Nepal with Connie and their younger son, Morgan, in July 2011. Again, they trekked up the Langtang Valley. Inside the dim, hazy Sherpa Lodge, the Saccos questioned the owner, the cook, and one of the boys, Tasi Gurung. According to BK, all three had confirmed seeing Aubrey a year earlier. But now their stories changed. The owner and cook claimed never to have seen Aubrey. Tasi Gurung said, "We don't remember seeing this girl, but if we had known she was going to go missing, we wouldn't have let her leave."

When the Saccos tried questioning the cook again, Connie says the owner's wife screamed, "Don't answer!"

Paul and Connie felt betrayed. Angry. But mostly,

PHOTOS BY AUBREY SACCO (LEFT); TRACY ROSS (2)

Paul says he felt shock. *Who are these people who would intentionally hamper our investigation?* he thought. *Who would intentionally stop parents from finding their daughter?*

Were the villagers lying? Maybe. Maybe they were afraid. It's possible they remembered an incident from 2000, in which a British trekker was found dead in the Langtang River and the fishermen who reported it were imprisoned for a decade. As a woman searching on behalf of the Saccos told CNN, "All the villagers in the Langtang area say that [the fishermen] didn't do anything, and that the people who did it were never caught."

Back in Kathmandu, the police assured the Saccos that they'd re-interviewed the young men, the cook, and Renzin Dorjee. According to a spokesman for the Nepali Army, each soldier at Ghora Tabela was questioned multiple times (including those on leave during Aubrey's disappearance), and troops searched the area three times between 2010 and 2012. But in the chaos that has defined Nepal's political situation for years, the Saccos kept learning that their contacts had been fired, jailed, or promoted. Plus, in a developing country like Nepal, police investigations are chronically underfunded.

The Saccos might have given up. Other families had abandoned their searches when confronted with the same roadblocks. Rachel Crowter, whose brother Julien Wynne disappeared in the Everest region in 2008, says her family searched for a year before stopping. "I do not see what else we can do," Crowter says. "The whole Nepali government and system are corrupt. There is no one to investigate. It leaves our family feeling totally frustrated and helpless."

But at home in Colorado, the Saccos went back to work. They forged relationships with ex-FBI agents and former members of the Nepali Army. Twice, they sent a private investigator to Nepal to conduct interviews.

"It isn't just that we miss Aubrey or want to punish the people who may have harmed her," says Paul. "It's an unending belief that the answers are there, and that we are very close to finding them."

But what *is* happening, exactly? Has this hiker's paradise become a danger zone?

ANSWERS DON'T COME EASILY in Nepal. And it's not just a culture clash between East and West. The country is still recovering from a 10-year civil war that ended in 2006. During that time, thousands were killed in skirmishes between Communist Maoists and the Nepali Army. According to Human Rights Asia, an estimated 1,400 men, women, and children were marched out of their homes—and out of existence. Nearly all remain missing—likely tortured and murdered—and distrust of the government runs deep. The U.S. State Department had an active travel warning for Nepal until 2011. "But travel warnings don't mean 'don't come,'" says Patch, the embassy official. "They just mean 'be aware of what's happening.'"

But what *is* happening, exactly? Has this hiker's paradise become a danger zone? The U.S. State Department offers a very clear answer. Since before 2010, it has warned strongly against solo trekking due to the increase in assaults on trekkers. On its Nepal page, it serves up a caution that reads, in part: "Solo trekking can be dangerous, and the lack of available immediate assistance has contributed to injuries and deaths, while also making one more vulnerable to criminals. Although it is not prohibited by local law, the Government of Nepal has reiterated its strong recommendation against solo trekking. In separate incidents in the last several years, a number of foreign women (including U.S. citizens) on popular trails have been attacked and seriously injured while trekking alone."

Indeed, the Nepali Ministry of Tourism tried to implement a ban on solo trekking last year (it has issued warnings and temporary bans in the past). The measure ultimately failed, but the Ministry strongly recommends that all solo trekkers hire a guide (about $20/day).

But it's important to keep some perspective. These warnings are meant to help trekkers increase safety, not scare them away. More than 100,000 foreign hikers visit Nepal every year, and the vast majority of them enjoy exactly the kind of experience they hoped for: majestic scenery, friendly people, exotic culture. But that also can create a false sense of security. Do many Westerners simply believe Nepali villages aren't subject to the same human problems that plague our own cities? (Though by any measure, the violent crime rate is lower than in the U.S.) And are the missing trekkers throughout Nepal victims of violence, or of hazards found in mountains everywhere? Patch says the embassy believes most have succumbed in natural accidents, like falling into a river or crevasse. Whatever the dangers, do we contribute to the problem because we like to imagine a Buddhist haven immune to worldly concerns? Aubrey isn't the only trekker who has said, "Don't worry. It's teahouse trekking."

Two of the most recent attacks occurred just months after Aubrey disappeared, also in Langtang National Park. In December 2011, 23-year-old American Lena Sessions was assaulted while hiking near a popular shrine in the Helambu region. As her attacker attempted to rape her, she grabbed his knife and ran, narrowly escaping. Five months later, in May 2012, another 23-year-old, Belgian Debbie Maveau, hiked into the same region, disappeared, and was found 10 days later—decapitated.

Five months after Maveau's death, I embarked on my own trek in Langtang. I had been following the search for Aubrey, and that led me to the unsolved attacks on female trekkers. Why couldn't the culprits be caught, I wondered? Were the authorities really as unhelpful as the Saccos and others said they were?

I enlisted the help of Pemba Sherpa, a Boulder, Colorado-based Nepali business owner and guide, and in late October 2012, we arrived in Kathmandu. We drove 30 miles into Langtang, averaging just 10 mph on a rough dirt road chopped and broken from landslides. In the town of Dhunche, on the outskirts of the park, I followed a police officer named Sudeep Ghiri into a low brick building. In an unlit room, I sat on a threadbare couch covered in a floral bedsheet.

"Lena who?" he asked, when I inquired about Sessions, and recounted the details of her attack.

About Aubrey he said, "Yes. Of course. We send her family condolences. We are sad for their loss. But you must know this is a dangerous place. In the time she disappeared it is rainy season. You can see big falls into the river. So that time you can see the accident is high in this area. We are still doing searching and have cultivated some agents. But since this case is a little bit... very... old, if you ask the people [from the Lama area] they will say, 'That's enough.'"

When I asked him what he thinks happened to Debbie Maveau, he sat back and said, "I don't know. I can't say. But her body, we found it two weeks after. It was a sloping area. Her head was down [below her]. And you know this is a national park, and lots of wild animals. Maybe, because of the gravity..."

I stared at Ghiri. Maybe *gravity* pulled her head off her body? Dawa Sherpa, managing director for Asian Trekking, later showed me pictures of Debbie's corpse. Her left arm is missing. One hiking boot is gone. Her skull lies 13 inches from her neck.

No arrests have been made.

I spent the next five days hiking up and down the Langtang Valley, walking over the same ground Aubrey covered. In the stretch of trail where she disappeared, it would have been exceptionally difficult—without being drunk, or having been pushed—to fall in the river, 200 feet below. Over and over, villagers told me that they knew nothing about Aubrey and they wished people would stop asking. Two young girls giggled, then turned bitter, saying they didn't care anymore that this girl had vanished. At the top of the valley, on day three, we met two young soldiers, one in a black Adidas sweatsuit, one in a uniform and red scarf. The uniformed soldier said, "Look. When that girl went missing, we did everything we could. We went in a helicopter. The Army searched. If a Nepali went missing in America, would your Army look?"

But the search for Aubrey did continue. The pressure applied by the Saccos appeared to be paying off. At the Namaste teahouse, we encountered a large troop of soldiers hiking up the trail. They wore camo and carried AK-47s. A pair of search dogs nosed the sharp-edged stone steps leading to the patio. They confirmed to me the search was for Aubrey. More than two years after she disappeared, 76 soldiers were back on the case, looking for her.

▲ Nepali soldiers, near the Namaste teahouse in Langtang National Park, resume the search for Aubrey in fall 2012 (top). Paul and Connie Sacco at their home in Greeley, Colorado

PHOTOS BY TRACY ROSS (TOP); HESHPHOTO

MORE THAN THREE years after Aubrey vanished, Paul and Connie keep her cell number live so they can call, hear her voice, and leave tender, tearful messages. It's a poignant symbol of their grief, but also of their hope that she's still out there, among the living.

"You know, I've been looking for Aubrey a long time now," Paul tells me when I return from Nepal and describe the Army's fruitless search. "As you know, all leads are on the table. But ... I've come to believe ... that your family will surprise you. I almost don't want to say this. But I think there's a chance that Aubrey made herself disappear. At the time she left, she was very disgruntled with Western culture. She dreadfully did not want to live trapped in a life like ours. She'd been reading a lot of Osho [an Indian guru] and another spiritual leader, Mooji [Jamaican Anthony Paul Moo-Young]. Mooji says you have to leave your family to find true enlightenment. There's a chance she just traipsed off and renounced her old life, which is possible but hard to believe. If that did happen, I would forgive her. But our relationship would never be the same."

Could Aubrey have vanished of her own accord? It didn't seem right. This from a girl who called or

▼ Aubrey (in Darjeeling, 2010) and ▶ Paul (in his Greeley home, 2013) shared a love for music.

emailed her mother every day of her trip, and who wrote, *I love you, Daddy Poo,* in the last letter to her father? A girl who recorded three songs for her dad before leaving home, to help him cope with her traveling so far away from him? Paul got her to sing, he says, because he wanted a piece of her that he could listen to while she was gone. "I loved this girl from her bows to her toes," he says, "probably to the point that it hurt her brothers."

When you love someone that much, is it better to believe she abandoned you than to imagine she's gone forever? Do you ever stop searching?

Paul and Connie returned to Nepal for a third time exactly three years after Aubrey disappeared, in April 2013. If nothing else, they wanted to remind police and military officials that they had not given up. In meetings with witnesses, they learned of reports that put soldiers near the Namaste teahouse on the day Aubrey departed. The news reminded the Saccos of an earlier lead, initially deemed unreliable, that three men had been seen attacking a woman near Namaste, then dumping her body in the river. But news about these leads, like so many others, faded when the Saccos returned to Colorado.

So they were shocked when, three months later, they received news that Aubrey's killers had been caught. On July 31, 2013, Dawa Lama, a Nepali man from Langtang, phoned to tell them that the police had arrested three men, and that they'd confessed to murdering Aubrey.

The next night, I went to the Sacco's home, a brick colonial in an affluent neighborhood of Greeley. Aubrey's paintings—oils and pastels, landscapes and self-portraits—hang prominently in the Italian-tiled foyer. We sit at a picnic table and parse a conversation the Saccos had with Consular Section Chief Patrick McNeil, of the U.S. Embasssy, hours earlier.

According to McNeil, an undercover Nepali police officer met a man who told him that he had murdered Aubrey. The officer befriended the man, who later implicated two accomplices. The Nepali newspaper *Republica* reported that one of the suspects had Aubrey's camera. News circulated that pieces of Aubrey's clothing were found in another suspect's home. All three were handcuffed and marched out of Langtang, and the news quickly spread to the AP, CNN, and news outlets around the globe.

The morning after Dawa's call, Paul's phone rang at 5:20 a.m. It was a Colorado reporter, who asked, "How does it feel to know your daughter was murdered?"

POPULAR GUIDES to the five stages of grief have made everyone an armchair psychologist. But as any therapist will tell you, the real thing is much more complicated. Over the three-plus years since Aubrey vanished, the Saccos have experienced it all—often simultaneously. Anger? Paul cringes when he recalls storming in on the French Ambassador in Nepal and screaming, "Our embassy helped you [when the French girls were assaulted]. Why can't you help us?" Depression? "Men, all their lives, are supposed to solve their little girl's problems," says Paul. "To feel as helpless or out of control as we have at times, it makes you want to commit suicide."

Would the news finally end this awful cycle?

There's no chance to find out. Like so many times during the search for Aubrey, the truth changes. On the morning of August 1, McNeil calls again. Taking a deep breath, he says, "This is, in many ways, disappointing. [The Nepali police inspector] had doubts about this ... boaster. They had questions [so they took him to Langtang]. But he changed his story, naming people who didn't exist. Based on no physical evidence, [the police] don't feel that they have any basis to keep the men." The three suspects are released after 28 days in custody.

I expect the latest turn of events to devastate the Saccos. But they've been through this so many times—these leads that dead-end—that they've become inoculated against big emotional swings. When the call ends, the house becomes eerily quiet. The summer air hangs still. Paul goes out to keep an appointment. Connie walks into Aubrey's room, where the clock is frozen on the date she was supposed to come home.

Connie, who has a soft, introspective demeanor compared to her daughter's exuberance, confides that she often waits for Paul to go to bed and then walks into the backyard. There, she stares into the sky and talks to Aubrey. She says, "Where are you?" and "How are you?" and waits for a response. She often gets a feeling that Aubrey can hear her. But one night she saw two eyes and a mouth in the clouds. The eyes reminded her of Aubrey, but the mouth was frowning. "I knew that I wasn't looking at Aubrey, because Aubrey is always smiling," she says. "Then I realized that the face in the cloud was mine. In Aubrey's journal she wrote that in order to move on, you need a clean slate in this life. Sometimes I wonder if my clean slate is letting go."

Acceptance? The Saccos' refusal to even entertain the idea has powered the longest, most expensive search for a missing trekker in Nepal's history. But is there a price? Recently, I talked to Amanda, Aubrey's best friend and now sister-in-law, and asked what part of Aubrey she misses the most. Her answer surprised me.

"Obviously, I miss having her around," she said. "She was the best person I could talk to when I needed encouragement. But at this point, I miss her being there for her family. Her parents come over all the time. I have pictures of her in high school, of her last night before she left for Sri Lanka. Paul will kiss the pictures. Our son [Luca, 4] is at the point that he's noticing things. My husband is more on the angry side, while Morgan, the younger brother, is very quiet. He doesn't talk about it. It's hard ... I just miss having her here. She was the middle child but she was also the equilibrium. She would liven the mood and her parents need that more than ever."

Paul admits as much during a phone call with both him and Connie last fall. "Frankly, it's kind of depressing. Connie and I just look at each other and shrug. We're in a lull," he says. The latest hope: U.S. officials delivered polygraph equipment to Nepal last November, and are training Nepali police to use it. Most likely, the "boasters" in Aubrey's case will be the first subjects. "But we've learned that even if [the police] know something, until they're ready, they won't tell us," says Connie.

I wonder if the Saccos really want to know. Because when you know nothing, anything is possible. In September, Paul tells me about a man he met while moving his mother into a nursing home in Chicago.

"This is the manager," he says. "A high-powered businessman, and very savvy. Halfway through the tour, he notices the wristband I wear for Aubrey. He points to it, says 'What's that?' I struggle with this. I don't want to get into it. But I respect Aubrey."

Reluctantly, Paul tells the abbreviated version of how his daughter evaporated in a beautiful valley beneath the tallest mountains on earth. And the guy starts shaking, like he'll go into a trance. Paul asks if he's all right. He says, "Yes, but I'm an intuitive." He says every feeling he's ever had he's been right about. And then he says, "Your daughter, Aubrey, is alive."

The man is a Freemason with contacts in India. He says he has "brothers" all over the world and that he will search for Aubrey. Paul exhales, then says to Connie, "That's an example of the kind of thing that keeps us going, right?"

"Well, he's asked us a lot of questions," says Connie. "That's exhausting. Revisiting things is exhausting."

But Paul doesn't hesitate. "We have to keep going, right?"

As if it's a question. •

Tracy Ross won a 2009 National Magazine Award for her BACKPACKER essay The Source of All Things.

PHOTO BY AUBREY SACCO (LEFT); HESHPHOTO

There's no such thing as too young to explore the desert.

PHOTO BY KENNAN HARVEY

DESERT SOLIDARITY

In Canyonlands' backcountry, a family learns that the wonder of our parks belongs to anyone who goes looking for it.

BY LEIGH ANN HENION

WHEN I TELL MY 6-YEAR-OLD SON, Archer, that we're going to Canyonlands National Park in Utah, he puts a hand on each cheek and starts screaming: "*Candyland?* We're going to *Candyland?!*"

Given this, Archer doesn't seem terribly surprised to see a cactus covered in gigantic gumballs from the window of our Jeep. It appears among a string of signs marking other peoples' territory: *No Camping! For Sale!* A placard near the cactus announces: *Souvenir Shop!* He wheels his head around to watch it recede.

I can see him thinking: *Isn't this the place?* For good reason: He's ready to claim a piece of land that grows candy.

"That's a tourist trap if I've ever seen one," my husband, Matt, says, pointing toward the sculpture.

He eyes Archer in the rearview mirror. "What's the difference between a tourist and a traveler?"

Archer shrugs, unsure whether this is a joke or a riddle.

Matt delivers the punch line: "A tourist exchanges currency. A traveler exchanges experiences!"

"I choose traveler, definitely," Archer says, emphatically nodding. Sprigs of straw-blond hair splay from under his jacket hood. He's an

adventurous kid and a thinker. Up until now, his outings haven't included desert backpacking.

We live in the southern Appalachians, where Archer has spent a lot of time in greenery-lined creeks, communing with salamanders and crawdads. So this arid environment feels strange.

That's one of the reasons I'm eager to introduce him to it. I want Archer to know the United States as a marvelous and infinitely surprising place. When he says the Pledge of Allegiance every morning at school, I want him to understand that his country is more than a flag or an idea. It's also deserts and mountains—some of which look a lot different than the verdant ones he's used to.

I also want him to understand that the national parks—including this one—belong to him. And me. And his dad. Archer's still figuring out what that means. But I'm hoping he'll see, at an early age, that ownership means nothing without connection—and connections are best made by experiencing the parks at ground level.

I'll be on a similar journey. Like many people who aren't from the Southwest, I was introduced to the canyonlands in my 20s, while reading Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*. His notion of freedom spoke to me. Yet I somehow failed to put it together that he wasn't charting a lifestyle for just anyone. The solitude he referred to, the ideal he embodied, was intended for man, alone.

Maybe as a result, I left desert backcountry to be the sole territory of the beard brigade. Not women. Not children. Certainly not young families. So when a friend recently told me that Abbey's wife and child were with him in that mouse-infested trailer while he was writing *Desert Solitaire*, it was as if the sealed doors of the past flew open before me.

Now, with a family of my own, I was ready to stake a claim to this land. Our land.

Archer, the author's six-year-old son, in Arches National Park

NATIONAL PARKS HAVE ATTRACTED the curious for more than 100 years, adventurers hoping to experience raw nature that might change them for the better. There's a certain type of experience that lives in the parks, unchanged since John Muir said: "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to the body and soul."

And that understanding, more than any gorgeous canyon view, is what I want Archer to have. But to find it, we need to go beyond the overlooks. We have to get dirty and sweaty to make it stick. Abbey, famously anti-tourist, would probably have approved.

Matt steers the Jeep past Canyonlands' visitor center and a herd of mule deer to the Elephant Hill parking lot, where we'll leave our car to access the Chesler Park Loop. The 11-mile route is billed as a dayhike, which makes it a perfect backpacking trip for a 6-year-old. Our plan calls for immersion: We'll spend three days in the backcountry, exploring.

An hour down the trail, Archer starts crawling on his hands and knees. "Mom," he says, pointing toward the foot of a spire. "I think I'm seeing mirages!" I crack open a bag of bite-size Snickers to revive him, but he's not hallucinating. There are, indeed, snow patches lingering in stone-made shade. It's early spring, when desert wildflowers are just beginning to bloom. He has a knack for pointing them out, beauty I might have passed by without noticing.

When the trail opens into Chesler Park, a grassy area completely encircled by spires, we're submerged in a bowl of beauty. Within three minutes of reaching our sandy camp, Archer's barefoot. "The sand feels ticklish!" he says. "It's like a mud bath, but you don't get dirty!"

I slip off my shoes, and we plant our toes.

We walk the trail of silken sand in front of camp, and our tracks cover the patterns of boot soles, transposing them with our soft animal pads. Archer finds a pinyon tree oozing sap. He sits to watch, as if it might bleed before his eyes.

We can see for miles. There's no wind, no visible movement outside of ours. The desert is hard, but there's something impossibly gentle about this moment. It's like the movable world has paused just for us.

In the shadows of spires, air darkens until it is the smoky gray of a tintype photo. Archer is at my side, nestling. "*Shhhh*," he hisses, though I'm not speaking. "I think I see a herd!"

"Those are actually low-lying trees," I say, studying their contours. "But there used to be bison here. There used to be bison where we live, in the mountains."

"What happened to them?" Archer asks.

"Some people got greedy and took more than they needed."

"More than they could eat?" he asks. I nod in affirmation.

"Sounds like they should have cared more about experiences," he says.

I SPEND THE NEXT MORNING PULLING cactus needles out of Archer's backside. And his pants. And his underwear. In exploring the campsite, he found a collection of compacted cans, half-covered in sand. "Rusty gold!" he shouted, over and over, while backing into a prickly pear.

There are dozens of needles. Each time I pull one he mutters, "Be brave! Be brave!"

"Does saying that make you braver?" I ask.

He assures me that it does.

I've been reading *Desert Solitaire* passages to Archer for the past few nights. Abbey, as a character, intrigues him. Archer takes a break from his bravery mantra to tell me that he suspects the rusty cans belonged to Abbey, who he views as some sort of billy-goat-gruff—not a wholly unfair assessment, really.

One, two, three needles out. Six more found.

"Mom, did Edward Abbey really live in the wild?" Archer asks.

Learning that Abbey lived in the desert with family empowered me in a way I hadn't known I needed. And my son, now crouched like a cub on all fours, seems like he could use a little help becoming comfortable with the landscape that's just bitten him.

"Ol' Ed lived in the wild sometimes," I tell Archer. "Other times he lived in the city. But get this: Sometimes, his son lived in the wilderness with him! And the little boy's mom, too!"

Archer is amazed. He awkwardly twists his head in an attempt to look at me. "A kid?" he says. "*Living* in the desert with his mom and dad? Is that a true story?"

I can see his eyes—and his understanding of the American West's mythos—widening. There was a *kid* out there! Archer's guiding parables will be different from the ones handed down to me. Exploring wild places—on an epic level, beyond his backyard—won't be something to postpone until after he has facial hair. And all sorts of people, moms included, will be in his version of the narrative.

Give us *Desert Solitaire*. But give us desert solidarity, too.

Spine-free and back on the Chesler Park Loop, crumbling stone becomes dusty trail. In the distance, mesas fall into buttes to create windows for the La Sal Mountains, sprinkled with snow. Meadow turns to ravine. You don't see where you're going until you're already there. It's disorienting, but we're proving adaptive. The Joint Trail, part of the route, is narrow. Even after descending into the slip of trail between stone, it's impossible to anticipate the peculiar slant of light, the surrounding stones' breath, cool and steady against exposed skin.

The sensation of being underground gives Archer new empathy for plants trying to thrive in the desert, under conditions that seem paltry compared to the lush Appalachian mountains. When our trio emerges, a small green succulent catches his attention. He adjusts one of its leaves as one might brush a curl off of a loved one's cheek.

"I think we should add some water to that to help it grow," he says.

"That's really thoughtful, but it's adapted to desert conditions," I say. "Humans don't always know best."

We continue up the trail and I can see he's working something out. We've just read about cryptobiotic soil, which means hidden life. There's a mature patch nearby, dark from the lichen, bacteria, and moss that hold the desert in place. I explain that this crust is sort of like skin. He looks into the canyon and says, "Then all of that is alive!"

He runs to the edge of the slickrock to get a close-up look. A patch of ground that he thought looked like moldy bread has become the flesh of a gigantic creature on whose back we're treading. Archer stretches out his hand and places it on a patch of soil. I follow his lead.

"Can the Earth hear everything we say?" he asks.

"I think so," I say. "It's affected by everything we do."

He pats the soil. Then, as solemn as I've ever seen him, my son looks up and asks: "Is this God?" Silently, he lifts his hand again, inspects it as if the lines of his palm contain a message. Then, he presses it down again, gently.

Afternoon sun sets the redrock aglow in Canyonlands National Park.

PHOTOS BY LEIGH ANN HENION (LEFT); ISTOCK.COM / TONDA

SOLITUDE SLIPS AWAY AS MATT, ARCHER, AND I move toward the trailhead on our final morning. We see more people in the span of two hours than we've seen in days. There are large-crowd noises coming from the parking area. At the trailhead, I find a woman studying a posted map. She's Linda Aaron, trip leader of 40 at-risk students from Salt Lake City's Glendale Middle School. They're training to mentor younger kids. Some of them have already made declarations that visiting Canyonlands is the most amazing thing they've ever done—and they haven't been beyond an overlook.

They're wearing cotton tights and carrying glitter-encrusted purses. They're eating white-bread sandwiches that ooze jelly and drinking water out of recycled soda bottles. None of them are wearing anything you'd find in an outdoor store.

Yet, here they are.

"Some of them haven't ever been out of the city before," Aaron says. "They've been climbing rocks and saying things like: *My mom's not going to believe I did this.* There are kids here who are already talking about how they're going to try to come back and bring their entire family. They want to share the experience."

Archer signals approval with a thumbs up.

Public land. Travelers exchanging experiences. The opposite of greed. He gets it.

In his work, Abbey announced that the canyonlands of Utah were "Abbey's Country." And now, watching Archer play greeter to the older kids, I can tell he feels that sense of ownership, too.

He runs alongside the middle schoolers, feeling bold, cheering them on. The backcountry isn't just for men like John Muir and Edward Abbey. Archer's 6. If he can do this hike, so can they.

Archer takes out what's left of the miniature Snickers. He wants to share them with the novice hikers. This is as good as Candyland, after all, and my son is letting them know we all belong. ◆

Leigh Ann Henion wrote Phenomenal *about searching for wonder in the natural world. She lives in North Carolina, where there are no cactuses to fall on.*

★ ★ ★

READERS IN THE PARKS

I was in McClure Meadow in Kings Canyon National Park, hiking the John Muir Trail. Just as I was zipping into my sleeping bag, I heard a thundering of hooves and looked outside to find a packer's mules let loose in the meadow. They were all kicking up their heels, blissfully rolling, and cropping up the grass. I fell asleep to the tinkling of bells.

Emily Corrie

THE LONG WAY 'ROUND

Sacred trails the world over help hikers discover deeper truths about the world and themselves. But what truly makes a path transformative? ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN treks a new 170-mile loop in Montana in search of the pilgrimage she needs.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JACQUI OAKLEY

DAY 4, MILE 39

This is not what I was expecting.

Twelve miles into a 19-mile day, I'm edging along a field full of scratchy brush and cow pies. It's hot and dusty, there's no shade, and I'm nursing blisters on both heels.

I had heard wonderful stories about Montana's Sacred Door Trail. Grand vistas, sparkling lakes, animals everywhere. But *this*? This sucks.

I plod along, yanking too hard on my pack straps in a futile attempt to lighten the weight on my back, kicking the dirt clods. When the trail peters out for the hundredth time, I stop and stare at the sky. *Are you f***ing kidding me?* I say under my breath, to no one. Pressure gathers behind my eyes.

I came to the 170-mile Sacred Door Trail last summer looking for the opposite of this: serenity, calm acceptance, a way out from under the wave of rage that's been drowning me for more than a year. This is a brand-new American pilgrimage trail, and it promises three weeks of inner peace by way of backpack and boots, or so I've been told. But right this second, I'm more pissed than I have been in months.

It's not just the heat, or the cows. It's what the trail's founder, Weston Pew, told me to do before I started this trip: Hike some sections in silence, noticing where your mind drifts and where it sticks. So I did.

He's late, again. Very late, and not answering my texts. "Have you left yet?" "When will you be home?" We're supposed to go out tonight. I pace around our apartment, sweeping a floor that doesn't need sweeping, checking my phone every few minutes. Annoyance gives way to anger, then cold, prickly fear. Something's wrong. "Sweetie, where are you?"

DAY 1, MILE 2

Light fades as the sun sets way too quickly. We—my friend Randi and her 11-year-old daughter, Shaeli, who'll be hiking the first leg of the trail with me—left Missoula late, and by the time we jounce my Subaru up 10 miles of washboard dirt to the trailhead, night is coming fast. I'm worried about making our planned campsite in time, or accidentally ambushing a grizzly in the dark, but I tell myself to chill: *This is a spiritual journey, remember, so just go with it.*

The Sacred Door Trail, like many pilgrimage sites, is intended as a place for spiritual reflection. It's for "grieving, healing, and honoring life's major transitions," Weston told me over lunch a month ago. Inspired by a hike on Spain's Camino de Santiago, in 2009 Weston started piecing together existing trails (including part of the CDT) into a loop route with the help of a coalition of local faith-based and indigenous groups. The trail officially "opened" in 2012 with a multi-faith ceremony, as well as a guidebook and website. But unlike many of the most famous pilgrimage sites—such as the Camino or the Hajj to Mecca—this trail is explicitly nondenominational. And it gets its sacredness not from the grave of an apostle or footprints of a prophet, but basically because Weston declared it so.

Spiritually, it's a bit squishy. But so am I. I mostly grew up nonreligious, and these days, I suppose I'm an agnostic, and a shallow one at that. It was hard not to roll my eyes as Weston went on about "the evolving universal life force that connects all things" or how the trail "deepens our connections to our original church, Mother Earth."

"What makes this a pilgrimage and not just a hike?" I asked. "Wouldn't being in the mountains for three weeks anywhere make you feel better?"

> THE SACRED DOOR TRAIL, LIKE MANY PILGRIMAGE SITES, IS INTENDED TO BE A PLACE FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION.

"You should go out there with the intention to introspect," he said. "Those insights, that catharsis—that might not happen without you trying to make it happen." While he allowed that would-be pilgrims can do that anywhere, he also stressed that traveling the same route as other pilgrims with the same purpose is a key part of the deal. "It's powerful and affirming to know that you're walking in the footsteps of others who have hiked the trail with similar intentions," Weston said. "The Camino offers a more defined 'container' that helps crystallize the experience. The key to creating a pilgrimage trail is to create a framework that's flexible, yet also strong enough to help orient and contextualize the experience for people."

Maybe he's on to something. According to Linda Kay Davidson and David M. Gitlitz in *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland*, a pilgrimage "is by nature a quest, a journey in search of an experience that will effect the kind of change that will make a difference to the individual's life or spirit."

And change is exactly what I need. When I let my mind drift, it still gets stuck on painful memories.

I walk him from our friend's house to the car, kiss him goodbye, tell him to drive safely. I'm going back to the party; he's traveling for work and will be gone all weekend. That's the official story, anyway, one I'll believe for another seven months until he confesses where he's really going. Which is straight to her apartment.

In cold, hard math, this is what it looks like. Six and a half: years we were together. Four and a half: months we were married before he cheated. Nine: months the affair lasted before I finally dragged the truth out of him. And 14: months that have passed since then.

I think the most acute phase is over by now—the sucker punch of shock, the despair of looking at a future suddenly wiped blank, the grief that weighted me down like one of those lead smocks you wear when getting an X-ray. But the anger? That stuck around, and the slightest provocation—a song on the radio, an Instagram photo—can fan those coals into a mighty blaze. At first, it acted like a shield, deflecting the worst of the heartbreak. Lately, though, I suspect it's holding me back. I know, I know, hell hath no fury like, well, me. But fury is heavy, and a year is a really, really long time to carry it.

I've set aside almost three weeks to try to hike it off here on the Sacred Door Trail. A rotating crew of friends will join me, and first up are Randi and Shaeli. When we spill out of the woods into Trident Meadows, we can barely pick out the metal pyramid trail marker halfway across the clearing. A few steps into the grass, an eerie, mournful *awhooo* erupts somewhere off to the north. We all freeze. An answering call drifts in from the west. Wolves. I've never heard them before, and tonight, their howls sound deeply spooky and thrilling all at once. If I've been expecting some kind of sign from the heavens to kick off this pilgrimage, this will do.

DAY 8, MILE 73

High up in the Beaverhead Mountains, I walk the Continental Divide, my right foot in Montana and my left in Idaho. How many times did he and I go together to places just like this—skywalking on ridges, deep in the mountains, with row after row of shaggy peaks radiating out beneath our feet? One hundred? Two?

This is the guy who stood next to me and watched black bears forage past our campsite in the Olympics. Huddled with me in a leaky tent in the Canadian Rockies. Gulped coffee with me in the dark to catch sunrise everywhere from the Grand Canyon to the Argentinian Andes. We were snowshoeing through hip-deep powder in Colorado when he told me, "I want to do this with you for the rest of my life."

Of all the unanswered questions my ex-husband left me with, I struggle with this one the most: *Who is he?* How could the man who held my hand through all of that be the same man who betrayed me so deliberately,

IF I WAS WRONG ABOUT THIS, IT'S EASY TO THINK, THEN I COULD BE WRONG ABOUT EVERYTHING.

so quickly, and for so long?

My friend Kim, who's hiking this section with me, and I haven't spoken for a half hour or so. In that silence, I poke at myself to see how deep the hurt still goes. Outwardly, I must look like I have it together: I get up every morning, feed my cat, hit my deadlines. I don't cry much anymore, and only when I'm alone. But I'm not myself anymore, either.

Betrayal shakes so much more than your faith in the betrayer. More than your faith in people. It crumbles everything you thought you knew about how the world works. *If I was wrong about this,* it's easy to think, *then I could be wrong about everything.*

"I need to ask you something." My body feels shaky, and not just from the chill of the early-winter rainforest soaking into my bones. We're hiking along the Elwha River in Olympic National Park, on a romantic getaway I planned because I can't take his vague, distracted distance anymore. "What's going on with our marriage?" It sounds dire, and I mean for it to. He stops abruptly, tells me he's sorry for how he's been acting, that he loves me. But strangely, he's crying, and I only feel colder.

In the week after my husband told me about his affair, I twice drove to Mt. Rainier and ticked off 18-mile days like someone was chasing me. I hardly let myself stop, choking down food as I hiked. But I wasn't trying to run away from anything. Rather, loping through the miles was the only thing that let me catch up to my wildly spinning mind—the only thing that gave me a toehold of control. On one of those days, I stopped to jump in an alpine pond after a brutal climb. It was the only time for a week I felt a glimmer of anything besides wretched.

In the following months, I went through regular therapy. It wasn't enough. So why not at least try the one thing that has always helped me in the past? Wilderness.

On this ridge-hugging section of the Sacred Door Trail, I stop for a snack on a fallen log with a million-dollar view. Crumbly beige scree fields stick out here and there among the evergreen expanse where the mountains have craned their necks just above timberline. A few miles away, smoke plumes rise from a small wildfire that roared to life yesterday and is already choking itself out. It will make for a glorious sunset.

He would have loved this, I think in spite of myself. And now I'm mad again.

DAY 9, MILE 82

My friend Kim and I slow to a crawl on the steep sides of Bradley Gulch, where we find the biggest patch of thimbleberry bushes I've ever seen. Grazing with wine-red fingers, Kim and I start talking forgiveness. I know this is key. Maybe if I can let it all go, the anger will turn to smoke and drift away.

But I've been wrestling with this one for months. "How do you forgive someone who's never asked for it?" I say. "Or apologized? How do you forgive someone who doesn't deserve it?"

"I don't know," Kim says.

I'm not the only one to pack big questions along on this trail. For the past four summers, Weston and his colleague Shannon Ongaro have voluntarily facilitated small-group leadership courses through his nature-based educational program, Inner Wild, on the Sacred Door. Next summer, the course will expand to a five-week, on-trail deep dive into theory on rites of passage, community development, pilgrimage, and personal leadership. Either way, many of the participants come to the trail hoping for a pilgrimage-like experience.

"I felt like I wanted to check in with myself, like, 'What do I really want?'" Sean Sweeney, a 26-year-old artist from Texas who went through the program last summer, told me. "Who am I, what am I doing, why am I doing it?"

Even if they don't emerge 170 miles later with all the answers, at least some of these pilgrims swear by the transformative nature of the trail months and years later. "Thinking about the people who had come before us was such beautiful imagery to me," says Robyn Trivette, a 33-year-old teacher, of her hike last summer. "Just being in a similar headspace and having a similar intention, and that we were carving the earth in that

way with our feet. I could sense a difference from the people we ran into who were thru-hiking the CDT."

Pilgrimage scholar David M. Gitlitz says there's nothing inherently "wrong" with simply proclaiming a trail sacred. "Sure, why not?" he asks. "But it's very difficult to set up a shrine that will attract a spiritual following on its own. People have to go someplace, say, 'It changed my life,' and the word gets out. You can't substitute that. It has to take root in some popular way."

In other words: The Sacred Door Trail is a pilgrimage if enough pilgrims say it is.

DAY 11, MILE 105

"Pay attention to your dreams," Weston told me before this trip—a fine example of how his method can blend the sacred with the self-helpy. I've never put much stock in analyzing dreams, but I do believe they can sometimes let you peek into the subconscious. For months after I left the home I shared with my husband, he and his—mistress? lover? mistake?—stalked through my dreams, so that I'd open my eyes and wonder, *When do I get to the part where I don't wake up every morning feeling shitty?*

And yet. Stretched out on a wooden bunk in the Hogan Cabin, a Forest Service rental hut perched between the second and third segments of the Sacred Door Trail, I have a dream. I'm back in Seattle with my husband, but there are two of him. One sweet, funny, kind, the one I fell for, the one I meant to love for the rest of my life. Then there's another one, identical but dark. They're aware of, and hate, each other. Sometimes the bad version will show up around town, lurking in a bar we duck into, and we have to leave. Sometimes he's waiting in our apartment when we come home, and the good husband—*my* husband—gets into a screaming match with him. We try, but we just can't shake him.

DAY 12, MILE 113

The dream stays with me as I start the final stretch across the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness, a windblown, rugged slice of cirque-cradled lakes and airy alpine passes. This morning, I hugged Kim goodbye; my friend Norman, another transplanted Montanan, is hiking the last 60-odd miles with me. We push through dew-wet meadows and climb a ridge scarred from some long-ago wildfire, where the bare trunks grant us wide views of the crinkle-cut ridges to the north.

I'm still turning the dream over. It reminds me of a parable I once heard. Sometimes it's attributed to the Cherokee, but no one really knows. In it, a wise grandfather tells his grandchild, "Inside of us all live two wolves. One wolf is evil, full of greed, anger, selfishness, lies, and pride. The other is a good wolf—joy, kindness, peace, truth, and empathy. These wolves are constantly fighting inside us, ripping at each other's throats for control."

The grandchild asks, "But which wolf will win?"

The grandfather smiles and says, "The one you feed."

We pitch the tent along the edge of Good Medicine Meadows, a low, grassy clearing with a stream winding through it. It's lovely, and also a classic cold sink: Sometime before dawn, I wake up shivering. Frost coats the tent fly.

"Are you cold?" Norman whispers. I know what he's getting at, and I don't want him to do it. We broke up a month ago—it was my first post-divorce try at dating—and I don't want to lead him on. More than that, I don't want to admit I need his help, or anyone's.

But somehow, just as much, I want him to. "Yes," I whisper, and he pulls me close. What a place to be, hung between yes and no. Desiring two opposing things at once.

DAY 13, MILE 118

We leave the burned-out landscape behind by midmorning, emerging into a boulder-choked field where only a few trees have managed to survive in the thin air. Ahead, the peaks get taller, with sharper edges and hairpin ridges plunging down to a

PART OF IT IS THE PHYSICAL HIKING. BY GIVING MY BODY SOMETHING TO DO, MY MIND COULD GO FREE.

necklace of lakes strung together by alpine streams. This is the beginning of the heart of the Pintlers, the most spectacular section of the whole Sacred Door Trail. Maybe it's because I've finally had enough time processing things on the trail, or maybe because this sure looks like a place for thunderbolt visions, but suddenly, something occurs to me.

What if I don't have to reconcile the man I thought I knew with the man I know now? What if I just dropped that tug-of-war, realizing it was impossible? He can be both of those people at once. It doesn't make sense, but do any of us?

It's such a simple idea, but I've never thought of it this way before. Ask any psychologist, and you'll learn it's normal for people to hold contradictory beliefs. We do it all the time. Though our conscious brains struggle mightily to impose order, sorting people into neat categories, our minds remain messy places.

Nobody simply is a good or bad person. We only make choices, feed one wolf over the other. And my husband, who really was the wonderful man I thought he was, instead chose not to be. But instead of rage, for the first time I feel something else. Pity, maybe. But maybe compassion, too.

Just like that, I'm no longer just a victim. I haven't forgiven him—no, not yet. But holding on to the bitterness would only be feeding my own bad wolf. Instead, I have a choice. For the first time since it all happened, I feel a space in myself, clear and distinct, where forgiveness can go.

DAY 17, MILE 165

We topped out at our final high point, Goat Flats, for lunch; now we hug the edge of a cliff and switchback down to Upper Seymour Lake for our last night in the woods. Tomorrow, I'll stroll out of here to the waiting shuttle car and finish this trail.

But first: The sun is out, and it's the warmest day of the week. Norman and I drop our packs and head straight for the shoreline, shimmying out of our pants and tossing our shirts over tree branches before jumping into the lake. The cold water makes me gasp, but it feels exhilarating, too. I scrub seven days' worth of grime and sweat off my skin, dunk my head, come up laughing. And feel better.

I'll be damned. I actually think I'll finish this pilgrimage a happier person than when I started. Part of it is the wilderness itself: Out here, there's nowhere to hide from your demons. Part of it is the physical hiking. By giving my body something to do, my mind could go free. But a large part of it, I must admit, is the spiritual intention: setting aside a dedicated time to pick through the thorniest corners of my heart. However you parse it, for the first time in more than a year, my anger is draining away. If I can say that, then who cares if this counts as a "real" pilgrimage or not?

By now, my toes are stinging. I belly-flop, seal-style, up on a boulder and shake off the droplets. I shield my eyes against the glare off the water, stare up at the ring of peaks around the lake, and let the sunbeams restore my warmth. ■

Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan is the Rocky Mountain Field Editor.

TRIP PLANNER

Pilgrims Wanted: Hike the Sacred Door Trail

SEASON July through September **PERMIT** None
MILEAGE 170 on trails (200 including road segments)
INFO thesacreddoortrail.org; email thesacreddoortrail@gmail.com for guidebook ($12) and GPS tracks
SHUTTLE Rick Harwood at The Bunkhouse Hotel in Jackson, MT; harwoodsbunkhouse.com; (406) 204-4126

GONE HIKING

TERMINAL CANCER.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO *if* YOUR DOCTOR

DELIVERED *the* SCARIEST TWO WORDS

in the ENGLISH LANGUAGE?

ANDY LYON WENT *for a* HIKE.

by **CASEY LYONS** *photography by* **KEVIN STEELE**

The kid limps into Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital out of the late-September night. His pack is worn and dusty, his face cloaked in a beard that grew out rather than down. It's the first time he's been inside a hospital in 23 months. The last time, his doctor gave him 24 months to live.¶ He walks up to the admitting nurse. "Can I help you?" she asks.

"I think I need some help. I've been on the trail and I keep falling down."

She directs him to have a seat, then asks him his name.

"Astro," he says.

"Your name is Astro?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. My name is Andy. Andy Lyon. I've been walking the trail for a while and everyone calls me Astro."

"Where do you live?"

"Well," he says. "I live on the trail."

"You live on the trail?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have a mailing address?"

"Yeah, my parents live in Laguna Beach, California"

"How did you get here?" she asks. It is, after all, south-central Washington.

"I walked here."

"You walked here from Laguna Beach?"

"I actually walked here from Mexico," Andy says, and can immediately tell what she's thinking: *psych ward.* "Let me start from the beginning."

But where is the beginning? Maybe it's when he was first diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma four years ago at age 19. Or, maybe it's after the second relapse, after the first round of chemotherapy failed and then the stem-cell transplant failed and then he was given a 1-in-10 chance of living another five years. Or maybe it's the moment when he decided to try to heal himself by hiking the 2,655-mile Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada. Would the nurse even believe that story?

Would anyone believe that story?

FEW FOOTPRINTS circle the PCT monument at the Mexico border, 2,300 trail miles south of Yakima, in early April. Most would-be thru-hikers appear a few weeks later, after they've wrapped up logistics: how to feed themselves, how to clothe themselves, how to minimize suffering on the journey. But Andy makes his footprints here today.

From the look of his trail runners, these are the first steps he's taken in them at all. He walks over to the monument, locates the trail register, and writes, "The longest journey begins with a single step." It's just the kind of stuff written by hikers filling the pages preceding this one, people who knew to start earlier than 1 p.m. on a sun-blasted trail.

He's olive-skinned but pale. His white, button-down sunshirt looks starched, and his trail pants sag around his thighs and calves. On top, he wears a beige, full-brimmed hat that makes him look like Gilligan gone rogue. He smiles and it's hard to tell if he's happy or wincing. Or maybe he's just squinting into the desert sun.

Andy shoulders his 22-pound pack, the strap sitting right next to the scar the chemo port left. He starts down the trail, a ribbon of dust snaking through the shrubs and over the low rollers out to the northern horizon. Even though this is just a trial run for his thru-hike, if he makes it 42 miles to Mt. Laguna, it'll be both his farthest backpacking trip ever and his first time going solo.

He walks and the nerves dissipate into the rhythm of his footsteps. In camp, he pulls out the unused alcohol stove he made from a soda can and Internet instructions, and fills it with diesel-line deicer. When he sets the lighter to it, fire engulfs the whole thing, sneaks out under his windscreen, and lights the ground on fire in a 3-foot circle. He stomps at it, then grabs for his socks and slaps at it. Then he fishes out his cell phone and texts his mom: *Hey! Safe and sound ... :) just set up my tent, now making chow. 11 miles today, 1 horny toad, 2 snakes (one rattler, one gardner). This is great!* :D *xoxo"*

Back at home in Laguna Beach, Betsy Gosselin is relieved. She has no idea what to expect during this thing either, but she already decided that she would do whatever needed to be done to support her boy—time, money, anything. So what if she hadn't even heard of the Pacific Crest Trail three months ago?

On the fourth day, he waits for Betsy at the predetermined pick-up spot and writes in his journal: "Well, that wasn't so hard!"

NATURE IS A faith healer. Everyone implicitly understands that, even if they don't really get how it works. Plenty of people harness the power of wilderness to clear their heads, or to recharge their batteries. There's power in nature's beauty, and strength to spare. Andy believes that, too, and his journey would test the limits of that power.

He was a freshman studying astrophysics at the University of California at Berkeley when an X ray revealed a dense, white mass at the base of his neck. A biopsy confirmed what doctors feared: cancer. Hodgkin's lymphoma. But the prognosis was good: With treatment, some 90 percent of people so afflicted remain cancer-free in five years.

But the treatment isn't pretty. After six months of chemo, even Andy's eyelashes fell out, and the nausea came in long sweeping fits that would leave him retching for hours. That's how Western medicine fights Hodgkin's. Andy, full of optimism, was a model patient. He memorized his drug regimen, studied up on what each ingredient of the cocktail did and what baggage came with it.

It worked, and Andy, now in remission, took a six-week victory tour across Central America, exploring Mayan cities and swimming in the waters of the Lago de Atitlán in Guatemala.

He re-enrolled at Berkeley for his sophomore year, but eight months later, a follow-up PET-CT scan revealed the cancer had returned as stage 4, spread throughout his body and in his bone marrow. His chances of survival dropped to the mid-60s. Betsy was staggered, but she held it together for Andy and her family. When she had a night alone, she let the sadness come. "This time it could mean death," she wrote on her private blog. "Andy could die. I feel the immense fear of losing my boy."

Andy did what his doctor said: a stem-cell transplant that would leave him in isolation on a sealed hospital floor for three weeks while his immune system rebooted. When he grew sick of the confinement, he convinced his mom and stepdad, Michael, that he needed some fresh air. They loaded him into a wheelchair, pushed him down the hall, and slipped through the elevator doors. "The trick," Betsy later said, "is to walk like you know what you're doing."

But 100 days later, the cancer was back, again. His doctor informed him that he was not a candidate for another stem-cell transplant. His five-year survival odds sank to 10 percent.

ANDY USED THIS COOKSET to PREPARE the MEALS HIS MOM DEHYDRATED, PACKED, and SHIPPED TO HIM ALONG the WAY. PREVIOUS: HIS PACK

The normal 20-something, hearing the news, might erupt in a mix of rage, sadness, and frustration, cursing the universe for the awful unfairness of it all. But Andy didn't react like that. When he visited his Ayurvedic practitioner (a form of Indian medicine) a few weeks later, he didn't even mention the relapse.

He came to believe that maybe the cancer wasn't the real problem, but a symptom of something larger and more profound. Maybe, if he located the things inside him causing the cancer, he could heal himself. That April, in a ceremony organized by his mother, Andy marked his completion of Western medicine and a new start to his healing. It kicked off a year spent meditating beside spiritual gurus in the American Southwest. He car-camped around the Sierra, sometimes discovering unmapped stands of sequoias and sleeping beneath them. It was his Summer of Bliss.

But that treatment plan was no better. On October 20, 2010, pain forced Andy home to Laguna Beach to see his doctor. A PET-CT scan showed tumors throughout his body. His doctor suggested that without medical intervention, Andy would die within two years.

Other cancer patients in this situation have refused chemo, choosing quality over quantity in their remaining time. Andy rejected chemo as well, but that didn't mean he was giving up on a cure. He had other ideas. He now believed that the only way to defeat the cancer—to win—was to prove that he was stronger than it.

In January 2012, on a 10-day silent retreat near Yosemite, Andy picked his battlefield: the Pacific Crest Trail.

He knew it sounded ludicrous—a young man with zero long-distance hiking experience and a terminal disease is going to cure his cancer by walking really far? Among responses to a terminal diagnosis, his notion was, to put it charitably, unique.

His family, friends, and spiritual guide objected. But Andy had made up his mind. He was going to thrust himself into the heart of hardship and beauty to seize control of his fate and challenge his disease in a fight to the death. If he won, he'd be healed. If it killed him, that'd be an OK way to go. The only thing he couldn't accept was waiting around to die.

THERE'S A TRADITION among thru-hikers to take on trail names. Not only do these handles represent membership in the tribe, they're also an acknowledgement that the things that

happen on a long-distance hike transcend normal life.

Andy wants his trail name to be about his diet. Whereas other hikers' food bags—especially guys his age—contain Snickers Bars and instant Ramen noodles, Andy's is an apothecary of organic foods and vitamins. He wants to be known for running on such premium fuel. Then, a week and a day after leaving the southern terminus, he meets Gourmet.

Andy is already in his tent when Gourmet cruises past on the purple-painted desert flats 75 miles north of the border, rapping about snowboarding. He camps a short distance away, and, the next morning, Gourmet apologizes for the disturbance. But Andy just laughs and asks him to sing the lyrics once again. Gourmet is a 39-year-old musician from Seattle, doing his first thru-hike, but Andy doesn't ask his real name. Nor does he tell him—or anyone else—that he has cancer. The two become quick friends.

The rolling folds of the Volcan Mountains elevate them to views of San Jacinto Peak (snow-dusted after a recent storm) and deposit them among the flower-speckled lowlands of the high desert in bloom. Chaparral and cactus line the hillsides as Andy, Gourmet, and two other hikers travel the hillsides sometimes together, sometimes apart.

In the town of Warner Springs, they set up their sleeping bags on the lawn of the fire station and stare at the sky. Andy knows all the constellations, the planets, the mythology attached to each; he points them out when the other hikers ask. Gourmet, considering this, says Andy shall henceforth be known as Astro. And so it is.

He is Astro now and he is new and he is in control of his story. To other hikers, he's not sick; he's not a cancer victim, or a novice hiker. He's just another skinny, early 20s guy with no history, lots of blisters, and a scraggly beard.

Gourmet and Astro descend Fuller Ridge, the skinny part of a mountain just west of Palm Springs, and the start of a 15-mile downhill. It's hot, 80, 90, 100 degrees. Gourmet, hiking ahead of Astro, notices a living room-size cave, shaded and out of the sun, and ducks in for a 10-minute break.

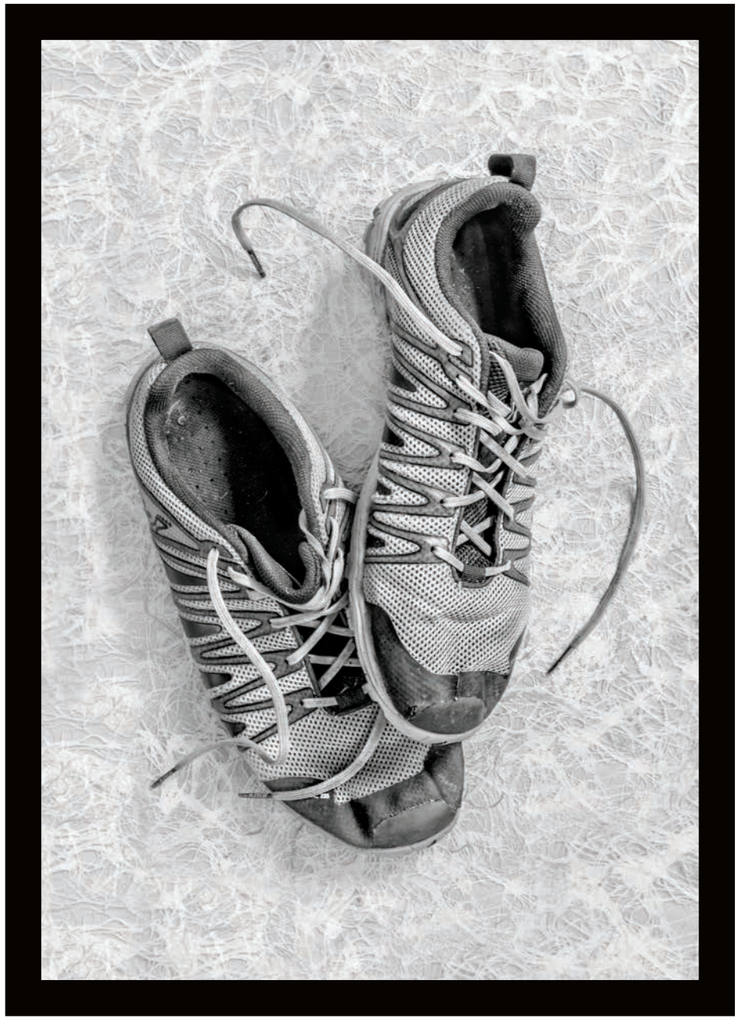
At the next road crossing, Gourmet stops and waits on Astro. Hours go by as Gourmet grows impatient, then worried. Then Astro traipses down the trail wearing an expression of bemused satisfaction. "Oh hi, Gourmet!" Andy says.

"What happened to you? You OK?" Gourmet asks.

"I took a wonderful nap in the cave back there," Andy answers. "It was the perfect rest spot. I couldn't pass it up."

Even in the early stages, where most thru-hikers concern themselves with making miles and wringing distance out of daylight, Andy feels no such urgency. He doesn't tell his new friend that he intends to savor every moment on the trail as if it might be his last.

Under the setting sun, they cross the desert floor toward Cabazon, where trail angels welcome hikers with a hot foot soak. Andy sags, eyes shut, head in hands, with his feet in the tub. The next day, he announces that he's taking a rest day. "I'm sorry, Gourmet," he says. "You should definitely hike, though." And just like that, fast friends become memories.



***ANDY'S TRAIL RUNNERS, GOOD** for about 500 MILES*

The trail in Southern California is like a long and winding ramp. It delivers hikers over the forested crest of the same San Gabriel Mountains Andy saw from his hospital bed during the stem-cell transplant. He's moving well now, 20, 25 miles per day, but he doesn't hurry. ¶ He stops to take selfies, which he's never really done before. In one, he's standing in front of a chestnut-brown horse grazing on the trail. He's smiling next to its shoulder, where a heart is outlined in white fur. He is always finding hearts. He sends the photos to his mom.

He arrives in Big Bear, where Betsy is waiting to drive him a few miles to the family's cabin at Lake Arrowhead, a deep, cold, fir-fringed lake in San Bernadino National Forest.

It's a huge house, complete with a yoga studio, in a peaceful spot. Andy wants to fill the place with thru-hikers. Betsy, always game, buys food to host. It's what she does for her son. Even when Andy recently crashed her anniversary dinner at a fancy restaurant, she didn't mind. She'd have a lot more anniversaries. What parent would say no?

A few calls later, Andy learns his friends are hiking on; it'll be just the two of them. But that's fine. They've been tight since Betsy carried the family through a divorce from Andy's father, John, years earlier, when his drinking got out of control. Over the next few days, Betsy, a yoga and meditation teacher, leads Andy through poses to loosen up his tight muscles. They also crank disco tunes—Andy's favorite—and dance like crazy. She drops him off at 8:30 p.m. on a Sunday night and he hikes back into the darkness, buoyed against the loneliness of solo hiking.

"Andy was happy out exploring," Betsy says. "Our hope was that his elation over these life experiences, and the freedom to do whatever he wanted with his precious life, would bring peace. And of course, we always hoped for a miracle."

A few weeks later, needing another break, he rides the train home to Laguna Beach and immediately settles into old routines. He goes hiking with his sister, Alex, and dog, Luna, and when Luna gets tired after a few miles, he scoops her up and carries her. The rest is dining at good restaurants, insisting on the most comfy pillows, bowling, and letting his little sister look after him. "He liked being independent because it gave him a sense of strength," Alex says. "But he also liked being spoiled."

Back on the trail four days later, Andy pulls out the voice recorder he'd taken from home. He's always been a private person, someone it took a while to get to know, but, at his mom's urging, he'd decided to share this journey. He clicks on the recorder. "Even at home," he says, "I was itching to get back on the trail and I can tell that's what my body likes right now, and what my mind likes right now is the peace and simplicity of walking every day."

At the edge of the Mojave Desert, he clicks on his voice recorder again. "I'm kinda having fun with this voice memo thing, so I'll do another one that's more personal, maybe." Then he exhales. "It's going good. You know, actually it's going really good. Every day is like," and he laughs and changes his mind mid-sentence, "more challenges. Every day, I'm like, 'Goddammit, why am I doing this?'"

There is pain now and it reaches beyond the blisters, bites, and bruises all thru-hikers deal with. "What happens is my belly, the upper right side of my abdomen, gets sore. If you push on it, it's very tender and then I begin to feel angry. I begin to feel anger, frustration, rage for even the littlest provocation."

But a few moments later, he's back on the recorder, exuding calm. "When you're satisfied with the present moment in every moment, that's pure joy," he says. Then adds, "I'm walking in this desert, among these Joshua trees, and it's beautiful."

"GUESS WHERE I AM!" Andy says to Betsy in a phone call at 10 a.m. in early June. She thinks, hopes, it's a trick question. "Hiking the Pacific Crest Trail?" she ventures. Andy shouts, "I'm on top of Mt. Whitney!" The landscape all around him falls away in spikes and columns of gray stone against a brisk, blue sky.

Andy explains, "It was here and I was here, so I figured, why not?"

At least, that's what he tells his mom. Most thru-hikers are trail-toned and suntanned at this point. To climb an extra 4,000 feet over 8 miles seems like a pittance for the chance to stand atop the tallest mountain in the Lower 48.

Andy, hobbled in recent days with a new pain in his left foot, pushed his body beyond anything he'd yet experienced to get up Whitney. He had to make it to the summit—an exercise in mind over matter that tested his whole idea for this journey. If he can make it up Whitney, he thought, maybe he really *can* make it to Canada.

On the way down, his foot seizes with each step, shooting pain into his spine, electrifying all the other muscles on the way—foot, calf, knee, groin, pelvis, back, and heart. It's like a clamp on his entire being, but he continues, alone. He has to make it 7 miles to the base of Forester Pass, so he can cross it the next morning, before the storms roll in.

He starts to whimper under the strain, but knows he must drive himself past the place where physical pain controls his mind. It's the only way he can uncouple the two. Over 3 miles, his groans build into yelps, become a rising cry of *Why? Why? Why! WHY!*

Then his father's face comes into his mind.

Andy's dad has been gone for 15 years. Drank himself out of the family, and, years later, to death. Andy never understood, but as a boy he felt guilty, like he could have saved his dad. He once confided to a friend that it had made his heart become like a closed fist. The tension spread through his body, and that, he thinks, is where his cancer came from.

He begins to cry.

Then he screams, "You did this to me! You motherfucker! Do you see what you did? Seven years have passed and I'm still dealing with this! Can you feel this? Do you know how this feels?!"

Andy wants to let go of it now, to give his mind and body a reprieve from the pain and stress caused by the absence of his father's love. He sits by a log and sobs and addresses his father. "You did this to me," he says. "But I forgive you."

Then, with a surge of clenching agony, the tightness in his foot releases. And for that moment, there is no more pain.

If it were only that easy. The fall of 2011 delivered 180 mph winds to the Mammoth area, leveling 400,000 mature pines and rearranging them in a heap. It makes for slow going as Andy and Michael hike together for a few days.

Michael's been Andy's stepdad for 13 years and his friend for longer. At the southern terminus, he'd given Andy a credit card for the kind of trouble he could buy his way out of, and advice for the rest. He's an experienced outdoorsman, quick with a quip, and accustomed to being the stronger hiker when the two of them make miles together. The first thing he notices about Andy is that he's lost weight. The second is his new easiness on the trail.

"He had a self-confidence on the trail that surpassed mine," Michael later says. "He was extremely comfortable." Andy's once-white shirt is formless and streaked with brown beneath his shoulder straps. His Gilligan hat is stacked with sweat rings. At the southern terminus in April, Andy's ultralight gear was top-of-the-line but unused. Up until

then, he'd tallied maybe five nights on backpacking trips. Now, he doesn't use a tent—he doesn't even *carry* a tent—preferring to sleep outside, under the stars.

As they hike, Andy tells Michael about a dinner he had a week ago in the Golden Trout Wilderness. He took off his pants and waded into a stream, hemmed in by bare granite mountaintops, and watched the water. When a fish swam by, he'd scoop his hands in and splash it onto the banks. After a little while, a dinner's worth of golden trout lay gasping in the grass. He cooked them over a fire and ate them, bones and all.

A few days later, Michael flies back home, and Andy proceeds alone through the grand High Sierra. It's Ansel Adams country, a kind of walk-through miracle over an endless succession of high-mountain passes, each one more dazzling than the last. But whatever Andy thinks about this glorious stretch, he doesn't record it. He goes silent, taking not a single note, nor clicking on his voice recorder. If he can manage his story well enough, can he delete his sickness from it? Can he make it go away?

But at the end of this stretch, in Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows, he's lonely and in pain again. He can feel his liver swollen to twice its normal size, killing him under his hipbelt. He flies back home to Laguna Beach, and a few days' rest stretches past a week.

Andy talks about going back to Berkeley, maybe opening a café, or studying healing. Betsy won't watch him loaf. She delivers an ultimatum: "You've got two choices: You can either get back on the trail, or get a job, because we're not going to support you."

Andy packs up the next day.

THE REST OF CALIFORNIA is ablaze in one of the worst wildfire seasons in recent memory, but Andy works his way around on a network of trails and roads, friends and trail angels. After the first miles of central Oregon's dark and broken lava fields, he makes camp near a road and packs a tiny bowl of medical marijuana.

His thoughts turn inward. "I had waves of pain, which I was convinced were signs of my ill health and my imminent demise," he later says. "I know there is something in my body that is a dark force." But he's hopeful that if he can accept this, it will finally let him be.

Then, the thought pierces through that the trip is a failure—that he is a failure and he can't do anything right and he is going to die and it is going to be his fault. And when he does, his mom and Alex and Michael will be sad and that would be his fault. He wants out. "I got the idea that I should hike on that night, continue hiking into the lava fields and somehow that would be like crossing the River Styx," he says. "I thought I would need to have a near-death experience, another transcendent experience where the last tethers of the ego would be cut and I would be free and then healing of my body and mind would happen naturally and rapidly."

NO ONE UNDERSTOOD why ANDY LOVED this SUN HAT so MUCH.

But he is too afraid of the lava field.

He lies awake for most of the night, thoughts racing but paralyzed, until exhaustion takes him around dawn. A few hours later, he gets up. By the light of day, the lava looks easy.

Hours later, he arrives at Big Lake Youth Camp, where his next resupply box is waiting. When he picks up his package he notices that on the rack nearby sits the box of Scott Williamson, legendary PCT speed hiker (who had given up his speed attempt this year due to fires). Williamson is a hero to most thru-hikers, and Andy feels an urge to open the box just to see what's in there—but he resists. Many other hikers had been content to simply take a photo.

But then Andy opens his own box and finds it's a few dinners light. He thinks, "Well, Scott, he's off-trail, he's not going to use this box or what's in it." He finds jellybeans, Snickers Bars, tortilla chips and dried refried beans, electrolyte packets, a tiny sack of toiletries, and two new pairs of nylon socks.

To set things right, he writes a letter to Scott and tapes it into the box. "I figure if anyone's resupply would give me the extra physical, mental, and spiritual boost I need at this point, it would be yours."

Andy walks out of Big Lake and logs the biggest day of his hike so far: 29.6 miles. In Scott Williamson's socks.

MOST THRU-HIKERS look forward to reaching southern Washington's Knife Edge. It's a sharp ridge of black rock, knapped by time into a 2-foot-wide blade that cuts the snow-smeared Goat Rocks Wilderness in two. It's a spectacular milestone, a dizzying catwalk signaling there are only 350 miles left before the Canadian border.

But Andy cannot share the other hikers' enthusiasm. It's late September when he limps up to it and steadies himself on his trekking poles. The hike has progressed well since he acquired Williamson's socks, but just when his strength and stamina seemed to peak, his right leg started buckling, making him stumble and fall.

Now, with the world falling away a thousand feet on either side, he weights his right leg. It collapses, sending his knee down onto the rock. He lifts himself back onto his trekking poles. His leg has given up, but that doesn't mean he has to. He heaves it forward again and leans onto his poles to swivel around his good leg. He collapses again. He crawls forward. He gets up.

Two in three would-be thru-hikers quit before they make it to the end of the PCT. Most simply get tired, worn out by the compounding aches and pains. Mile by mile, Andy has been amassing a body of evidence that he's one of the toughest hikers out there. He's proving himself stronger than the cancer with every forward step. But as he crawls along the rock, he knows he cannot go on. He cannot crawl to Canada.

He tells his recent hiking companion, Wolverine, a veteran of long trails, that he needs to go to a hospital. By luck, Wolverine has friends picking him up a few miles ahead in White Pass. They drive Andy into Yakima, Washington, and drop him off at the doors of the emergency room.

He limps in out of the night and tells the nurse his story.

Hours later, a full battery of tests reveals a large mass pressing on Andy's spine. It's a new tumor and it's responsible for the weakness and numbness in his leg that's causing him to fall.

The doctor on duty prescribes pain meds. Betsy and Michael grab the packed go-bag of Andy's street clothes and take the first flight in. The next day, Andy learns of a new chemo drug, called Adcetris, recently approved and not widely available. Yakima Valley Memorial, in tiny Yakima, Washington (population 90,000), was the first place in the country to buy it. It shrinks tumors rapidly, especially in cases like Andy's, in which Hodgkin's lymphoma has relapsed after a stem-cell transplant. But it's not a miracle. The doctor says it'll only buy him time.

Time is what Andy needs. It's early October by now—late in the PCT season—and cold rain is coming to the high country of northern Washington. Snow won't be far behind, and then the trail will effectively close. Betsy and Andy sit together in the hospital room, waiting to discuss the new drug with the doctor—contemplating whether or not Andy should give Western medicine another try.

Word trickles out: There is a scruffy-faced hiker with advanced cancer who walked here from Mexico. A nurse strolls in, tells them he's arranging for a horse so Andy can finish his journey. Next, a social worker comes in with paperwork from the Dream Foundation for a grant to pay for the horses. Then the phone rings; it's the owner of a packhorse outfitter. She wants to hook Andy up with a horse, a wrangler, and whatever else he needs. Then the press coordinator asks about a news story; then the TV crews arrive.

In an interview with KEPR News, Andy tells the reporter: "One of the greatest blessings I've gotten from this whole experience with cancer and healing is the freedom and the drive to do whatever I want to do."

Now, his story is out and everyone knows. And in a way, it's gratifying. "I've walked all this way suffering," Andy tells his mom. "It's about time someone noticed."

Three days after he comes off the trail, Andy sits in a hospital bed with an IV line in his arm. The Adcetris drips in. His hike has delivered him to one of the few hospitals in the country that has the medicine. Who is he to deny fate? The next morning, he reports the numbness and tingling have subsided enough that he wants to continue. But not with a horse. "If I'm going to finish the trail," he tells his mom, "it's going to be with these feet."

He hefts his pack, pockets his prescription steroids, and walks on. He's making his own miracles now.

There's a parable about death that Andy and his Ayurvedic practitioner, Rob, shared together months before Andy started hiking. *When the flowers in the garden know tomorrow is their turn to be plucked,* the lesson goes, *Do they feel sadness? Do their faces droop? Are they any less bright? No. The moment they know that the next day it is their turn, they make themselves ready with great gusto and excitement.*

Betsy drops Andy at a hotel in Snoqualmie, Washington. His friends and fellow hikers are there. Between the rancid gear and body odor, it reeks inside, but Andy meets the dense air with the Yakima *Herald* held aloft, his grinning mug pasted across the front page and one to match in real life.

A few days later, heading north out of Skykomish, with 172 miles left to the northern terminus, the trail becomes a rocky, hard-scrabble way, winding over mountain passes where glaciers cling to the slopes. The sky is textured gray and full of rain.

The trail is gone, replaced by a rushing stream of cold runoff. Water fills Andy's fifth pair of trail runners. Sometimes it's so cold he can't touch pinky to thumb. He clips his tent canopy (he'd gotten it back when the rains came) to its poles using his teeth. The rain is so loud at night that he has to put in earplugs.

Today, flush with food from his last resupply, he tells his fellow thru-hikers Scrub Rat and Doe Eyes that he's going to stay put and wait out the weather. For days, if that's what it takes. The pair leaves camp and the lashing rains soak them through. The shivering starts soon enough. They're moving slowly. "Our gear was failing," Doe Eyes later says. "We were soaked to the bone and filled with fear about hypothermia. And here comes Astro, jaunting up the trail, his gear soaked, his rain jacket wide open. Fearless."

Andy continues ahead, moving slightly faster than the pair, and begins the long ascent to Ptarmigan Glacier, blue ice mashed against the gray rock and gray sky. The climb is endless, and

he begins to despair, his burst of energy long since depleted. Tears of fear join tears seeking mercy from the mountain. On the way down, every other step he slips and every fifth step he falls—his leg is still sore.

"There was a period most of the day today where my thumbs were so numb that I couldn't even unzip anything. I had to open Ziploc bags by ripping them with my teeth. I sped as fast as I could," he tells his voice recorder that night. He knows, like all the hikers do, that if he can't stay dry, he could freeze to death within hours.

For so long, death had been a distant stalker, hidden behind the uncertainty of months to come and solutions left to try. Now it's come in close.

But so has support. Led by Betsy and Deon English, an affable drug rep with Seattle Genetics (the maker of Adcetris), Team Astro comes together to get Andy through to the end.

In search of help for on-the-ground logistics, Deon connects Michael to a friend of hers named Dave Leffmann, who calls his friend, Marc Fendel, who just finished a PCT thru-hike of his own in September. Dave tells Marc the story of a kid with late-stage cancer that has been thru-hiking. Kid's name is Astro. Does he know him?

He does. To most people, Marc is Marc. But to a very rarified tribe, he is Gourmet, the guy who had given Astro his trail name all those months and miles and mountains ago. Of course he remembers him. There are people in this world who leave a mark after only the slightest brush. Andy is one of them. "How can we not do this?" Gourmet says to Dave.

Team Astro mobilizes for the final push to the border. Andy, Dave, Gourmet, and Michael set out from Harts Pass, 29.4 miles from the end. The trail is high in this part, sliding across the side of a mountain with views of snow-dusted peaks that stretch into Canada. They walk together in a snow trench. That night, it pours cold rain, but they can stand up and cook under Dave's giant tarp. They devour the goodies that Gourmet packed in: soup, bread and cheese, chocolate.

On October 19, 2012, Andy wakes up on the day before he was supposed to die. He wakes up and shakes the water off his tent and unzips from the warmth of his sleeping bag. He packs his bag by muscle memory. He is 15 miles from a forest clearing that holds a five-part wooden monument with the PCT's insignia driven into its crown.

They lope along fast, staying warm in the cold and damp. Michael feels like he's jogging. Gourmet's been here before and marks the miles: two more to go. Andy says, "I'm gonna make it. I can't believe it." With a mile to go, the emotion begins to seize him—part elation, part relief, part something only he knows. He thanks everyone for being here. With 100 yards to go, the trail widens enough between the trees to walk two abreast. Michael and Andy walk arm in arm under a sagging sky.

At 5 p.m., Team Astro enters the clearing and approaches the monument. This is his moment, the end of the journey on which he set the terms of his future by focusing on the now. He is supposed to be standing here cured and triumphant with a story of strength and courage that he can use to help heal others. Does it matter that it didn't work out that way?

Andy doesn't say much. He walks up to the wooden monument and reaches out to it with his cold, red-raw hands. His hair is wet with sweat and rain and matted to his face. In this single, perfect moment, he is alive and free from whatever came before and whatever comes next. He closes his eyes, leans in toward the monument, and then, gives it a kiss. ■

A MOMENT of PURE BLISS at the TRAIL'S NORTHERN TERMINUS

Ten months after finishing the PCT, Andy steadies himself against the railing as he walks to the Crystal Hermitage Guest House at Ananda Village, his spiritual community in Northern California. Four days later, on the morning of August 30, his mother wakes him so they can watch the dawn. It is Andy's last sunrise.

Casey Lyons is senior editor.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BETSY GOSSELIN

Learning the alphabet: After the AT, Christian Thomas headed to the PCT, and the CDT is next. Here, he's with his mom, Andrea, and her boyfriend, Dion, during their last month on the PCT.

Kindergarten Can Wait

When five-year-old Christian Thomas set out with his family to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail, some skeptics said he couldn't—and shouldn't. But like a lot of kids, he wasn't listening.

By Bill Donahue | Photography by Brown W. Cannon III

WE SWOOP AROUND ANOTHER TURN IN THE MOUNTAINS. THE ROAD GETS A BIT STEEPER, AND IN THE JANUARY RAIN, A GRAY TENDRIL OF MIST DRIFTS OVER THE GREEN WOODS. THE ENGINE CHURNS AS OUR CAR LABORS UPHILL. BESIDE ME, THE LITTLE BOY IN A CAR SEAT STARES OUT THE WINDOW. CHRISTIAN THOMAS IS FIVE YEARS OLD AND REED-THIN WITH ROSY, CHERUBIC CHEEKS, AND BY NOW HE HAS EATEN ABOUT HALF OF THE CHOCOLATE DONUT HOLES CONTAINED IN THE 14-OUNCE WALMART BOX IN HIS LAP. WHAT'S ON HIS MIND? IS HE DREADING THE HIKE PLANNED FOR TODAY? PLENTY OF ADULTS WOULD BE ANXIOUS ABOUT A 15-MILE TREK IN A CHILLY DOWNPOUR, HOOFING IT UP AND DOWN ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL AS IT ROLLS THROUGH SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK. OR IS HE JUST MESMERIZED BY THE FAT RAINDROPS LASHING AT THE WINDOWS?

Quiet, quiet, quiet. There are crinkled paper bags wadded on the floor of the car, a thrashed 1996 Jeep Cherokee, and dirty laundry is strewn everywhere. Yet somehow amid the chaos, this kid is tranquil, composed—put together. His brown hair is neatly parted. His manner is genial, and when he speaks he exudes the incongruous panache of a TV reporter delivering the news from outside a low-rent apartment complex. "I like fog," he says in a high, fluty voice. "It's cool! When you see a person, it's like, wow, he magicked here."

Christian giggles, charmed by his own wit. Then he keeps eating donut holes and his mother turns around to peer back at him. Andrea Rego is 26, with long brunette pigtails. In her most recent job, she did office work at a construction company on Long Island. She can be feisty. Like a moment ago, frustrated, she said, "I'm gonna burn this car when this trip is done!" Now, in a sweet baby voice, she tells her son, "You can have as many of those as you want, bud. Eat up." She turns to me and adds, "I'd be happy if he ate the whole box. He needs the calories."

Maybe he does: It's early 2014 and Christian is hiking the entire Appalachian Trail, all 2,180 miles, with his mom and stepdad (well, technically his mom's boyfriend), Dion Pagonis, 29. Christian—now best known by his trail name, Buddy Backpacker—started eight months ago, in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, and he's trudged through snow in North Carolina and black flies in Maine. He's slept with his Pooh Bear every night and he's outhiked his mom. She stopped after just 400 miles, electing to chauffeur, which improved their resupply logistics and enabled Buddy and Dion to walk without heavy packs. In a week, after hiking numerous trail sections out of sequence, the trio will return to Harper's Ferry. Christian will become the youngest person in history to complete the AT. After that, the family plans to hike the Pacific Crest Trail (2,650 miles) and the Continental Divide Trail (3,100 miles).

At the moment, Christian weighs just 46 pounds. So he keeps eating donut holes, and then, after a while, he groans. "I don't feel too good, Mommy," he says. "My stomach hurts."

"You'll feel better when you start hiking, Bud," Andrea says, again in the baby voice. "You always do."

Dion says nothing. Almost always, Dion is silent.

We park at the trailhead, and when we climb out of the car the wind is ripping. When Andrea pulls a transparent rain poncho over Christian's jacket, it rattles in the gale. No other hikers are out. There are hardly any cars in the whole park, and it's still pouring. Being a parent myself, I think, "Now's when it happens. Now is when the kid throws a tantrum in protest."

But Christian is placid. His bellyache is gone or forgotten, and he's skipping around in the parking lot and enlisting me as a straight man for his pranks. (I'm still a novelty, having just arrived to hike with him for three days.) "Knock knock," he says.

"Who's there?"

"Car go."

"Car go who?"

"Car go beep beep." He throws his head back and laughs, so the parking lot fills for a moment with bright peals of joy.

"How many miles can you hike in a day?" he asks me as we start hiking.

"I don't know. About 20."

"That's nothing! I did 22 miles one day and I wasn't even tired."

HOW FAR IS TOO FAR? How much toil and suffering should a kid take—and what for? A generation ago, back when children roamed the streets freely, pedaling their banana seat bikes in a time before helmets, no one fretted over such questions. When a six-year-old boy named Michael Cogswell thru-hiked the entire Appalachian Trail with his parents in 1980, there was nothing but feel-good rhetoric surrounding his hike. Newspapers made light of how the little boy crashed constantly, weighted by his pack, and this magazine ran a celebratory story in which the author, Michael's stepdad Jeffrey Cogswell, waxed poetic about the trailside flora—"red trillium, violets, purple ironweed"—and lionized the little boy's perseverance as a photo showed a wonderstruck Michael drinking from an ice-skimmed mountain creek.

Now, though, childrearing is a science, and sniping at other people's parenting techniques may be our favorite contact sport. When journalist Lenore Skenazy decided in 2008 to let her nine-year-old son ride the New York subway alone, she received thousands of hate letters and was called "America's Worst Mom." (Her response: freerangekids.com.) Similar skepticism has surrounded two Texas sisters who run half-marathons. When *The New York Times* profiled Kaytlynn Welsch, 12, and Heather Welsch, 10, in 2012, the headline asked, "Too Fast Too Soon?" One reader responded, "This is child abuse."

Any parent who loves the outdoors can find him- or herself pushing the envelope, sometimes unwittingly. I will confess that when my own daughter, now 20, was in preschool, I took her on a kayak trip during which our inflatable boat sprung a leak. Our tent and sleeping bags slipped out into the rapids and I spent a frigid, sleepless night

Christian (opposite) takes a well-earned play break on the PCT in Oregon.

chastising myself for being selfish and negligent. But that was just a weekend. To thru-hike the AT, Christian has had to climb over rocks and roots almost every day for nine months, overcoming challenges that defeat plenty of adults, even as his young sinew and bones are still growing. Naturally, his parents have critics. In one recent post on a Facebook page, a hiker named Yvonne called Andrea out. "If BB's mother is still on here and viewing these posts, I want to challenge you!" she wrote. "I challenge you to take a moment, step back and ask yourself who this Appalachian Trail hike adventure and experience is all about... if it truly is about Buddy... allow him to explore, allow him stop and love the mountain views."

An AT stalwart calling himself GreyWolf took a harder line, alleging that Dion and Andrea brought Buddy hiking in unsafe conditions. "The temperature never got above the 20s and was in the teens at night. Should I call social services?" he railed.

But the family's Facebook pictures from Christian's journey on the AT voice a strong rejoinder to skeptics. Here's the boy standing atop Katahdin, his arms raised in triumph. Here he is catching snowflakes on his tongue on Christmas Eve in the Smokies. As I scroll through the images, I can't help but marvel at how Christian has experienced so much delight at such a young age. And part of me wonders: Should we really be asking if Andrea Rego is a bad mom for setting her son on such an arduous task? Is the correct question, in fact, *Is she the best mother ever?*

For the PCT, Andrea gave up her role driving a support vehicle and the family hiked together.

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CERTAINLY, SHE STARTED from a rough spot.

When Andrea got pregnant with Christian in 2008, she was in her second year of college at Stony Brook University, in New York. She was 20 years old, overweight, and ensconced in a nine-month romance with a man from whom she is now estranged.

"I hoped Christian would bring some stability to my life," she says. The plan failed. After the birth, Andrea continued attending college for a year, but then quit to work full time. Logging 50 to 60 hours a week at the construction company, Andrea, who is 5'4", ballooned to 200 pounds. "By the time I picked Christian up at daycare," she says, "I was so tired that we just went to McDonald's or ate frozen food in front of the television. Christian wouldn't eat anything if it wasn't in a package. He was addicted to TV."

Soon, though, Andrea grew closer to her friend Dion Pagonis, who had his own unfulfilling (but lucrative) job on Long Island, working in a windowless room at Sherman Specialty, the world's largest supplier of restaurant crayons. Dion, who is also 5'4", once weighed well over 250 pounds. But he is not one to live in quiet desperation forever. He's ambitious, in idiosyncratic ways. In high school, he earned his Eagle Scout badge supervising a team that re-created a Native American village. In college, at SUNY Fredonia, he was the president of Greek life.

In 2007, Dion bought a Wii Fit and began working out three hours a day. He lost 70 pounds. Not long after, Andrea joined a gym and began working out, too. By 2011, Dion was fit enough to try the AT, solo. (He made it 200 miles before twisting his ankle.) Later, he convinced Andrea to join him for a backpacking trip in Colorado. She had never before gone on an overnight hike, and she was still smoking a pack a day. Over a weekend, they covered only 7 miles. "It was very hard," she says, "but I loved it—just being outside, away from Long Island."

In spring 2012, finally, Dion engineered an escape plan. He and Andrea sold nearly all their possessions and moved west to Colorado, first to Boulder, then to Crested Butte, a ski town where Dion scored design gigs at elance.com and they operated a hostel called Butte Bunk. While Dion snowboarded, Christian (then four) and Andrea took to the bunny hill on skis. "By the end of the season," Andrea writes at buddybackpacker.com, Christian "was blowing down moguls and double blacks on one of the hardest mountains in the United States. He has the endurance of an advanced athlete with a deep love for nature. Andrea and Dion have no choice but to live epic lives with him."

The experience in Crested Butte changed the trajectory of their lives. Suddenly, the pair hoped to bring Buddy to California, so they could all learn to surf. They thought they'd like try a long-distance mountain bike odyssey somewhere. They wanted to put themselves on a path toward adventure, and test their own endurance as well as Christian's. In Colorado, as the snow melted, Andrea envisioned another kind of adventure. "Why don't we hike the Appalachian Trail?" she asked Dion in April of 2013. Crested Butte was about to button up for the off-season. So they bought the well-used Jeep for $1,500, loaded their gear, and headed east.

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IT'S VERY SLOW HIKING with Dion and Christian, and also a little bit solemn. Both of them walk with iPods and headphones. Dion listens to rock, Christian to educational music and lessons—brainy stuff chosen by Dion. (The digital lessons are the backbone of Christian's homeschooling program.) All I can hear, moving along through the woods, is the dull thud of footfalls and the rain pattering on the dead, sodden leaves. We roll along over gentle hills, passing rocky outcroppings that open onto the gray horizon, and eventually (inspired by his music, it seems) Christian begins skipping and weaving on the trail.

"Pay attention," Dion tells him. "Look where you're going."

"I love the Octopus's Garden song," Christian says when it comes on his iPod.

"Please don't sing it," says Dion. Then he adds, "Take your hands out of your pockets. Christian! Listen to instructions!"

In downtime at occasional hotels, Dion and Christian cuddle up together and watch movies on Andrea's iPad. Out on the trail, though, the dialogue is nearly all safety-oriented during the 40 miles I hike with them. To me, Dion explains, "If he trips and breaks an arm, our hike is over." In New Hampshire, Dion made Christian a promise: "If you don't have any boo-boos when we get to Katahdin, I'll give you some money." Christian lost that challenge, scraping his knee in a crash.

Now, though, it's Dion who's holding us back. Still a bit chunky at 180 pounds, he isn't a particularly fast hiker, and he's plagued with what he calls "Fred Flintstone feet"—his arches are almost convex. At times, Christian and I drift ahead. Then, I ask Christian about his audio lessons. He's learning vocabulary words: nefarious, subvert, fetid, and encumbered.

"What's the teacher saying right now?"

He squints a moment, listening. Then he parrots the saccharine voice from his iPod: "We're so encumbered with red tape we can't get any real work done."

When we meet Andrea at a road crossing, Christian runs toward her, laughing, to hug her. We all get a moment of sweet reprieve, but only a moment. Andrea says, "I always feel like we're a pit crew in a car race. It's like, 'You tie his shoes. I'll put food in his mouth.' We're always rushing to get him back on the trail." She turns to Christian. "Are you ready for some Pringles, Bud?" Looking back at me, she says, "He loves Pringles—that's his favorite food."

Christian takes a small stack, and then as we step into the woods, I glance back at our mission vehicle: The Jeep is a dull red, with "buddybackacker.com" and a big pair of angel wings, in yellow, that Dion drew on the hood. (The wings signify trail angels, as Andrea often gives other hikers rides.) The Jeep has 150,000 miles on it, but they've been hard miles; it looks like it might die on the next hill.

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THE BUDDY BACKPACKER expedition is not a well-oiled machine, and by the time I joined, there'd been a medley of calamities. On the first night of the trip, after the family rolled out of Crested Butte, Andrea left her wallet at a convenience store. As Dion dislikes carrying money, the trio was broke. They made camp after midnight near Manhattan, Kansas, in a cold wind, and struggled setting up their tent for the first time. "I was shivering," Dion remembers.

"After just two restless hours, the family

pressed east, toward West Virginia and the start of their hike—and the start of their controversial trail strategies. Many hikers have attacked Andrea and Dion for being loosey-goosey—and also lazy—on the AT. Sometimes when faced with a big hill, they make things easy on themselves. They drove to the top of Mt. Washington twice, for instance, so Christian could hike down each side. (He never actually *climbed* Washington.) When it was snowing in the Smokies, they skipped ahead, down to Georgia, then came back weeks later. They took about 90 days off, in total, enabling Dion to earn much-needed money by doing design projects. They were simply hiking their own hike, to invoke the credo that pervades AT culture, but that counted little with backpacking's grand poohbahs, who in many cases have built their lives around the AT and come to style themselves the keepers of the trail's sacred mores.

"They were sloppy," says Warren Doyle, a retired college professor who's hiked the AT a record 16 times. "They did a lot of lollygagging, and they got into trouble because of that. They were out hiking far later into the winter than they needed to be." (Doyle, ironically, has critics himself. On his Appalachian Trail Expeditions, a support vehicle carts gear for hikers, enabling them to sashay nearly all 2,000-plus miles bearing nothing but daypacks.)

Other critics questioned if they were actually on the trail at all, suggesting that Christian's parents cheated by skipping several stretches of the AT, even as they pretend-logged the miles online.

"There are some people who are lying about thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail and, since it's almost Christmas, I'm not going to name them yet," wrote a man named Tom Bazemore on Facebook. "This will give them a chance to come clean and end their con game." Bazemore, who runs a Georgia-based shuttle company, continued by directly addressing his targets: "You are certainly not the first to lie about hiking the entire trail but the fact that you are using a little child in this con is truly beyond belief!"

Seventy-one comments followed, most of them nasty, and Andrea snarled back: "I hope you all are completely ashamed of yourselves for spewing such nonsense. I can't wait until we are finished and can laugh looking back at all you haters."

I called Bazemore to ask which sections Buddy and his folks had skipped. His complaints zeroed in on a 30.3-mile stretch of trail between Newfound Gap, North Carolina, and Davenport Gap, Tennessee. "I shuttled some hikers there exactly when [Christian and Dion] were supposed to be there," he said, "and I told these people to look for a man with a five-year-old boy. They never saw them."

Dion had anticipated such critiques, however. In his own Facebook post, he wrote, "If I wasn't hiking with Buddy, I would be skeptical of his accomplishment, too." So along the length of the AT, he took photographs with a GPS camera and then posted them to a map at panaramio.com. His pictures are mostly of Christian standing at overlooks or streams, or by trees or on mountaintops, and they do not skip the section Bazemore questions. For those 30 miles, there are more than 20 photos, each one time-stamped. I scrutinized them one morning, and a story emerged of a small boy moving over rocky terrain, through ice and snow, at a little more than 1.5 miles an hour. There is little doubt that Buddy Backpacker progressed steadily northeast, toward Davenport Gap, in two long days, on December 1 and 2, 2013.

Christian hams it up with Dion.

I called Bazemore back and asked him to point me toward other skipped sections. "Look," he said, "I'm not going to go back and forth with you on this like we're all in junior high school. I know what I know and I stand by it."

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THE WEATHER CLEARS, and when we begin hiking on the second day, after camping, Christian is in high spirits. "Isn't it beautiful out today?" he says. "The trail is nice and soft, and there are no roots, and it's pretty flat right here. It's even pretty warm." He's chatty now, and he speaks of seeing orange lizards on his AT odyssey, and turkeys, and red flying

Andrea and Dion on the PCT

squirrels, and a rattlesnake, some wild ponies, and a moose. He doesn't know the names of the plants around us. He's experiencing nature as a small animal does, sensually, as a breeze on his back and a cold bite on his brow. Listening to him, I think of Michael Cogswell, the six-year-old thru hiker, now in his early 40s, who recently told me, "I wouldn't trade my AT experience for the world. There's a certain purity in doing something like that as a child. You can never get that back. But there are positives and negatives. By the time I was done with that hike, I wasn't really a kid anymore. I'd walked so many miles. I'd carried my own clothes and a tent and helped wash the laundry at night. I'd had all this responsibility."

Is Christian growing up too fast? He sure doesn't seem world-weary, for he keeps begging me to tell him make-believe stories. I tell him one, finally. It's about my plastic water bottle going "home," to China. The water bottle has a hard-to-pronounce fake Chinese name that Christian loves repeating, his voice a high-pitched array of scratchy, whispery sounds. When the tale is done, he spends 30 minutes detailing the plot of the film *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*. Then he asks, "Should I tell you about *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs 2?*"

Is he lonely—starved for attention from people besides his parents? Probably a little, but when I ask if he misses going to school, he isn't entirely clear what school entails. Andrea says he enjoyed preschool on Long Island, but on the trail he only conjures up one memory. "They put me in with the babies," he says with disdain.

I ask him if hiking ever gets boring. "That's a silly question," he says. "No!"

"Do you ever hate the AT?"

"Sometimes I don't like it when it's really hard. Then I just want to be done. I want Mommy to be right there in the middle of the woods and I just want to go to sleep right there."

Later, I described my hike with Christian to Dr. W. Douglas B. Hiller, an orthopedic surgeon at North Hawaii Community Hospital and a one-time chief medical officer for the triathlon at the Olympics. He said, "I doubt they caused him any physical harm. As long as it was a happy family hike and he wasn't being pushed, or made to keep going when he was limping, he should be fine. If he got some bruises and cuts, well, that's what little kids do all day long—they run around and jump and fall and get up."

I searched at length for a child psychologist who might object to Hiller's sanguine take. I couldn't find one, and I decided that the hubbub over Andrea's parenting was rooted partly in fear: Andrea is different than most AT hikers. She's from working class Long Island. She's combative at times. Yes, she and Dion brought Christian hiking on a very cold day. But what's the harm in dressing warmly and hitting the trail? Yes, Dion sometimes carps at the kid. As do many parents who steer their children toward more culturally accepted goals—piano, soccer, spelling bees. Why should hiking be any different? In fact, it's easy to see the experience in a very different light. Christian and his family are hiking America's most beloved and fought-over trail in pursuit of happiness, and they're happy most of the time. Together, they've found a way to engage with the world—to commune with its beauty and have an adventure. This is what matters.

On the last day I'm on the AT, Andrea picks us up at dusk, to drive us to the nearest shelter, where we'll camp. It's cold outside, so we savor the warm blast of the car's heater. When we park, Dion limps down the short path to the shelter. Christian leaps over the puddles. Andrea cooks us all dinner. Then the next morning, backing out, she runs over the gas stove. Under her breath, she says, "Shit!" Then she laughs and throws the stove into the Jeep and drives on.

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I SEE THEM ONLY ONE MORE TIME, eight months later, on a rainy afternoon last September in the small town of Trout Lake, Washington, as they take a break near the end of their Pacific Crest Trail thru-hike. Trout Lake is a forested Nowheresville, and after 11 straight days on the trail they're ensconced in drab tasks—laundry, email, cleaning out their packs. Still, as I pull up to the Trout Lake Grocery to find Andrea standing there on the porch, with Christian entwined in her arms, she exudes a certain glow. There's an ease about her, a softness to her skin. She's happy—you can tell that without even asking questions. And she's sunbaked and lean now, 35 pounds lighter than when I'd last seen her. She's been hiking the whole way this time, with both her and Dion carrying packs. The Jeep is long gone.

"We did 23 miles yesterday before four o'clock," she says, looking down. "Didn't we, Buddy?"

"Yeah," Christian says, rocking a bit in his mother's arms. He's sleepy-eyed and determined, it seems, not to take the bait. "Actually," he says, "it was 22.8."

"What's been your favorite part of the PCT so far?" I ask.

"Whitney," he says. "It was cool. We were way up there. It felt like the end of the trail." There's still a kid's wonder in his voice, but it's more contained now. He's 2 or 3 inches taller, and there is, suddenly, a grace about his small, lanky person. It seems almost certain that in a few years girls will go crazy for him and that he'll deflect their ardor with a languid ease.

"And what else was fun?" I ask, digging a little more.

"Goat Rocks," he says, referring to a nearby boulder field that stretches on

YOUTH MOVEMENT

These kids are going places.

Youngest to Complete the Triple Crown

Only about 200 people have hiked all three of America's long trails—the Appalachian, Pacific Crest, and Continental Divide Trails—making the Triple Crown one of the rarest feats in the outdoors. By comparison, more than twice that number reach the top of Mt. Everest most years. And when Reed "Sunshine" Gjonnes of Salem, Oregon, finished the CDT in 2013, at age 13, she became the youngest to join the elite club by an astounding 11 years. But her record may not last. If Christian completes the CDT this year, he'll become a Triple Crowner at age 7.

Youngest to Hike the AT Solo

Most adults struggle with the physical and mental hardships of a solo thru-hike: no one with whom to share the load; loneliness during months of hiking; making every decision alone. Neva "Chipmunk" Warren conquered these challenges and all the other difficulties of a thru-hike at age 15. She completed the Appalachian Trail in 2013, with zero long-distance hiking experience. "As I was climbing Springer Mountain on day one ... It was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be, and I was a bit scared," she told *Blue Ridge Outdoors.* But unlike a lot of older hikers faced with the same fears, she persevered.

Youngest to Hike Colorado's 14ers

Axel Hamilton conquered the 54 designated Colorado 14ers (as well as the four disputed peaks) by age 6. Hamilton completed the summits with his father and older brother, Calvin (who climbed the 14ers by age 8 and finished them all a *second* time last summer, at 10). Axel celebrated his final peak, Mt. Evans, on September 24, 2013, with a chocolate cake topped with 58 candles. What's next? Axel has his eyes on Colorado's 704 peaks over 13,000 feet.

—Ali Herman

YOUTH MOVEMENT PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) COURTESY; MATTHEW NORMAN AND KIMBERLY KENNEDY; COURTESY

Christian is 4 feet tall (without rocks).

for a couple miles. "I like doing hard stuff. And this house," he says, meaning the store, where they're staying in an upstairs motel room. "At night, they light up these lights on the porch and it's beautiful. It looks like Christmas."

When Dion emerges, fresh from a shower, I see he's lost weight as well. He's more than 30 pounds lighter and also ebullient, almost jolly. The tenseness I'd seen before on the AT, as he tried to corral a restless kid and negotiate complex car logistics, has vanished. This time, the three of them have all hiked together. There is, it seems, a new calm in Dion's muscles. "This trail is easier than the AT," he says. "It's well-maintained, it's graded. It's not rocky and you can actually get a good stride going."

We walk across the street to get lunch, and Andrea and Dion update me some. Christian, they say, now likes to wield his bamboo hiking poles like Ninja swords. They've landed a host of sponsors—a tent sponsor, a pack sponsor, even a socks sponsor—and at one point, resting from the trail, they encountered a lovely 18-year-old girl who spent the afternoon teaching Christian how to twirl a hula hoop.

VIDEO Christian talks about his plan to hike the CDT in a video at **backpacker.com/buddy.**

"You liked that didn't you, Bud?" Andrea asks.

"Yeah," he says, looking down at his fries. "That was good."

What jumps out is how steady they all seem. They're no longer the hapless outsiders of the backpacking world. No one is savaging them on Facebook anymore, and their goal of completing the Triple Crown in 2015 no longer seems outlandish. Barring catastrophe, they will get the job done. Then they'll move on to surfing or mountain biking or whatever. Everything will work out for Christian, more or less; he'll clearly be okay.

But to Christian, the unlikely peace that his family enjoys wandering the world is old news. He doesn't want to sit there and talk about it. There's a trampoline behind the store, and he keeps looking out the window toward it. Eventually, Andrea lets him go. He runs over to it, loose-limbed, his body lit with delight. He climbs inside the trampoline's protective black mesh fence, and begins jumping, giddy and laughing as he sails into the sky. ■

Editor's note: Christian, Andrea, and Dion started their CDT thru-hike in March. Check for updates at buddybackpacker.com.

Bill Donahue has written for The Atlantic *and* The New York Times Magazine. *With his daughter, he recently swam between remote Caribbean islands, and lived to tell the tale.*

Hikes Gone Wrong

We all love the trail. Sometimes love hurts.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RYAN GARCIA

Just Desserts

Revenge is a dish best served cold, wet, and thirsty. *By Tracy Ross*

Forrest had gotten fat. I know it sounds cruel, but that's what I thought when I saw him at the airport in Anchorage, Alaska.

I'd driven four hours from Denali National Park, with dual sensations duking it out inside of me: titillation, to see the only guy I had ever truly loved, and neck-tensing anxiety, because the last time Forrest and I had been together—two years prior—we imploded.

We'd dated on and off since junior high, and I'd always felt his adoration for me vacillated based on my weight. Truth: He'd always seemed more adoring when I was thin than when I'd packed on a few.

I was a chubby kid, a "big-boned" adolescent. But at 19, I learned that long, uphill hikes paired with strenuously reduced caloric intake could make me "muscular thin." In the years since, through hiking and not eating, I'd whittled myself into "wiry." Along the way, I'd also logged enough time on trails to land a job as a Denali backcountry ranger. When I called Forrest the summer I started, I fantasized about him coming to the park, seeing the strong, thin me and swooning in unrequited worship. Why unrequited? Vengeance was welling inside of me.

I'd take him on the hardest backcountry patrol in the park, the three-night, 18-mile, willow-clogged, river-threaded, wolf-and-grizzly-bear-teeming Sanctuary River Loop. I'd prove how empowered I had become without him.

We drove back to Denali in twilight, and, the following day, readied ourselves for the trip. But in the flush of vengeance, I made two tiny mistakes. I packed water bottles and a stove, but no water purification tablets and no lighter.

We rode the bus to the Sanctuary drop-off and started hiking. In full peacockery, and fueled by years of resentment, I began speed-hiking up the valley. Poor Forrest—who'd never negotiated Denali's tussock-stacked, squishy, trailless tundra—lagged farther and farther behind. He seemed weak, and that made me stronger. I took off, blazing even faster. I'd turn back, "check in," and blast off again.

Well, hiking like this makes you thirsty, which is when I realized my oversight. Though water sources abounded, I had no way to purify. *I can still boil*, I thought. And that's when I realized my second mistake. I couldn't even do that, nor, without flame, cook us dinner. I waited for Forrest, and simultaneously gave him the news and brushed it aside. We didn't really need to eat any way, I told him, then mentioned that maybe our best choice—given circumstances "beyond my control"—would be to abandon the trip. Off I stormed again, with something less than peacockery, telling Forrest I'd wait for him at the edge of the Sanctuary River.

That was a lonely 3 miles. Not only had I failed to demonstrate my leadership and strength, I'd managed to spike the entire trip. I made it to the edge of the Sanctuary, sat, waited, and thought about what I'd have to say to him when he caught up.

Minutes passed, maybe even an hour. As night began to fall, I pictured all sorts of fates for poor Forrest: him tripping on a tussock, grizzlies gnawing on his buttock. Not only had I—a ranger—lost my volunteer, but I was flirting with maybe losing my nerve, too. There was no way I could find him by myself in the brushy terrain without help, so I made the very non-rangery decision to cross the Sanctuary River—alone—so I could hike the most familiar way out in the last light.

I plunged in, nearly losing my footing and submerging to my chest near the opposite bank, hauled myself up, hiked the few miles to the park road, and hitched a ride to a nearby campground. The host called my boss, who initiated a search. All my fellow rangers fanned out, searching the tundra for Forrest. I wanted to search, too, but I was too wet and too distressed to be much help, and instead shivered in the campground host's trailer.

In the span of one day, I'd gone from femme Denali ranger to bumbling rookie, a danger to myself and others, especially Forrest, who was alone at the mercy of the bears and wolves.

But Forrest didn't need mercy.

After I'd ditched him one time too many, he ditched me back.

Instead of following me, he found his own way back to the park road, flagged down a backpacker bus, and had it drop him at my Park Service cabin. When the search party finally found him the next morning, he was warm and happy, indulging in his second king-size Snickers.

That one should have been mine, but I think I already got what I deserved.

Poor Forrest—who'd never negotiated Denali's tussock-stacked, squishy, trailless tundra—lagged farther and farther behind. He seemed weak, and that made me stronger.

Tracy Ross and Forrest parted ways amicably. She met her husband on a mountain a few years later.

The Wrong Leaf

Just because there's no poison ivy around doesn't mean you're in friendly territory. *By Corey Buhay*

Identifying poison oak and poison ivy are pretty basic skills. You learn, you memorize, you take the knowledge for granted. Throw in a different ecosystem and some distractions—say beach camping and a sky full of stars—and things are bound to get iffy.

I was in the Galápagos at the end of a semester abroad, on a short overnight with friends to celebrate. After a few beers, I headed for the trees. I plucked a leaf, did my thing, and rejoined the party.

The burn was subtle at first. I thought I was sitting too close to the fire or that maybe my shorts had taken on a little too much sand. If only.

Something was not right. The pain became so intense I couldn't hold a conversation. I excused myself again, spread my sleeping pad under the trees, and went fetal.

"Corey? Are you crying?" My friend poked her head into my jungle refuge. She hauled me out of the bush, marched me over to our somewhat intoxicated guide, and inquired about the likelihood of poisonous vegetation. He led me back into the brush to investigate.

"Is this what you touched?" He snatched a leaf and waved it in my face. I nodded. He stuffed it in his mouth. "This is *mangle salado*—the salt mangrove. It takes on seawater and stores the salt in its leaves. See? Salty!" I sagged with relief. *Only salt*.

Then he noticed something else.

"Oh, but this—" he picked a nearly identical leaf from a plant adjacent to the first. "This is *manzanillo*—the poison apple. I took a bite of this as a child and haven't had feeling on that side of my tongue since."

My friend and I exchanged panicked glances.

"Scrub with sand," he recommended. A subtle gesture informed him of the affected body part, but he only shrugged. I waddled to the ocean.

Back in camp, word spread fast.

The advice was overwhelming. Had I tried rinsing with saltwater? Freshwater? I was gifted an alcohol wipe, which brought no relief to my sand-abraded skin. My friend found a park ranger, who said that orange juice would do the trick, then handed me a pocketknife and an orange.

I found a place to squat and squeeze. The pain made the stars swim overhead.

I crawled back to my sleeping bag, put a baggie of ice between my legs, and, eventually, fell asleep.

Filtered sunlight and the splashing of waves on the rocks woke me the next morning. I sat up in a puddle of melted ice, but that was the only evidence of the previous night's pain. I was cured, though by which remedy, I'll never know.

Assistant Editor Corey Buhay sticks to smooth stones now.

READER FAILS

My husband thinks it's really funny to tell me lies just to see if I'll believe him. So when I stopped right off of the trail to answer the call of nature and he told me someone was coming, I didn't believe him. But when I looked up, an older couple was staring down at me, smiling. I said hello and waved. A year later I'm still a little bitter toward my husband.

—PAM ANDERSON

Hiked the Narrows in Zion. About 100 yards in, I smashed my head on a branch that I didn't see because I was watching my feet. Blood streamed down my head in front of a bunch of kids. My partner ripped off her shirt and used it to stop the bleeding. Big day for those kids.

—DAN GUAY

An Eye for An Eye

An AT thru-hiker invites friends along for a comedy of horrors.

By M. John Fayhee

It was supposed to be a mellow hiatus from the myopic intensity that had defined my southbound thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. Two buddies were set to join me in Hot Springs, North Carolina. One—whom I'll call Red—would be with me for a week, the other—whom I'll call Modern Man—for 12 days.

Neither amigo was in trail shape. Red, though experienced, had been working the previous six months on a boat on the Mississippi River. Modern Man, a self-avowed city boy, had never placed a pack upon his back until we cinched up and made our way uphill out of Hot Springs.

We planned short, leisurely days, which would provide a welcome respite before my final push to Springer Mountain.

As scripted, day one went smoothly. We hiked a mere 8 miles, set up camp early, and relaxed around a campfire while sipping tepid vodka-Tang screwdrivers.

Day two did not go as scripted. When Red and I arrived at Groundhog Creek Shelter, located on a side trail a quarter-mile from the AT proper, we realized Modern Man was not with us.

Since the tread through that section was well worn and well marked, and since there were no trail or road junctions upon which he could have strayed, we could envision no scenario in which Modern Man could have become disoriented—except perhaps as a result of an especially intense reaction to the mind-altering substance we had consumed at lunch. He had simply vanished into thin air.

As darkness approached, Red and I began to consider the possibility that some mishap might have befallen our neophyte pal. Maybe a sprained ankle or snakebite. Or maybe he was sitting on the trail communing with a fern. So we walked back out to the AT and retraced our steps—all the way back to the last spot we remembered seeing Modern Man, some 6 or so miles. No sign of him.

We returned to the shelter, hoping that, by some miracle, our friend would be there. He was not. So, armed with flashlights, we yet again retraced steps we had already retraced, yelling until our voices were raw. It was a surreal experience, not least because our minds were still, um, altered, and the woods were alight with an intense display of firefly pyrotechnics.

Just before dawn, we staggered back to the Groundhog Creek shelter, caught a few restless ZZZs, and pondered our options. There was no other choice but to notify search-and-rescue. The closest road crossing was thankfully in the direction we were going—toward Great Smoky Mountains National Park. And so we headed on, not sure if we were leaving our friend behind, and feeling uneasy about it in any case.

Less than an hour later, we came across Modern Man. He was sitting forlornly under an improvised poncho shelter, his eyes bleary. He had simply walked by the side trail leading to the shelter and hunkered down when he knew he was lost. Such a possibility had not occurred to us.

Though we were weary and glad to be reunited, we had to stay on schedule because both Modern Man and Red had to return home on preordained dates. After agreeing that, henceforth, we would only experiment with hallucinogens after arriving in camp, we began the first serious ascent on our itinerary: directly up the switchback-free side of Snowbird Mountain. Near the summit, while crossing an otherwise innocuous little trickle, I slipped. My head snapped forward and eye came down directly on the pointed end of my chest-high hiking stick. My entire field of view exploded with bright red.

"HELP!!!" I screamed, which was tough, given that I was hyperventilating. When Red arrived, having run when he heard my high-decibel shriek for assistance, he was so winded he could scarcely stand. He saw my bloodied face, yelped, and spent the next few minutes freaking out, which did nothing to calm my nerves.

Modern Man was unruffled. He spoke reassuringly, directed me to tilt my head back, and said something like, "Well, you don't see that every day." My eyelid had nearly been torn off. You could pull it down and see the white of my eyeball, which might make for an amusing trick at a Halloween party, but, out in the middle of nowhere, it amounted to a stressful turn of events. Modern Man reattached my eyelid with a couple butterfly bandages improvised from duct tape and pronounced me patched up enough to continue.

For the next few days, whenever we passed other hikers, they would let loose with some variation on the shocked exclamation theme—things like, "OH MY GOD ... WHAT THE F*** HAPPENED TO YOUR EYE???"

Red left us at Davenport Gap. He seemed happy to be departing for the relative calm of the Big Muddy.

Near Newfound Gap, a shoulder strap broke on my pack, forcing me to hitchhike into Gatlinburg in search of repair. During this time, I made a detour to a doctor's office to have my now-oozing eye examined by someone who had perhaps washed his hands in the past week. You know you are in dire straits when a medical practitioner recoils at your appearance. After loading me up with antibiotics, the doctor told me the infection was bad enough that, had I waited another couple days, I would have gone through the rest of my life being a natural for roles in pirate movies.

Back on the trail the next day, we started into Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which is heavily regulated. When AT hikers apply for their permits, they have to specify at which shelters they will be staying. Modern Man and I arrived at our designated destination only to find that we would be bunking with a young couple on their honeymoon. This was awkward, so we hiked on to the next shelter—3 or so miles away—walking into a flash-and-boom thunderstorm that ripped through and soaked us down to our skivvies.

Next morning—the last Modern Man would be with me—we learned from a passing dayhiker that the shelter at which the honeymooning couple was staying had been hit by lightning the previous evening, likely during the same squall that had drenched us. The young wife had been killed. The husband had been paralyzed on one side. He barely survived. It was all over the local news, the dayhiker said.

Before taking his leave, the dayhiker looked at me and asked, "What the f*** happened to your eye?"

At that point, my injury seemed mighty inconsequential.

It is an understatement to say our descent into Fontana Village was somber and reflective. Though the day was beautiful, and though the birds were chirping brightly, there was no way to mentally tamp down thoughts regarding the cruel interface between fate and coincidence.

Modern Man and I drifted apart after that trip, as if the distance might bury the bad memories. And my eye? It took a long time, but it eventually healed. Though sometimes I wonder if that trip caused other lasting effects. I maybe spend more time glancing toward the heavens than I used to, but that's something that likely comes with age, whether you're on the trail or not.

M. John Fayhee, one-time editor of the Mountain Gazette *and author of 12 books, advocates whittling the ends of trekking sticks until they're nice and round.*

Modern Man was unruffled. He spoke reassuringly, directed me to tilt my head back, and said something like, "Well, you don't see that every day."

READER FAILS

Rain pummeled a three-day trip that I took with my brother in the central Cascades, so we decided to turn around. Unfortunately, all the streams we had crossed on the way in were now raging. The first one we came to was about 6 or 7 feet wide, but appeared to be only about a foot deep. I went first. One step from the far bank, I sank in to my waist and fell on my back with my 40-pound pack dragging me under. My brother was laughing so hard I had to save myself.

—BRANDON CLARK

Mutiny

Optimism isn't a weather forecast.

By Annette McGivney

We stood in a circle around the seal. It was lying motionless, but still breathing, on a stretch of beach along Northern California's Lost Coast. It looked up at us with big, sad eyes.

"It's clearly suffering. I think we should kill it," said John Harlin, this magazine's Northwest editor at the time.

"What! Are you kidding?" answered contributing editor Mike Lanza.

He was not kidding. "I could just pound its head with a rock," Harlin said. "You know, like a mercy killing."

It was late November 2001 and the first day of a four-day trip to test gear. Our group of seven had set out that morning from Mattole Beach, some of us carrying more trepidation than others. It was the off-season for the Lost Coast and a storm was in the forecast. But even in the best weather, traversing the wilderness beach requires timing the tides for safe passage below stretches of rocky headlands. Throw in a storm surge and the route becomes impassable—or interesting, depending on how you look at things.

Rocky Mountain Editor Steve Howe had his take: "This is a bad omen," he said as we stared down at the seal with the sun beating on its silky, black skin. Howe said keeping to the plan was foolhardy. But then, Howe's a bit of a grumbler. And never mind we were testing down bags, teepees, tarps, and lightweight rainshells. "We are carrying all the wrong gear for this place," Howe added, as if he was going to talk the rest of us out of it.

Not a chance. Our group was dominated by the three horsemen of optimism. There was Jonathan Dorn, the editor-in-chief whose meteorological instinct deviated so far from Howe's that he was testing an ultralight poncho as both shell and shelter. Gear Editor Dennis Lewon was so unconcerned that he'd packed wood-burning camp stoves. And then there was Harlin, who regularly sought out the world's most difficult mountaineering routes because, for him, the greater the challenge, the greater the fun. Fortunately for the seal, Harlin's zeal for euthanasia didn't pass group muster. We hiked beneath blue skies to our campsite along Cooskie Creek.

The next morning, we woke to a pounding storm. Vindication for Howe, but to his credit, he didn't gloat. "Howe and Harlin have gone to see if there is a better way around the headlands!" Dorn shouted over the teepee-rattling gusts.

The scouts returned with bad news: There was no high route. Being more of a worst-case-scenario kind of person myself, I thought we should heed yesterday's omen. "Well, we should stay here and wait it out," I said. Howe agreed. Two others were on the fence. The optimists argued that if we got out of camp right then, we could cross the headland stretch when the tide was at its lowest. Positivity prevailed.

The several-mile traverse between Cooskie and Randall Creeks was worse than even I had imagined. A storm surge had pinned churning surf to cliffs. We struggled across slippery rocks where every oncoming wave felt like a fire hose. I planted my trekking poles between rocks to avoid being swept out to sea and looked back at our crew. Lewon was

laughing. Howe was fuming. And Dorn had salvaged a buoy rope to secure his poncho around his waist. Meanwhile, the storm runoff caused rocks to drop from the cliffs overhead like mortar rounds.

Eventually we reached sanctuary—a treeless bluff well above the surf and lashed by the hurricane-force winds. Somehow, in the middle of this vast stretch, there was a cabin. It was the only windbreak in sight and so we huddled on the porch to consider our options.

"There is no way we can pitch tents in this wind," said Howe, who added grimly that he was feeling hypothermic.

Lanza, with his jacket wet through, said he was soaked and maybe hypothermic, too. Everyone was shivering.

Howe turned the knob on the door of the cabin. It was unlocked.

"I'm going in," I said without hesitation. Howe and Lanza followed.

But the three horsemen would have none of it. "That's breaking and entering," Dorn said, suddenly glowering.

"What about gear testing?" added Harlin, the seal sadist. "You're cheating."

Cheating never felt so good. We were finally out of the wind and rain. Our focus turned from survival to getting comfy. We brewed tea. We claimed bunks. And we laughed as we watched the optimists outside the cabin's large picture window scurrying around looking for sticks to fuel their wood stove. (They had managed to erect their teepee in the lee of the cabin, which, somehow, was not cheating.)

With nightfall came a temperature drop. The cabin was unheated, while the fire in the teepee had turned it into a sweat lodge. The optimists were sitting shirtless, drying their clothes on a line. Our cohort of mutineers briefly visited the teepee and its smug occupants—to warm up. Sitting around the wood stove, we argued about who was smarter. Team Mutiny had the good judgment to get out of a potentially life-threatening situation. But the optimists argued they'd been right since they weren't dead. They called us quitters.

We woke the next morning to a rainbow arching over the coastal bluffs. The storm had passed. We tidied up the cabin and got the owner's address from a magazine cover so we could later send him a thank you note with a bottle of whiskey.

The rest of the hike went off without a hitch, notwithstanding a raccoon raid on the last night in which we lost what was left of our food. Once at the Black Sands Beach trailhead, we reflected in our disparate ways on what had gone down.

"Man, that was fun," Lewon said.

"Well," Lanza replied, "I'm just thankful Harlin didn't club me in the head."

Southwest Field Editor Annette McGivney lives in Arizona, far away from the beach.

Legend of the Bear Slayer

A young hiker goes from zero to wilderness hero and back again in record time. *By RJ Thieneman*

Most days, girls looked in my direction zero percent of the time, anyway, so I figured the merit badge sash couldn't hurt.

My mother insisted that ladies prefer a man in uniform, so I wore my Boy Scout outfit to school on Fridays. Most days, girls looked in my direction zero percent of the time, anyway, so I figured the merit badge sash couldn't hurt. If only there was a badge for love.

The thought was never far away, even on a trip to the Rocky Mountains' Cimarron Range with nine other 13-year-old boys.

That day began with a bear wandering into our camp for breakfast. Being the first to spot the visitor, it was my duty to remember my training, spring into action, and bang the cooking pots together. I pretended like I knew how it was going to go, and the bear, also on script, moseyed off. Stories around the breakfast fire quickly evolved into a mythical saga. The cooking pots became my weapons. I had vanquished the beast.

Throughout our hike that day, the crew took five-minute breaks every now and then so as not to let the lactic acid build in our legs. Each time we stopped, we were leapfrogged by another crew, only to then pass them again on their break. Our new trail buddies had a decent-size group and a few people our age. But there was one detail that made them particularly interesting: They were girls.

Each time we passed the band of females, I glanced at one in particular. It was impossible not to. Her golden braids, Kansas City baseball cap, and freckled cheeks made her irresistible. I'm sure she hadn't bathed in days but still managed to smell like oranges. She smiled and I smiled back.

The girls giggled each time we passed. When enough distance grew between the groups, the boys and I planned a future for this nameless angel and me. How many kids would we have? Where would we grow old together? Maybe she likes Nintendo? It felt like winning the lottery. No one guessed I would meet the girl of my dreams in the middle of a 100-mile hike.

Up ahead: a fork in the trail. Dread washed over me. She and I had come so far. Just as I expected, her crew was heading south. Mine was going north. It was too soon. In this moment, I felt the same tingle I'd felt the first time I laid eyes on her, all those hours ago. The best six hours of my life. I was not going to let her get away.

I summoned the memory of the bear fight from earlier that morning. *I am king of that beast, master of these mountains. People don't fight off bears only to let the perfect woman get away. You can do this.* I swallowed to wet my mouth and yelled across the canyon toward the trail on the opposite side.

"Hey! Can I have your number?!"

This was it. Everything was out in the open. The birds stopped chirping, the frogs stopped croaking, even the wind stopped blowing. No one dared a whisper.

"Sure!" she yelled back.

I tore through my pack for a pen and something to write on while she cupped her hands around her mouth to yell the digits.

"One-eight hundred-IN-YOUR-DREAMS!"

It took a good 30 minutes for our crew to escape the sound of cackling girls. Then, as if on cue, it started to rain. My T-shirt got soaked as we rigged a tarp for cover. I rummaged through my pack to find the only dry layer left: my Boy Scout uniform.

If only I had been wearing it earlier.

RJ Thieneman is a writer in Los Angeles. He still sports the neckerchief sometimes.

Stung

When a group of hikers disturb a beehive, things can't get worse. Until they do. *By Dennis Lewon*

The forest was quiet. Tall pines muffled any natural noises, and the kids—normally chattering away—hiked silently along.

It was the last full day of a weeklong backpacking trip for teens in the Trinity Alps Wilderness of Northern California. I was one of two guides leading 10 youths, and we were in the middle of the "no-talk walk," where we hiked a few miles spaced far enough apart that the kids couldn't see or hear the person ahead or behind.

It was my favorite time during the week—the campers were comfortable in their surroundings, and the forced silence afforded them the chance to reflect on their experiences before heading home. They had learned a lot during the previous days—for most, it was their first time backpacking—and if I'd done my job right, they were feeling confident and proud.

And for me, after a week of balancing the need to give them independence and safety, it was a chance to enjoy some downtime and just cruise. I always acted calm, but this was the only time I actually *felt* it.

We were heading downhill, tracing a stream that pools and drops through the forest. I was in front, the other guide was sweeping in back, and the kids were between us. I was zoning out on the trailside scenery, looking for pockets of orange leopard lilies beside the creek when a scream interrupted my reverie.

"Ayye!" Then: "Ouch!" Then: "Ahhhhh!"

I froze. Could the kids have run into a bear? A rattlesnake? Did someone break an ankle? Get impaled by a stick?

I turned and headed back up the trail. More shouts and screams followed—maybe a couple hundred feet away now—and I quickened my pace. Then, as the trail rounded a bend, I almost ran headlong into the first of the kids hiking down, a 13-year-old girl holding her arm and singing the ABCs. "What are you doing?" I asked. "What happened?"

"Owww," she screamed, "I got stung by a bee. Twice. It hurts it hurts it hurts." She took a breath. "Saying the ABCs helps take my mind off the pain." And then she started in again: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G …"

Before I could respond, another scream reverberated through the woods. "OK, you're going to be fine," I said, recalling that no one on this trip claimed a bee allergy. "You sit here and I'll be right back."

Just seconds after leaving, I encountered another kid coming down—a boy swatting at his legs and moaning. I heard the ABCs start up again in the distance before he had a chance to even talk. "Keep going around the corner," I told him. "You'll be OK. Wait there."

I passed three more teens in similar distress, and sent them down with the others. Finally, another hundred yards up the trail, I saw the source of the stings just as another kid approached unawares. A swarm of bees hovered where a dead log lay across the path. "Run," I yelled. "Run down to the others and stay there!" Another kid entered the danger zone as I was talking and ran after her, screaming.

As they disappeared down the trail, I had a horrible, sinking feeling. Hiking in front, I must have disturbed a hive when I climbed over the log. I'd breezed on, oblivious, and behind me the bees had been picking off the kids one by one.

I went around the swarm and collected the last couple campers and the other guide, then we met the others. It looked like a triage unit. Eight kids had been stung, as many as three times each. They were all holding various limbs, moaning. We spent a half an hour checking for adverse reactions, applying hydrocortisone, and reassuring the kids that the pain would pass. *We can still have a great last night,* I thought. *The pain really will pass, this doesn't have to be the way they remember the week.*

"What bad luck," I told them, "I've walked hundreds of miles in Trinity and never stumbled on a beehive before. I know it hurts, but don't worry, you could hike here every year for the rest of your life and it'll never happen again."

Soon after we started hiking again, I encouraged the day's leaders to look for a campsite. Better to let everyone relax and recover.

The kids chose a site and dropped their packs. Things were looking up. Bee stings hurt for a bit, but they fade. No one was singing the ABCs.

Then I heard it. "Ouch!" Another shriek. "Owwww!" *What the heck?* I thought they were playing a joke on me.

But no. Bees were swarming. One of the kids had leaned his pack against a log—and another hive. The two kids who hadn't been stung were the first to get it.

"Grab your packs," I shouted. "Run!"

Amid the chaos and screaming, I knew the kids would be OK. I also knew that someday they would get a chance to reflect on this trip. And I was glad I wouldn't be there when it happened. ■

Editor-in-chief Dennis Lewon says it's pure coincidence that he was involved in two of the stories here.

READER FAILS

My mom was nervous during a night hike, so I spent the entire time reassuring her she'd be fine. When we made it back to the road, I turned to her and said, "Look, you did great and didn't fall. You made it." The words were barely out of my mouth when I stepped in a pothole and hyperextended my knee. After a police escort and an ambulance ride, I found out I broke my tibial plateau.
—KATHRYN JONES

My wife bought me an awesome book of local Southern California hikes for my birthday. She said to open it wherever and we would take that hike. We now know it is wise to look at the difficulty ratings first. We also now know the symbol for bushwhacking.
—DAVID BEILFUSS

Treasure trove: A sample of Forrest Fenn's antiquities

MARK SPOT

A hidden **BOX OF TREASURE**. A cryptic poem from a wealthy Santa Fe art dealer. Four states' worth of Rocky Mountain wilderness. **Brian Mockenhaupt** joins the hunt. Photography by Jen Judge.

MY OLD TOYOTA Corolla, with its blooming rust spot on the left fender and a collection of dents, trembles as I urge it up a zig-zaggy road into New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains. I'm feeling almost guilty about pushing it so hard. The Corolla doesn't know it yet, but our relationship is ending—within a few hours, if everything goes according to plan. When I haul a treasure chest out of the wilderness, I'll call the nearest Subaru dealer and have them deliver me a shiny, new all-wheel-drive, for which I'll hand over a fat gold coin.

On the seat next to me, under a road atlas and an empty coffee mug, lies the document that catalyzed our impending breakup: a *24-line poem* (far right) penned by an 83-year-old New Mexican art dealer and archaeologist named Forrest Fenn. Its hidden clues, he says, lead to a bronze chest filled with millions of dollars worth of gold nuggets, rare coins, gems, and jewelry. I'm not sure why I brought the poem—good luck? a sense of security?—because I've puzzled over its clues enough that I know the lines by heart. I'm also pretty sure I know where its cryptic code points. Nothing left to do now but collect my riches.

I've heard people who win the lottery say they won't quit their jobs. Not me. I'll retire right away, then buy a handsome little boat and sail around the world. Never mind that I can't sail. I can afford lessons. I can afford anything. Maybe after a tour around the globe I'll move to a cabin in the woods and fly fish.

Winding down the backside of the mountains, I catch a whiff of burning brakes. That's okay. We're almost there. Besides, I have more practical concerns: Most boats have names. What should I name mine?

MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY have come to expect strange declarations from me in my 15 years as a freelance writer: Off to the jungles of Southeast Asia, or to report in Afghanistan, or to climb a mountain in Nepal. But when I told them I was leaving to find a literal treasure, it was as though I'd said I want to be an astronaut when I grow up. I'm 39.

But when I told my nine-year-old nephew my plans, he looked at me with eyes big and mouth open, an expression that said, *Adults get to do things like that? Maybe growing up will be just like being a kid, only awesomer.*

He's right. It *is* awesome, especially since I can use my adult brainpower and resources on the job. There's a real, potentially life-changing prize out there, and a real person will find it. It'll take more work than playing the lottery, but *earning* the prize is part of the appeal for me—and, I suspect, for the hundreds of others who have tried to follow the clues since Fenn released them in 2010. Whoever finds the treasure, it'll be thanks to wits and skill—not mere luck. I'm good with wordplay and handy with a map and compass. Why shouldn't it be me?

FENN SAYS HE HID HIS TREASURE somewhere in the Rockies, at least 8.5 miles north of Santa Fe, where he lives. Northern New Mexico alone is 30,000 square miles. Daunting, to say the least. Luckily, I've watched *Indiana Jones*. I hit the books first: Fenn's 2010 memoir, *The Thrill of the Chase*, a rambling account of his childhood in Texas, summers spent as a fishing guide around Yellowstone, bombing missions in Vietnam, and his rise as a particularly skilled art dealer and amateur archaeologist.

The book has hints that help explain the nine clues hidden in the poem. It was a cancer scare that spawned Fenn's plan to hide a treasure chest, so two stories stood out to me, both reflections on mortality and what remains after we're gone: In Vietnam, where Fenn was shot down twice, he visited a remote waterfall and near its base he found a graveyard filled with the bodies of French soldiers. The rest of the world had forgotten about them. Years later, after Fenn had moved to Santa Fe and opened an art gallery, a friend of his asked that he scatter her ashes over Taos Mountain. He flew his plane over the summit, but he didn't think she'd want to rest forever in the cold of the snow-covered peak, so he dropped her ashes somewhere close by instead. In both stories, he mentions yellow and purple flowers in the area. Coincidence? No way.

My girlfriend, who had been studying a map of New Mexico as I read aloud from the book, smiled and tapped her finger on an area east of Taos.

"Agua Fria Peak," she said. I looked at her dumbly. "Cold water."

Ah ha! And that's not far from Taos Mountain. If Fenn had turned his plane east, he could have poured the ashes around there. *Begin it where warm waters halt.* I dug deeper and learned that near Agua Fria Peak is a memorial dedicated to 16 Marines killed in Vietnam in 1968. One of them was Davis F. Brown. *Home of Brown.*

In an afternoon's time I had whittled down my search area from a quarter-million square miles to just a few.

I'd start at the memorial, head to a nearby river with a couple of waterfalls—*there'll be no paddle up your creek; just heavy loads and water high*—and somewhere between them I'd find the treasure. I loaded up the car with snacks, camping gear, and Fenn's book, and was off to claim my prize.

CHEWING A PIECE OF JERKY while Johnny Cash sings of bad luck and hard times, I admire the mountains that stretch to the horizon. The view almost makes me pity the other treasure hunters, wasting their time in all the wrong places. They're going to be pretty bummed when they hear a first-timer scooped it up.

But as I descend into a broad valley, doubt creeps in. There's the memorial, set on a wide, grassy hillside. But there's not so much as a skinny creek nearby, and none of the fast-charging streams and waterfalls I'd expected.

I pull off the road a few times and charge into the surrounding forests, too stubborn to accept that I might be wrong. Finally I flop back into the car, snatch the poem from the passenger's seat, and scan the stanzas with disbelieving eyes. Chastened by the setback, I ponder my first lesson in the elusiveness of Fenn's treasure: From a few hundred miles away, it was easy to jam square clues into round holes and feel pretty confident in my conclusions. So confident that I gave Google Earth little more than a quick glance before hopping into my car for the 10-hour drive from Phoenix. I chalk it up to amateur's hubris.

Time for Plan B: experts.

BEFORE I LEFT for New Mexico, I had clicked and scrolled through blogs, message boards, and Facebook pages where searchers trade theories. Some recount fun weekends with family; others declare the treasure has already been found, or that it's a hoax. Many are cagey in their posts, not wanting to give too much away. And there are those who know exactly where it is, 100 percent, but don't have the money to finance their expedition, or can't get the time off work. "I broke Forrest code last year and know where he has buried his treasury [sic]. Actually it isn't buried but I won't say more," one poster wrote. "If you want my maps, make me a deal, a substantial deal."

But hour three of research yielded a promising lead: Taos art gallery owner Doug Scott has been hiking and rafting some of the most remote areas of northern New Mexico since the early 1970s. For the past several years, his fascination has been waterfalls. He's photographed hundreds. Some are just 100 yards off-trail, but unknown to most everyone who passes by—just the sort of place Fenn might have visited with his treasure.

Just off the old plaza in Taos, I step into a gallery filled with early-morning sunlight, its walls lined with paintings of wildlife. I spot Scott in the back, near an easel. A thin gray beard runs along his jawbone and frames a face tanned and weathered by decades outdoors. Scott has just opened his gallery for the day and the tourists aren't drifting in yet, so he offers me a seat at the back. I'm far from the first treasure hunter who's come looking for his advice, he tells me. He's met about 50 so far, and he can usually spot them quickly, milling in the

WHERE THE TREASURE LIES
by Forrest Fenn

As I have gone alone in there
And with my treasures bold,
I can keep my secret where,
And hint of riches new and old.

Begin it where warm waters halt
And take it in the canyon down,
Not far, but too far to walk.
Put in below the home of Brown.

From there it's no place for the meek,
The end is ever drawing nigh;
There'll be no paddle up your creek,
Just heavy loads and water high.

If you've been wise and found the blaze,
Look quickly down, your quest to cease,
But tarry scant with marvel gaze,
Just take the chest and go in peace.

So why is it that I must go
And leave my trove for all to seek?
The answer I already know,
I've done it tired, and now I'm weak.

So hear me all and listen good,
Your effort will be worth the cold.
If you are brave and in the wood
I give you title to the gold.

The goods: Fenn has never said how much the hidden treasure (below, in a 2010 photo) is worth. Estimates range from $2 million to $7 million.

PHOTO BY ADDISON DOTY

gallery but not paying attention to his art.

"The majority of the people looking for the treasure who bother me about it can hardly walk a mile," he says. "They tell me 'I know it's up that canyon. Come out with us. We'll split it with you.'" He declines politely, tells them he has too much work, but doesn't tell them the rest: "They're basically lazy people," he says. "They want to be a millionaire without working for it." *Um, who doesn't?*

Scott says he hasn't looked for the treasure himself. And while he can recommend plenty of waterfalls for me to visit, he doesn't have any leads on where it might be. I wonder if he knows more than he's letting on. Maybe the poem has kept him awake at night, too. Maybe he has his own secret map of likely spots, his own dog-eared copy of Fenn's book. Maybe his search for waterfalls is just a clever front. Maybe I'm getting paranoid.

He wishes me luck, then pops up from his seat to greet a couple eyeing a painting of charging horses. That's my cue to leave. I wander down the street, past cafes and more art galleries, plotting my next move. Scott can't be the only local who might, even unknowingly, harbor inside knowledge.

On the edge of town I spot the Taos Fly Shop, a weathered wooden building that looks like an old Wild West trading post. Fishing has been a big part of Fenn's life, and many people interpret *home of Brown* as brown trout, which would make these guys the area experts. Inside, I find Nick Streit and his wife, Christina. Nick grew up fishing these rivers and now runs the shop, which his dad opened in 1980. By his ruddy cheeks, I can see Nick still spends plenty of time on the water. The guides are out with clients, and Christina is working a broom across the floor. I ask about Fenn's treasure and they trade a glance. Nick gives me a here-we-go-again nod.

Opposite: Forrest Fenn in his den, with his book, *The Thrill of the Chase*. He's sold 21,000 copies, even though you can only buy it through his local bookstore (Santa Fe's Collected Works).

As I look out on the woods around me, it occurs to me just how little of the wilderness we actually explore.

They've been visited by a few vacationing couples, and four college buddies on a reunion trip, but Nick particularly remembers a young woman who came asking about areas out near Agua Fria Peak, my first failed location.

"She knew just where she should go," he says. She asked him questions for an hour. He brought out topo maps, and was generous with his time. She scribbled a crude sketch of the area on a piece of scrap paper. "I told her, 'You can buy one. It's only $8.' She says, 'Oh, I can't afford that!'

"This girl was going to a place outsiders shouldn't be going, and walking across people's property," Nick says. "They have guns."

He gives me a raised eyebrow that says *You need to know what you're getting into.* I hadn't really considered bullet wounds as a potential outcome of this quest. Imagining a backside full of buckshot dampens some of the romantic allure. So I stop imagining it, and forge ahead. "Where would you look?" I ask.

Nick and Christina suggest the rugged sections of the Rio Grande River, or the wilderness areas north of Taos.

"How do I know you're not trying to throw me off, because you're looking for it, too?" I realize it's hard to joke about the treasure without sounding half-serious.

"If we found it," Nick says, "we'd hang a sign on the front door: *Gone fishing forever. Treasure found.*"

WITH A VERY NICE $8 MAP from Nick and Christina's shop, I head north of Taos and camp in Carson National Forest, near an area that Nick suggested, with canyons and mountain streams that would make good hiding spots.

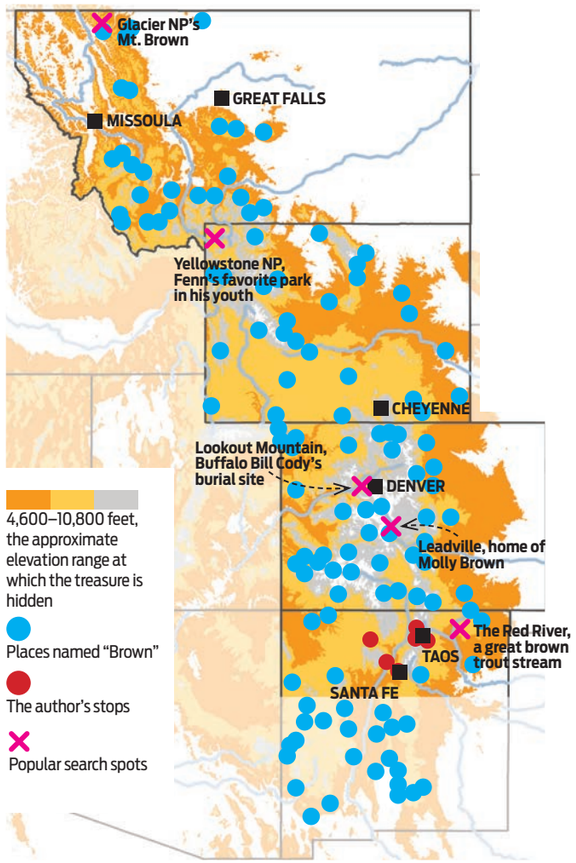
I'm up early and dayhiking deeper into the mountains, the poem stuck on repeat in my head. I poke around some rocks near a cascading stream and peer into pools of water—Fenn says the chest is hidden, not necessarily buried—but I find no treasure. As I look out on the miles of woods around me, it occurs to me just how little of the wilderness we actually explore. As of today I can count these mountains as a place I've hiked, but I've only seen the view from this brown band of trail snaking through the forest. Fenn could have hidden his chest behind any one of those distant ponderosa pines.

I crest a hill, which opens to a vast meadow between ridges. A herd of 200 elk stand a few hundred feet ahead. They're frozen, having seen me before I noticed them. They bolt. I see flashes of brown and hear the thunder of their hooves, hundreds of branches snapping, and mothers calling for their bleating calves. Farther along I pass six bighorn sheep and see another three higher up, perched on a steep ledge, looking down at me. While no human but Fenn has laid eyes on the treasure's hiding spot, I imagine some animals have. If only I could ask them.

I eat lunch on the rounded, rocky hump of Gold Hill, watching storm clouds gather on the horizon, and make it back to treeline before the thunder rolls in. A few miles from the car, the valley floor narrows to about 60 feet wide, with rock walls on both sides. The poem plays through my head on its maddening loop as I scan the canyon for a little waterfall, or an easy-to-miss cave where Fenn might have tucked the treasure chest. My heart beats a little faster each time I go to check on a spot. I wish I'd brought my nephew; he'd appreciate turning a hike into a giant game of hide-and-seek.

Just ahead, maybe 20 feet, a deer crashes through the

THE HUNT—MAPPED



brush and runs to the far side of the little box canyon. I can hear him moving toward the rock wall on the right side, where I'll be able to get a good look at him. He steps out from behind the trees, 30 feet from me.

Only he's not a deer. He's a rather large black bear.

What a silly way to die this will be, killed by a bear while hunting for treasure. Although, what a way to die! *Killed by a bear while hunting for treasure!* I take a few steps backward and wait. He stares at me, then sniffs the air and turns to some berries on a nearby branch as I step lightly past him and down the trail.

I've hiked a 19-mile loop through stunning scenery, and had it all to myself. But back at the doomed Corolla, with my tired feet enjoying flip-flop freedom, I realize that much of the trek was unnecessary: A 79-year-old man carrying a heavy box probably wouldn't have lugged it miles from a road. Another rookie mistake. At this point, I'd have the same luck throwing darts at my new map.

I need to see Fenn.

FOR THOSE WHO TORTURE themselves trying to decipher Forrest Fenn's poem, being invited to his house is like finding the golden ticket and visiting Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. At least that's how I feel as I pull through the gate in a neighborhood of old Santa Fe homes hidden by high walls and drive up to his small, stucco villa, escorted by a trio of yipping dogs.

Fenn has welcomed a few treasure hunters into his home, but I don't have a heartwarming story. So I've played my other card—reporter. I can give him a little publicity, and maybe cajole a clue from him along the way.

I knock on the door, and there he is, wispy white hair, crisp blue button-down shirt tucked into jeans, with a soft voice and Texas drawl predisposed to storytelling. Stories that start like this: "I was standing right here one day with Ralph Lauren..."

Fenn leads me into his den, which is like a little museum, the walls and shelves crowded with moccasins, jewelry, tomahawks, and a model of the fighter he flew in Vietnam. This is just the barest glimpse of the art and artifacts he has collected, traded, and sold over the decades to amass his wealth.

He writes his books here, and answers emails from treasure seekers. He's received more than 36,000 over the last three years. He'll often respond if the notes are short, and kind, and the writer signs her name and doesn't ask too many questions. Many people are looking for tips, or telling him where they've looked and wondering whether they're hot or cold. He never lets on, but he tells me a few people have deciphered the first two clues correctly, and a few have been within 500 feet of the treasure.

Certainly the treasure is in part about legacy, and Fenn is having fun in his old age—creating a reason for people to talk about him before he goes, and, if the treasure remains unfound, to remember him long after he's gone. But he's more modest in his reasoning; for the record, he says he hid the chest to inspire people to turn off their TVs and gadgets and enjoy nature. He's charmed by the emails about father-son searches, and the family-vacation treasure hunts, or the two brothers who hadn't spoken for 17 years, until one read about the treasure. They went searching for it together and are best friends again.

On the flip side, someone sent him a death threat a few days before my visit. He's called the police twice on people who stopped by uninvited and wouldn't leave, and one man followed him when he left the house, thinking he might be going to check on the treasure. Others can't believe that their search spot was wrong. "They've figured out exactly where the treasure chest is," Fenn says. "They go to that spot and it isn't there. So one of two things: Either Forrest Fenn is a fraud, or someone has already found it. They're absolutely convinced. Never mind that it's 400 miles some place else."

"Does it give you some enjoyment knowing this drives people crazy?" I ask.

"Well, I'm kind of proud of that," Fenn says, "because what you're saying is I make people think."

We sit on a soft leather couch and our conversation meanders from Jimmy Carter's passion for arrowhead collecting to the intricacies of property law[1], but he's evasive when the topic shifts to the treasure itself. He gently deflects my questions or tells me a new story, like fishing a beautiful stretch of the Madison River near Yellowstone. He has wanted to return there, but it's *too far to walk*—which is both a line from the poem and the name of his new collection of stories about his life. Plenty of people are searching that area, where Fenn spent so many childhood summers, but he's not offering me a hint.

He's released a trickle of new clues since he first announced the treasure, which keeps him in the spotlight, of course, but he also doesn't want the blame for hunters' missteps. He says the treasure is above 5,000 feet—and north of Santa Fe—so hapless fools won't be dying in the desert, and that it's not associated with a structure or buried in a cemetery, to keep them from destroying property or desecrating graves. But those extra clues aren't much help, because Fenn knows some pretty obscure hiding spots.

He first explored the Southwest backcountry in the 1960s while stationed at an Air Force base in Arizona. Cruising over the canyons and deserts in a fighter jet, he'd spot a tucked-away ruin, and return later by Jeep or on foot. When he moved to Santa Fe in the early 1970s, he fished the Pecos River and small streams, and hiked all over central and northern New Mexico, "to get the lay of the land," he says, "and learn something about the country in which I lived."

One man followed Fenn when he left the house, thinking he might be going to check on the treasure.

He seems confident that hunters are still far from finding the chest, and I don't think he wants it found anytime soon. He's enchanted with the idea that someone may be as interested in the treasure 500 years from now as he is in the objects that surround him in his den.

Fenn takes me to his "laboratory," a small room just off the garage loaded with Spanish chain mail and religious medallions, whole pots and plates from the Pueblo eras, musket balls, arrowheads, and stone tools. He encourages tactile relationships with artwork and artifacts, and tells me I can touch anything. Most of the antiquities I've seen in my life were sealed behind glass cases, so it's pretty damn cool—and a surprisingly powerful sensation—to rub a 500-year-old Spanish coin between my fingers, or a piece of Ming Dynasty porcelain that made its way from China to New Mexico via the Philippines and Mexico City.

Fenn was nine years old when he found his first arrowhead, the same year he started a list of rules to live by, which he has added to and reordered throughout his life. "I decided that my

1. Potential hunters, take note: Some contend that if the treasure is on federal land, it would be a crime to take it. Plus, each state has its own laws. One thing's clear: It's complicated.

number-one rule is this: It doesn't matter who you are, it only matters who they think you are," he tells me. "It's what I can make you believe."

Oh boy. For a quick moment I feel like I've been had, suckered into an elaborate illusion.

But I think even a trickster like Fenn would find it unseemly and lacking honor to just lie about the treasure. And he doesn't appear to lack for money. Rather, his rule seems to reflect his impatience with title and privilege and societal norms. Anyone can be a successful art dealer or archaeologist without fancy degrees. Just like anyone can hide a box of treasure—and carve out a little place for themselves in history. Just like anyone can find it.

He says he always knew the hiding spot, but spent 15 years massaging the clues to match before he hid the chest. With the cancer treated, he had time to get the words just right. "People think I sat down one night and wrote that poem. I didn't write that poem, I crafted it," he says. "No one is going to find that treasure chest on a Sunday afternoon picnic or over spring break."

Even Peggy, his wife of 60 years, doesn't know where it is. For several years before he hid the box, it sat on a table in his vault—where he keeps many of his pricier possessions—covered with a red bandana. One day she pulled away the bandana and found a stack of Fenn's books in place of the chest. He told her only that he'd hidden it sometime in the previous 18 months.

Will he ever pass on the location? Maybe a deathbed disclosure?

"No," Fenn says. "Never, never, never, never, never. People may still be looking for it for 10,000 years from now."

MY TIME WITH FENN, enjoyable as it was, hasn't brought any clarity to my search. But I'm not ready to resign myself to the dartboard strategy. Northern New Mexico still feels like the right place, speckled with deep canyons, waterfalls, and remnants of past civilizations. Fenn has even hinted in interviews that he might like to go to the hiding spot to die and have his bones rest near the treasure, which suggests a location close to home.

I head northwest of Santa Fe to Los Alamos, where I've arranged a coffee-shop rendezvous with Craig Martin, author of *100 Hikes of New Mexico*. The 61-year-old has a gray ponytail brushing his shoulders, and he hikes about 1,800 miles a year. As the open-space specialist for Los Alamos County, he maintains and promotes the county's trails, essentially doing the same things as Fenn: Trying to get people outside.

Martin has read Fenn's poem, and he humors my request for expert analysis. He dons a pair of reading glasses and ponders the stanzas. He sips his coffee and removes his glasses. But no epiphany; instead, he quotes Henry David Thoreau:

I frequently tramped 8 or 10 miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines.

"He knew what it was all about," Martin says. "You love a little tree and you go and visit it. Out here it's rock formations, petroglyphs, or a little stand of wildflowers that only grow in one place. Last week I found a new species of plant that hadn't been documented in Los Alamos County."

Maybe he can see the disappointment on my face, the golden gleam draining from my eyes. He throws

FEELING LUCKY?

These legendary treasures haven't been found.

Hidden riches: Arizona's Superstition Mountains are home to saguaro cacti, javelinas, and perhaps gold.

1. Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine, AZ

According to local legend, German immigrant Jacob Waltz discovered this rich mine in the 19th century, somewhere in the Superstition Mountains east of Phoenix. He left the gold untouched. Rumor is it's cursed; in the past decades, Superstition Mountain has claimed several adventurers who went out in search of the gold, never to return.

2. Rhoades Mine, UT

In the 1850s, Ute Indian Chief Wakara led an early Mormon settler, wealthy miner Thomas Rhoades, into the Uinta Mountains to this trove of ore—enough to pay off the national debt, Rhoades' son later said. Rhoades swore to keep the "Sacred Mine" secret, only take what one man could carry at a time, and use the money for the good of the church (Wakara was a convert). The mine's exact location was never disclosed.

3. The Oak Island Money Pit, Nova Scotia, Canada

This tiny island houses a sinkhole said to be full of treasure belonging to Spanish sailors, Freemasons, or pirates. In 1795, Daniel McGinnis discovered the pit while wandering on the island. He and several others since have attempted to excavate the pit, claiming findings such as tool marks from digging or cipher stones. All attempts at finding any treasure thus far have failed.

PHOTO BY CCOPHOTOSTOCKMN / AGE FOTOSTOCK. SIDEBAR TEXT BY STASIA CALLAGHAN

me a crumb.

"Along the Rio Chama. That's where I'd look."

AN HOUR NORTH of Los Alamos, I turn down a rattly, dirt Forest Service road that skirts the trout-filled Chama River for 13 miles. I think I'm finally onto something. After meeting Martin, I studied maps of the area and found divine inspiration: This road ends at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, built in 1964 at the base of a high red sandstone wall. The monastery is home to a couple dozen monks. Monks wear brown robes. *Home of Brown.* And upstream, the river pools in a reservoir behind the El Vado Dam, *where warm waters halt.*

I park just below the monastery and start up a dry streambed into Chavez Canyon, ready for more clues to click like the tumblers on a vault's lock, or at least for the feeling that they might. It's kind of addictive, and I'm starting to understand why so many people spend their weekends geocaching. Whatever the prize, there's something about the search itself that makes any hike more exciting. Like something special might happen around any turn. I guess that's probably how Fenn felt looking for relics. It's like doing a puzzle while taking a hike. It's *fun.*

I climb up through the first of several sculpted sandstone slots. Halfway through the second, stemming my hands and feet against the slick-with-grit walls, I pause to consider the sense of this. If I fall, out here alone, I'll be in trouble. Luckily, this is in keeping with the poem: *From there it's no place for the meek, the end is ever drawing nigh.*

This is exactly the sort of place I'd imagined when I'd read Fenn's poem for the first time, though I figured I'd be using a rope to swing across a pounding stream, or maybe easing my way along a brittle bridge, with a swirling whirlpool and certain death just below.

The few footprints I saw early on the trail have stopped. Now it's just the occasional deer track until, while crossing through a patch of soft mud in the streambed, I see a fresh cougar print as big as my fist. I make a quick and pointless glance over my shoulder—if the cougar wanted to bother me, he'd already be latched on my neck.

At the third slot, an 8-foot ledge leads up to a large cavern. I prop a branch against the rock face and climb it like a ladder until I can pull myself over the lip. But the cavern is empty, and before me is an even higher wall, 20 feet tall.

Crap.

This canyon is too rugged for an old man with a heavy box. But I can picture a younger Fenn in just this sort of place, searching out an ancient ruin that hadn't been seen in 1,000 years, brushing dirt from an artifact and turning over the past in his hand.

Back up at the monastery, I want to ask the monks what they think of such earthly treasures as Fenn's box of gold and gems—or, a long shot, if they have any inspired thoughts about its location—but realize I need only look around me for the answer. They live simple lives of material deprivation. If they saw value in earthly riches, they wouldn't be out here.

"What do you do here all day?" I ask one of the monks.

"We pray!" he says, sounding rather jubilant. Seven times a day. In between, they work in the fields along the river, growing hops, and they brew beer, which is sold throughout New Mexico. I also learn they're Benedictine monks, who wear black robes, not brown. Oops.

I wander into a building next to the chapel. On a table near a small room filled with photographs of the New Mexico desert, I find an essay the monk Thomas Merton wrote about the monastery and the power of wilderness. "There is nothing final or permanent about the desert. All that really matters is ahead of one," he writes.

After reading his essay, I sit on a covered porch, on a long wooden bench, and watch clouds push across the clifftops on the far side of the Chama. Mist hangs over the fields of hops. The monastery grounds are purposefully quiet, with little conversation. From far over in the monk's area, a bellowing, joyful laugh breaks the stillness.

All of a sudden, I care much less about Fenn's treasure. Having shared the trail with a cougar will be my reward for the day.

I watch a monk stroll past the rows of hops, then I walk back to my dinged and dented car, which waits for me along the road, still loyal. I'm ready to get home and savor a monk-brewed beer. And yet, as I drive back down the dirt road, my eyes are drawn to the side canyons and mesa tops and the far-off peaks along the horizon. I already know I'll never be in the Rockies again without a few lines of the poem sneaking into my head. Fenn's treasure is out here, somewhere, maybe 1,000 miles away, or maybe up the next canyon, just around the bend in the river.

Of course, the river! I've been going about it all wrong! What I need is a raft. I'll float down the Rio Chama, hop out along the way, and investigate all these hiding spots. I'll find my box of riches yet.

I wonder if "Hey Forrest, I found it!" will fit on the back of a sailboat. •

Brian Mockenhaupt wrote about veterans on the PCT in our May 2013 issue. He's still driving the Corolla.

Confessions of a Reluctant Highpointer

More people have climbed Mt. Everest than have highpointed every state in the U.S. But does that mean it's really hard or really crazy—or both? **BY LOREN MOONEY**

JOHN S. DYKES

"PULL OVER," I said.

We were headed down a two-lane highway south of Timm's Hill County Park, through the thick green woods of north-central Wisconsin. This was supposed to be a laid-back week, hitting four easy state highpoints: Eagle Mountain (Minnesota, 2,301 feet), Mt. Arvon (Michigan, 1,979 feet), Timms Hill (Wisconsin, 1,951 feet), and Hawkeye Point (Iowa, 1,670 feet). In between, we'd use the extra days to hike the Boundary Waters' forests, explore the cliffs and beaches of the Apostle Islands, and wander the dunes and pancaked sandstone cliffs of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. It was just after Labor Day weekend—no crowds, clear skies, summer heat subsiding. It was a good plan: We'd pace ourselves and see the area's most renowned wild places.

Instead, after tagging Timms Hill—with nearly a thousand miles of driving and two other highpoints behind us and three days to go—I had a new idea. It did not include the Boundary Waters.

Audra steered our rented Chevy subcompact into the gravel lot next to an old train depot, tires crunching to a stop. I called up Google Maps on my phone and reached into the door pocket for our well-worn copy of Don Holmes's *Highpoints of the United States,* its laminated cover peeling. I thumbed to the U.S. map in the front of the book, then typed "White Butte, ND" on my phone.

"Oh, no. That's insane," Audra said in an accusatory tone that couldn't quite hide a tinge of excitement.

I continued to punch in the new route and made my case. "If we drive to Minneapolis now, then leave by six tomorrow morning," I said, "we can be at the White Butte summit by early afternoon." Then, we'd finish a marathon push to Rapid City, South Dakota. The following day we'd snag Black Elk Peak (South Dakota, 7,242 feet), then hit Hawkeye Point on the way back to the Minneapolis airport. "We should have an hour or so to spare before our flight," I said. "Hopefully."

Yes, it would mean we'd pack our "laid-back" vacation with an extra 20 hours and 1,200 miles of driving. It would mean forgoing the Boundary Waters. It would mean trading the Apostle Islands for a 1-mile hike to a nondescript butte on private land.

But it would also mean checking off two more state highpoints.

Had it really come to this? Audra put the Chevy in gear.

HIGHPOINTING. Talk to most people who call themselves highpointers, and they'll tell you about the moment they committed to the goal, perhaps the peak that got them hooked.

Not me. I don't have a single moment. If anything, I thought the idea was pretty dumb when I first encountered it. Nineteen years ago, I stumbled upon a copy of *Highpoints of the United States* on the "free table" at the short-lived outdoor magazine where I worked.

I flipped through the pages and learned I had summited exactly one—Washington's 14,410-foot Mt. Rainier—the year before on a guided trip. I also learned that the highpoint of Alabama, where I grew up, is 2,407-foot Cheaha Mountain, and that you can drive right up to the restaurant and observation tower at the summit.

Fairly quickly, I realized that half of the state highpoints are, like Alabama's, not climbs at all, or even hikes: They are bumps and hills that can be accessed by roads all the way to the summit parking lot. Delaware's highpoint, I read, was 448-foot Ebright Azimuth, an indistinguishable swell on a suburban street corner north of Wilmington. I guess that's why they're called highpoints and not summits.

Of course, some *are* summits, and require great effort or technical skill or both. As a weekend adventurer and budding mountaineer, I had already penciled some of these classics on my bucket list, like Mt. Hood (Oregon, 11,240 feet). But Cheaha Mountain? Ebright Azimuth? Pursuing them seemed the very definition of inane. The locations on this list are determined by arbitrary state lines. In the rules of this game, standing on the corner of someone's manicured yard shares equal status with standing on the summit of Denali (Alaska, 20,310 feet).

Still, it was fun trivia, so I brought the book home. And I suppose it's telling that in the personal log appendix, in writing so measured that today I don't quite recognize it as my own, I wrote "6/17/99" next to Washington, Mt. Rainier, before putting the book on my shelf, where it sat untouched for years.

THE BOOK DREW Audra's attention like a magnet. We'd only been dating a short time when she picked it up. As a natural obsessive who isn't happy unless she has a goal—a marathon, an Ironman, basically anything that requires planning and diligent checking-off of milestones—she was fascinated by the list.

By then I had hiked a few more peaks that incidentally were also highpoints: Mt. Marcy (New York, 5,344 feet) and Mt. Mansfield (Vermont, 4,393 feet). They were easy weekend trips from my home in New York City—and were actual hikes. Audra saw the dates written in the personal log and kept asking when I was doing more. "No idea," I'd respond each time, "I'm not trying to do them."

> Over the next few years, Audra found ways to sneak two more highpoints into our plans while we were doing other things.

Audra ignored me and started consulting the book whenever we traveled. It was her idea to detour to the Delaware highpoint on a winter weekend when we were visiting friends in Philadelphia. I resisted. "It's not even a hike," I said.

"It's only 25 miles out of our way," she argued. And won.

"Turn right at the light," Audra said, using the book to read me directions to Ebright Azimuth. At the light, I turned off the four-lane highway onto a neighborhood road. A few blocks later, we pulled up next to a blue-and-gold historic sign on the edge of someone's yard (the property was formerly owned by the Ebrights). It's only about 420 horizontal feet from the Pennsylvania border, but at 447.85 feet high, it's deemed to be the highest natural earth in the state.

I walked through 2 inches of sooty snow toward the sign in mock slow motion, taking gasping breaths like a mountaineer at elevation, and tagged it with a playful slap. We took each other's pictures next to the sign, wearing smart-ass grins and faces of sarcastic pride. It was her first highpoint, my eighth: "2/21/05."

Over the next few years, Audra found ways to sneak two more highpoints into our plans while we were doing other things. Going to Cape Cod for a group beach house rental one summer, it was less than an hour's detour to Jerimoth Hill (Rhode Island, 812 feet), another spot next to someone's yard. Hiking along the Appalachian Trail on a fall weekend, it was easy to detour to nearby Mt. Frissell (Connecticut, 2,380 feet). Infrequent as they were, these experiences were becoming a thread running through our adventures, connecting the years in ways our "normal" hikes didn't.

Even at this glacial pace, our "highpointing" drew notice. Most of our friends were indoorsy New Yorkers, so when Audra would tell them why we had taken an extra hour to get to the Cape, or chosen one dayhike over another, their minds turned on the concept of highpointing, and questions typically came in the same order:

"Where's the highest highpoint?"

"Alaska, 20,310 feet."

"What's the lowest highpoint?"

"Florida, 345 feet."

"Are you going to do all of them?"

"Oh, no," I'd say, shaking my head. "It's silly."

"Yes," Audra would say over me. "We'll try."

NEARLY A DECADE after I discovered *Highpoints of the United States,* Audra and I flew to Asheville, North Carolina, to visit my brother and his family for a long weekend. The book came with us. We tagged Sassafras Mountain (South Carolina, 3,554 feet), Clingmans Dome (Tennessee, 6,643 feet), and Mt. Mitchell (North Carolina, 6,684 feet). Even I had to admit, there was something irresistible about a cluster like that. Plus, we saw peak fall colors, ate at rural diners, and poked around Cherokee-themed souvenir shops that sold skins and arrowheads. And, OK, we sacrificed actually hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains to do it, but by this point I'd come to appreciate the way highpoints, even the drive-ups, made for fun side excursions from whatever else we were doing and introduced us to unexpected corners of the country.

On the way home from my brother's, it occurred to me that this trip had been different: *Had we spent more time highpointing than visiting?* I was afraid to do the math. As if to confirm my fear, a package was waiting in our pile of mail. Audra had signed us up for a family membership in the Highpointers Club, with some 2,613 dues-paying members, plus 302 completers of all 50 states and another 589 who have done the Lower 48. →

STATE HIGHPOINTS
Plus: The author's top picks

MASTER THE MOUNTAINS

Scramble Safer

Conquer class 3 or 4 terrain with confidence.

▸ **Assess your objective.** Is it necessary or just a shortcut? What are the consequences of a fall? Don't climb up anything you can't climb down.

▸ **Cinch your laces.** A tighter fit gives you better feel for the rock. Approach shoes and softer, stickier rubber soles improve grip.

▸ **Watch your footwork.** Keep your weight over your feet for better balance. Paste your soles onto low-angle rock to maximize surface area. Dig into small, flat holds with the inside of your big toe, and flex your calf to press down and into the wall.

▸ **Maintain three points of contact.** Move slowly, and test holds before weighting them.

▸ **Be suspicious.** Look for fissures around blocks, which can mean they're detached from the rest of the formation. Knock on thin, flake-like holds. Hollow? Don't touch; they could snap off.

I opened the large, white envelope and pulled out the club's quarterly newsletter, entitled *Apex to Zenith*. It was like lifting the lid off a secret world.

There, on its glossy, color covers, were photographs of highpointers in action: doing a headstand on the summit of Mt. Washington, kneeling next to the family dog on Hawkeye Point, posing with a 19-day-old baby on Sassafras Mountain, lying prone in mock exhaustion upon reaching for the summit sign of Cheaha Mountain. There was also a picture of helmeted climbers standing shoulder to shoulder on Mt. Hood, each raising an ice axe triumphantly. One photo showed a highpointer with an impossibly large grin—he was standing on the snowy summit of Gannett Peak (Wyoming, 13,804 feet) holding a sign that said "50."

Every issue had a "completer's" section of reports by those who have done all 50 or finished all but Denali, which many highpointers skip. One newsletter featured a photo of someone's "4EVR 49" license plate.

Another installment ran a front-page photo of a gathering of highpointers at the New Jersey summit, clad in matching tie-dyed shirts—it was the annual Highpointers Convention. *A convention.*

Speed-record attempts. Interviews. Regional guides. *Apex to Zenith* was fun to read, but more importantly, it made me feel normal compared to the people who inhabited this wacky subculture. These folks were obsessed; I was just curious.

THAT LASTED UNTIL the fall of 2010. A couple of months before, I'd lost my job in the middle of the Great Recession. Audra's freelance career had already ground to a halt in the sluggish market—we were both unemployed. Some severance pay and savings meant we were in a far more fortunate position than many other Americans, but we were both at a crossroads. Everything was on the table: changing careers, moving to a new city, leaving behind friends who felt like family.

In the absence of knowing what to do next, one clear-cut goal presented itself: We turned to the list of highpoints. The human brain craves order, and the rest of the world felt like chaos. Looking back, it's clear we felt like we had little else to guide us, so the list became a sort of life map.

We cashed out every single frequent-flier mile between us and headed west to knock off some of the bigger summits. We drove highways, desolate back roads, and unmaintained dirt washboard that punished subcompact rental cars. We pitched the tent, cooked by headlamp, brushed teeth with a bottle of water, hiked dusty trails, and scrambled over scree and boulders to summit markers. We studied the increasingly battered *Highpoints of the United States* as if it were leading us on a crusade—or at least telling us what to do next.

With book in hand, we went on a blitz: Wheeler Peak (New Mexico, 13,161 feet), Black Mesa (Oklahoma, 4,973 feet), Mt. Sunflower (Kansas, 4,039 feet), Panorama Point (Nebraska, 5,424 feet), Mt. Elbert (Colorado, 14,433 feet), Kings Peak (Utah, 13,528 feet). When we returned to the trailhead after Kings Peak, Audra pulled out the book, wrote in the date, and did a count. "You have 25," she said. "You're halfway."

The milestone hit me in an unexpected way. Even though I was now unabashedly highpointing, it never occurred to me that I might actually finish someday. But now I experienced a psychological shift: I no longer thought in terms of how many I'd done, but how many I had left to do. It was like a countdown had begun.

And so the Western tour de highpoints continued. On Mt. Whitney (California, 14,494 feet), the high-altitude air seemed so oxygen-rich I felt like I could run to the top. No fatigue. No altitude headache. We felt relaxed and strong—if there were such a thing as professional highpointers, we could be part of that elite group.

After Whitney, we made a beeline for nearby Boundary Peak (Nevada, 13,140 feet). I started calling myself a highpointer. My real-world titles of "writer" or "New Yorker" had little relevance on the trail. Some days, all I wanted was to just keep going like this—mapping, driving, hiking, checking off one peak, and heading to the next.

But we knew it was only a temporary escape. Several of the remaining peaks had snow and ice hazards, and their short summer climbing windows had closed—we didn't have the skills to climb them. And while we briefly entertained fantasies of hitting the Dakotas or blowing through the Midwest drive-ups, we were still unemployed. The cost was just too high, in dollars and in time away from job hunting. So after the three-week lark, our all-too-brief career as professional highpointers came to an end. Still, what we'd done felt like progress.

THE MAIN ROOM of the 2012 Highpointers Convention was packed with more than 200 people—mostly men, beards mostly gray, though there were a few couples and families with kids. We were crammed into the main room of the Mazamas mountaineering club's lodge, in Government Camp, Oregon, for the annual Friday evening social. Despite the fact that it was June, big, heavy flakes of snow fell outside.

After a couple of years, during which we'd relocated to San Francisco, started new jobs, and done a few more casual, one-off highpoints, Audra had convinced me to register for the convention. She'd read in the newsletter that a longtime club member was organizing an informal Mt. Hood climb on the side. "We'll meet more experienced people to climb with," she said. "This is our chance to get Oregon, and maybe prepare for other hard ones in the future." But the snowstorm prevented a summit bid.

Instead, we tried to make the best of it at the social. Mingling in the room of strangers was easy with our common interest. Our convention badges even displayed the key pieces of information any highpointer needs to make conversation: name, home state, and completion number. Those with numbers higher than 40 typically responded with puffed chests if you started with, "Wow, what's left?" If the number was 15 or fewer, "Just getting going, huh?" was an obvious gambit. My number, a midpack 33, meant that most people started instead with the home state, "California, have you climbed Whitney?" I loved the question because it led me to the story of our highpointing bender out West, and how the trip ultimately emboldened us to take the leap and move across the country.

Don Holmes, 80, author of *Highpoints of the United States,* looking regal with white hair, a thin smile, and a white golf shirt bearing the club's logo, stood near the front podium. He was joined by newsletter editor John Mitchler, an Alec Baldwin lookalike. They both wore badges that said "Colorado, 50."

Mitchler called the room to order and we settled in for the evening's keynote about the first-ever highpoint completer, A.H. Marshall. Marshall, a wiry railroad telegraph operator with a swept-back thatch of hair and peering eyes that made him look like he was perpetually facing a gust of wind, nabbed his last U.S. state highpoint in July 1936.

Marshall began highpointing just as the U.S. spiraled into the Great Depression. He first had to create a list of state highpoints—nobody had compiled it before—which required meticulous research of conflicting sources and writing letters to dozens of Forest Service officials for different maps and advice. As a perk of his telegraph job, he got free railroad travel. So over several summers, he traveled by rail, hitchhiking, and foot—ticking off highpoints as fast as a modern-day peakbagger with the benefit of a rental car: Nevada 6/3/30, Arizona 6/7/30, New Mexico 6/15/30, Colorado 6/19/30, Utah 6/28/30.

He had no family obligations, no home to worry about. The main focus of his whole life became highpointing. In 1936, he took a multi-month leave from work in order to do his final 18 highpoints. In July, in the farm fields of Indiana, Marshall finished number 48, the last one at the time. (There, he visited three points on his maps that listed the same elevation, plus two additional areas that locals claimed were higher, just to be safe.)

Around the room there were lots of "wow, how far is too far?" head shakes. I was reminded of Stony Burk (New Hampshire, 49 at present), a living highpointer who represents the Marshall spirit. To date, he has made 423 ascents of state summits. And at 71, he continues pushing. He's been to the Rhode Island and New Jersey highpoints in every calendar month, and climbed Tennessee's 11 times. He's currently helping to establish a permanent Club museum in Ohio.

All of us highpointers have sacrificed for our obsession in our own way—spending time and money, sometimes speeding through them for the sake of accomplishment, while not stopping to savor or explore arguably "better" and more wild places. On the other hand, I had one highpointer tell me that picking up the list helped him get over a divorce. It had certainly helped Audra and me deal with a job crisis. What else might our brains obsess over—breakups, money woes, the state of the world—if not for this list?

I no longer thought in terms of how many I'd done, but how many I had left to do. It was like a countdown had begun.

THE SPRING AFTER the Oregon convention, Mitchler tossed out an invitation to the Highpointer Club's email group: He was going to be back in Portland on business, and offered to lead a climb up Mt. Hood, especially for anyone who had missed out on a summit due to the previous June's storm. Audra and I jumped at the chance.

We had perfect snow conditions and mild weather for our ascent (number 35 for me). We took a summit photo with our small group, ice axes held high.

Back at the Timberline Lodge bar, our climbing team naturally began to talk about what was left. Audra and I shared our plans to pace out our 10 remaining Midwestern and Southern drive-ups on a couple of relaxing, stop-and-see-the-sites road trips.

A few of us were also missing three of the hardest remaining peaks in the Lower 48, and so hatched a plan to tackle them the following summer: Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. The latter's Gannett Peak requires at least a 33-mile round-trip hike and 8,450 feet of elevation gain.

Mitchler sat back, sipped his beer, and smiled at our excited planning. I thanked him for organizing the trip. He shrugged. "I really appreciated the times when I was invited along on trips with more experienced people."

Mitchler completed the 50 U.S. highpoints in 2003, and his obsession only grew after finishing the feat. But rather than repeating highpoints, he found

THERE'S A LIST FOR THAT

Got summit fever? Here are just a few of the checklist challenges around the country.

50 STATE HIGHPOINTS

The Highpointers Club site has an online guide and store, and a blog with club news and membership info. highpointers.org

COUNTY HIGHPOINTS

Arguably the most obsessive peakbagging faction, the County Highpointers Association hosts an interactive map with established and debated county highpoints for each U.S. state, plus more peakbagging esoterica. cohp.org

COLORADO 14ERS

In addition to the Fourteener records, the Colorado Mountain Club maintains an online register, MySummits, where you can log your progress on Colorado's top 100 peaks. cmc.org

SOUTH BEYOND 6,000

The Carolina Mountain Club recognizes those who summit 40 peaks over 6,000 feet in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. carolinamountainclub.org

NEW HAMPSHIRE HIGH PEAKS

Since 1957, the Appalachian Mountain Club has charted hikers' progress on the 48 4,000-plus-foot peaks in the White Mountains, with special awards for those who climb in winter. The club also keeps lists for New England's 4,000-footers and 100 highest peaks, as well as the 111 4,000-footers of the Northeast. amc4000footer.org

ADIRONDACK 46ERS

More than 10,000 completers have registered their climbs of the Adirondacks' 46 highest peaks since the list began in 1925. adk46er.org

Didn't find the list you were looking for here? Try here: peakbagger.com/listindx.aspx.

new ones. He completed the county highpoints of several states and began working through the highpoints of U.S. National Parks and Monuments, and the U.S. territories worldwide (in June he completed the first-ever ascent of 3,166-foot Agrihan on the Mariana Islands, a sword grass-choked volcano that he called "the last unclimbed American highpoint"). He's even ticking off the highest natural ground in the 50 most populous U.S. cities. "That's neat," he said, "because there isn't a list—I have to map them out." He's done 42 of them.

For Mitchler, his multiple ongoing quests solve a common problem most highpointers face. "Almost all who finish the states say, 'Now what?'" he explained. "Now all of a sudden you don't have a list."

That won't happen to Mitchler. He told me he's also considering a list of the highest golf courses in every state. "So far, I've identified 20 states and played 10 of them," he said.

Just like the newsletter used to make me feel normal by comparison to "regular" highpointers, now Mitchler made my two decades of casual highpointing feel normal. But then I recalled the years I spent as a highpointing denier. Can we recognize when we go over the edge ourselves? Does it matter? There are plenty of people who think climbing *any* mountain is crazy. Who's to say when enthusiasm becomes obsession?

On that 1,200-mile detour to the Dakotas, we went a little nuts by any objective measure. Our time on the road dwarfed our time on the trail. We skipped the Badlands and Devils Tower. Instead, we walked through what felt like a painting of the American prairie, complete with abandoned cabin and barbed-wire fence, to reach White Butte. We ran to the stone fire tower on Black Elk. And it felt like we were making each moment really count.

Now, when I look back on that road trip and other questionable itineraries, I don't regret the places not seen. Rather, I appreciate how even my mild case of obsession has shaped how I experience the outdoors. As a backpacker, I have spent hundreds of nights out in the wilderness, hiked thousands of miles of trails—and sometimes all the beautiful places blur together. But I remember every single highpoint in vivid detail. The day, the weather, the back roads, the trail, the nearby towns, the people met along the way.

List-keeping doesn't drive all my hikes, of course. For instance, I only recently noticed that, since moving to California, I've been to seven of the state's 58 county highpoints. I'm definitely not trying to climb them all.

Loren Mooney currently has 48 U.S. state highpoints. She's missing Virginia and Alaska.

MASTER THE MOUNTAINS

Get an alpine start

Weather risk and warming snow can make an early start critical. Don't blow it.

- **Set two alarms.** Hitting snooze is a good way to sleep through your wakeup window.
- **Pack the night before.** Get your kit ready to grab and go. Do all your snack and breakfast prep before hitting the hay.
- **Get dressed.** Lay out everything you'll hike in. Better yet: Sleep in your clothes.
- **Caffeinate.** If coffee is a necessity, use instant and make sure you allow time for boiling water.
- **Eat on the go.** Choose breakfast foods that require no dishes (oatmeal in a packet is a good bet), or eat cold snacks while hiking.

SPREAD THE LOVE

THIS IS WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE TO FINALLY SEE SOMETHING I'D THOUGHT ABOUT FOR SO LONG.
–LIZ ALVAREZ, AUTHOR'S MOM

TRIP PHOTOS BY TED ALVAREZ

Mom's Big Adventure

A mother-and-son road trip through all five of Utah's national parks in one week is the perfect way to make up for lost time—or court disaster. *By Ted Alvarez*

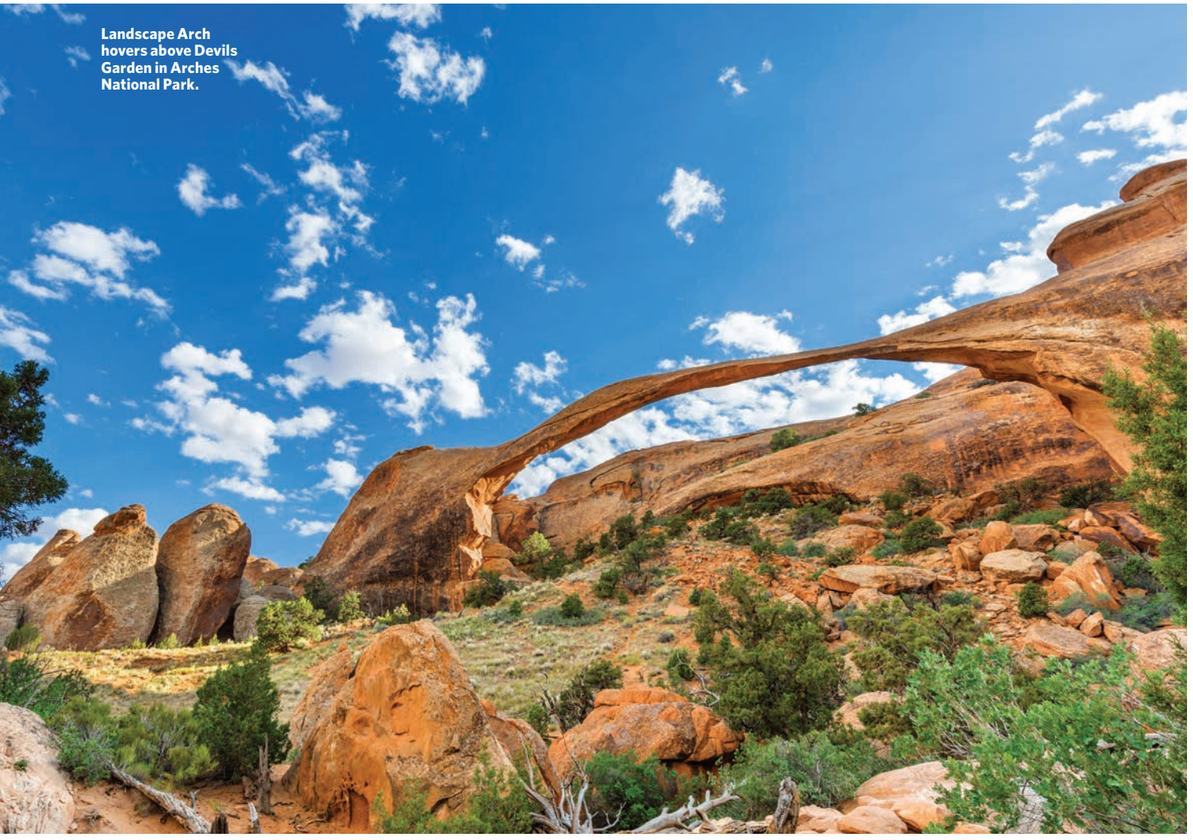
CAPITOL REEF NATIONAL PARK, DAY 5, 1:36 A.M.

IN CAPITOL REEF NATIONAL PARK, the Waterpocket Fold creases Earth's crust in a 100-mile network of multi-colored sandstone canyons that web and crimp together like giant veins. It's easy to feel small here.

I find this sensation to be magnified after midnight, while squatting barefoot and half-naked in a sandstorm and trying desperately to jury-rig a snapped tent pole back into place before my underwear fills with grit.

Me? I'm used to backcountry exercises in humiliation and nature's occasional profaning of my unmentionables. But my mom? She's inside our tent, on her first backpacking trip ever. I stop hammering at the splintered aluminum pole to cast a dim light into our battered and crumpled home-sweet-home. I can make out the shape of a mummy bag and just barely hear a muffled whimper from within above all the howling and flapping.

I think I may have broken my mom.



Landscape Arch hovers above Devils Garden in Arches National Park.

LOTS OF KIDS SAY their moms are the strongest person they know, but I think it would still surprise my mom, Liz, to hear that I mean it. Enduring patience and bottomless empathy don't usually pop up on superhero stat sheets, after all. But there's a flip side to that kind of strength: deference. Growing up as the quiet one in a kaleidoscopically unstable family of nine in rural Texas taught my mom to be supportive, reactive, and always on duty.

MY OLDER SISTER AND TWIN SISTER CLASHED A LOT. THAT SET ME UP TO BE THE PEACEMAKER.

My mom's commitment to her kids' dreams is the gravitational center of our nuclear family—the reason her three children ended up as a professional writer, an opera singer, and a drummer. In her career, she turned those same traits outward as a Montessori preschool teacher, where success was measured in inspired children. Parents and kids still stop her in the grocery store to say hello and share updates. She lights up every time they do, as if hearing good news about her own children.

THE WAY I GREW UP, RAISING KIDS WHO KNEW THEY WERE LOVED AND HAD CONFIDENCE IN THEMSELVES WAS THE DREAM.

But I worry that beyond teaching and raising a family and seeing her kids scatter happily to the four winds, she's never really chased her own dreams.

As the years rolled by, health issues—first her family's, then her own—seemed to sap her energy and her joy. When she retired two years ago, she expressed excitement about traveling or finally learning how to play guitar. But instead of trips to Europe or tinkering at James Taylor songs, the years were riddled with the grief and exhaustion of caring for an aging parent and a dying sibling.

The guitar I got her as a retirement gift gathered dust in its case. Then her little brother died, and something cleaved. Listless and distant, she seemed as if she wanted to sleep straight through her golden years. The constant light behind her eyes started to fade, and her health began to falter mysteriously. When we tried to lift her out of the fog, she would grow protective and snappish about her mourning.

I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS AFFECTING YOU GUYS IN A WAY THAT CAUSED YOU TO WORRY SO MUCH.

But when I visited, I noticed how her blue eyes regained their sparkle when she walked the dog through the quivering aspens that crowd the cabin she built with my dad in Colorado's Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Maybe she just needed to go for a hike, and didn't know it—or didn't know what she was capable of.

PHOTOS BY IAN DAGNALL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

IT WAS NOT "EASY." MY HUSBAND AND I HAD TRIED IT ONCE BEFORE BUT DIDN'T GET FAR. THAT WAS PROBABLY 10 YEARS AGO.

I used a climb up a modest Thirteener near the cabin ("It's easy!") to assess her ability and come up with a plan. We didn't quite make the summit and her pace slowed to a crawl on the descent, but she'd cleared nearly 7 miles and 2,500 feet. This I could work with.

Back on the cabin deck, we treated our sore feet with Woodford Reserve while the sun melted behind a trio of Fourteeners and updrafts tossed her blond and silver hair. Seeing her now, obviously pleased with the fresh air and effort, I wondered what other dreams or goals she might be keeping to herself. I asked her about her bucket-list and her answers were a gut punch to me. She had always wanted to go camping under the stars. She wanted to visit the alien deserts of the Southwest. But, because of the creakiness that comes with age, she didn't think either of those things could happen for her now.

WHEN I WAS A GIRL, WE HAD A TWO-STORY HOUSE WITH A ROOF WE COULD ACCESS FROM A WINDOW. AND YOU COULD SEE SO MANY STARS. WANTING TO RECONNECT WITH THAT IS DEFINITELY TIED INTO MY CHILDHOOD.

This was insane. She lives in Colorado, a mere six hours from Moab, and some months I spend more days outside than under a roof. Why hadn't I taken her on a grand Utah adventure? Am I a bad son?

There was only one solution to my goals of showing her the Southwest of her dreams and making up for decades of lost time: A road trip through the densest patch of desert canyons in the world. We made a pact to get in shape.

NATIONAL PARKS ARE MADE for big lists and bold ideas, and we had both. We'd visit all five Utah parks in a week, and she'd train on the job: Dayhikes in Arches and Bryce would beget overnights in Canyonlands and Zion before culminating in a backpacking trip in Capitol Reef. In my experience, southern Utah can break anyone's funk.

I've planned a lot of trips, but the stakes felt so much higher this time: This was my mom, after all. And I wanted more for her than a vacation. I wanted her to find purpose, inspiration, and a reason to stay strong in body and mind somewhere out there in all that red sand. Was that too much to ask?

THAT'S WHAT I WANTED. TOO. AFTER TAKING CARE OF SOMEONE ELSE, YOU KIND OF FORGET AND LET GO OF THE THINGS THAT YOU DO FOR YOURSELF.

Kidnapping her unannounced seemed unfair, so I called to give her two weeks' advanced warning. Her voice trembled a little when she admitted that her efforts to prep hadn't gone much beyond neighborhood dog-walking. I told her that she'd be fine, hoping it was true. But the silences on the phone were longer than normal. She swallowed hard before admitting to the big one: She was nervous about pooping in the woods. But she said she trusted me. By the end of our redrock rager, I wanted her to trust herself.

DEVILS GARDEN TRAIL, ARCHES NATIONAL PARK, DAY 1, 2:30 P.M.

We almost bailed on day one. High winds on the drive in threatened to topple our car—just as they threw the trailers we saw in roadside ditches. I'd hoped for perfect spring weather, but now I hoped my mom wouldn't think the whole week was going to be like this. More than rain or snow, wind can ruin any first-timer trip: It's a constant headache,

it's loud, and you have to stake everything down. But it was too early to go off itinerary. The wind might have been beastly, but we had a good tent, triple windproof layers for my mom, and a collapsible flask of bourbon if the whole plan hit the skids. My mom brought an ultrastylish scarf, too. We were ready.

I HAD NO IDEA I WOULD BE USING THIS AS A FACE MASK.

My easy-entry plan was to tackle Devils Garden, a 7-mile loop with a buffet of arches, and hit Delicate Arch at sunset. It seemed like a perfect starter hike when I was looking at the map a few days earlier, imagining a sunny, mild spring day. But it was high season, and we were dodging a line of scarfed hikers coughing through the airborne grit. The massive sandstone fins and loops walled in the trail and acted like wind tunnels; the strongest gusts blasted sand into our mouths and ears.

TED IS MY ELDEST. HE'S A PEACEMAKER AND A PLEASER. KIND OF LIKE I AM.

I knew there'd be crowds, and worried my mom would be disappointed, but she didn't even notice. Like a kid, she was finding shapes in the sculpted stone: a reclining lion, an otter, a vulture, a child squatting, two cats next to a dog—*wait, no, that's a piglet*. We laughed. She hadn't made a joke in years.

The fun stopped when we reached a short section of stone stairs. She tensed up and had to lean on my shoulder, then blasted up the next slickrock bench like a champ, then froze when it ended in a sloping pile of stones. I could see her fear. Walking the dog hadn't really prepared her for the psychological challenge of a pile of stones with a 14-foot drop on one side. Where I saw adventure, she saw danger.

THERE IS NO WAY I COULD'VE HANDLED THAT.

Landscape Arch rose behind us like a totem from space; we were maybe 2 miles in. I knew the entire 7-mile Devils Garden Loop was out of reach. Delicate Arch would have to wait. I knew there'd be taxing moments this week, but saw no reason to make the first day a killer.

We turned around and I felt the magic drain out of the day. Then my mom darkened my mood by indulging in my least favorite of her post-retirement habits: naming her past, present, and potential future ailments. Diverticulitis. Glaucoma. Hiatal hernias. Esophageal spasms. Indigestion. Excessive constipation. Macular degeneration. Lost eyebrows. Bunions.

OH. COME ON!

THIS IS A COMMON THING. JUST WAIT.

Maybe she just wanted to know the enemy, but I was annoyed it had joined us under the Double O Arch. I walked faster to leave her grim summoning behind. But when I saw her struggling on a sandstone bump the size of a large throw pillow, I dropped back and offered up my hand and shoulder. We hugged at the bottom.

DID YOU REALLY HAVE TO MENTION ALL OF THESE? I SOUND SO NEUROTIC.

I remembered my goal to help her shed her perception of herself as someone who doesn't belong off the scenic drive. Back at the cabin, she'd confided that the fantasy of shouldering a pack and striding into the wilderness was obscured by stinging joints and fading stamina. But I think national parks are the best way to reappraise who you are and what you're capable of. I've healed self-inflicted wounds before with slickrock, and return whenever I sense a better, happier, fuller self is hidden out there in the miles of dirt.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN CURIOUS ABOUT WHAT MAKES TED TICK. I THINK THE OUTDOORS FOR HIM IS A FORM OF THERAPY. IT FEEDS HIS SOUL.

And now I wondered if my chafing at her list was less about her aging process than my own. A nasty case of plantar fasciitis hobbled my autumn and forced a reckoning with my own abilities. I'm also about to close my fourth decade and thinking about living in a van while my friends settle down with houses and kids. Mortality—my mom's, mine—whistled shrill in my ears.

We can both benefit from more time outdoors, I know. New research shows that exposure to nature yields health benefits like reduced cancer risk, lower blood pressure, lowered depression and anxiety, lowered inflammation response, enhanced immune systems, and boosted memory. The latest buzz is around forest bathing—frequent but small doses of the outdoors—and I'm all for it. But it sounds like dipping your toe in. Sometimes you need a good old-fash ioned dunking—full immersion, the deeper the better.

But you can't make someone take the plunge; you can only show her where to do it.

Gaining confidence on the Queen's Garden Trail in Bryce Canyon

Testing ninja skills against sandstorms in Capitol Reef

Preparing for a sandy night's sleep in Capitol Reef

My mom's only camping experience thus far was a soaked, chilly nightmare at Colorado's Guanella Pass, sleeping on the bare ground beside a soaked dog. I needed her first night since then to be a stunner, not a fight for survival. As every backcountry traveler knows, sometimes you have to improvise. We headed south and checked into a Best Western in Bryce Canyon City.

THAT WAS 13 OR 14 YEARS AGO. MY HUSBAND WAS LIKE, "WELL, WE'RE NEVER GOING TO DO THIS AGAIN."

HONESTLY, I WAS PRETTY EXCITED ABOUT THIS.

ISLAND IN THE SKY ENTRANCE, CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARK, DAY 1, 7:30 P.M.

Winds whipped sand and fury at the Island in the Sky. A *Mad Max*-style haboob erased the sagebrush horizon—and my plans to camp on the rim and duck into the Syncline for our first overnight. I couldn't very well have my mom's inaugural night out end with her being blown off the rim of Canyonlands. That certainly wouldn't have helped with the esophageal spasms.

BRYCE CANYON NATIONAL PARK, DAY 2, 9:30 A.M.

We woke up to a sun-bright morning with snow crystals twinkling in the fierce breeze. Yes, it was still blowing, but the air was clear and invigorating. We blasted to the Queen's Garden, a 3.5-mile chance at redemption.

The forested rim of Bryce melted below us into Neapolitan towers, and I could sense my mom tensing up on the loose gravel. I coached her through, telling her to trust her poles and her feet. Coral-and-pink hoodoos crowded our descent, each turn in the trail revealing a new ornate section, like dripping Gaudí cathedral spires cast in dirt. Bryce was at its shoulder-season best: A thin layer of snow decked the ridges like cake icing, making the red and peach pop enough to crack viewfinders. But the trails remained dry and trustworthy. She didn't balk at the zigzagging switchbacks. We high-fived with our poles at the top.

I CAN CLIMB UP LIKE NOBODY'S BUSINESS—IT'S THE DOWNS THAT BUG ME.

➡

Late-season snow decorates the rim of Bryce Canyon.

PHOTO BY DUSTY DEMERSON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

SPRINGDALE, UTAH, DAY 2, 9:30 P.M.

On park adventures, plans change with weather and circumstance. A little chaos is part of the fun.

I learned that I get my roll-with-it taste for improvisation from my mom when she just laughed at our plan B, which was neither glamorous nor scenic. It was a campground behind a La Quinta Inn in Springdale—we were two months late to get a car campsite in the park. We set up while an adventure bus from New Jersey barfed out a half-dozen fit 20-somethings who went to work on a canvas city with hammers and railroad spikes.

Time for more improvisation. Mom said she was just happy to be here, and I explained "here" doesn't have to be a tent-and-RV town, so we went looking for a "here" with margaritas. I assured her the walk through town would count toward her daily mileage total (5.1). She swelled a bit, and by the time we got to camp the air had calmed. We celebrated with a miniature bonfire.

I KNEW THIS WASN'T THE REAL EXPERIENCE—NOISY NEIGHBORS. RVS. BUT IT WAS NICE TO SEE THE WHOLE PROCESS IN A REALLY CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT.

I'LL TAKE IT!

ZION NATIONAL PARK VISITOR CENTER, DAY 3, 8:30 A.M.

Here's the thing about beauty-queen parks like Zion: They're popular. I know that, so I should have insisted on a sunrise start but didn't, and by the time we arrived at 7:30 a.m., the Zion parking lot was full. I threatened to bail on the overnight in Zion entirely (we drove through—that counts!) for a civilized (read: empty) park like Capitol Reef.

Mom to the rescue with her soothing patience: "Let's just ask around," she offered. She was trying to calm me down, but there was something else, too. I sensed she wasn't ready to leave—that she was asserting her desire, however subtle, to see Zion.

THIS IS TRUE. IF SOMETHING IS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO ME, I FIND A WAY TO MAKE IT HAPPEN.

A young, ruddy-faced ranger with chapped lips told us he thought the Lava Point road was open, contrary to the NPS website. Before he could say, "but what about your shuttle," we zipped off to Lava Point, where we set out on Zion's West Rim Trail.

WEST RIM TRAIL, ZION NATIONAL PARK, DAY 3, 1:30 P.M.

The trail rambled through miles of largely burned ponderosa forest—a blight for most backpackers. But we nicknamed my green-thumbed mom Gaia in our youth, and she was enthralled by a forest in renewal. She wondered at an immaculate ponderosa bursting green in a field of charred siblings: "How'd it stay that way? It's so gorgeous." I dragged her from fuzzy leaves and indigo flowers to keep pace: We started late, and our planned 9-mile day was almost double her max on this trip, margarita miles included. But she grunted into the uphills and grimaced only when gravelly downhills swayed too close to the 3,000-foot drop.

I HADN'T HIKED 9 MILES IN MY LIFE. IT WAS SUPER EXCITING AND POWERFUL TO BE UP ON THAT RIM AND WATCH ALL THE DIFFERENT COLORS OF THE SUNSET.

The sun had already slunk behind the mountains by the time we reached the cones and ramps that surround the Guardian Angels. It was all white sandstone shot through with bands of crimson and reddening in twilight. I thanked my mom for saving the day.

That night, we shared mom's first backcountry campsite with a herd of mule deer. Their silhouettes milled around us as they picked at grasses in the final oranges and lavenders of the evening.

REFRIGERATOR CANYON, ZION NATIONAL PARK, DAY 4, 11:30 A.M.

Tired from the previous day, we opted to go 5.5 miles to the Virgin River. The tradeoff involved 3,500 feet of descent with exposure—my mom's Big Bad. She was shaky at the crux: A path switchbacked down the face of a cliff at a moderate grade, but it was only 4 or 5 feet wide, and beyond the cracking sandstone edge was a thousand-foot drop.

LUCKILY, BEAUTY TAKES THE EDGE OFF THE ANXIETY.

By the time we reached the rust-colored drop-offs that frame Angels Landing, her joints were murdered. She was bugabooed by the ants-marching crowd heading down Walter's Wiggles, so she slowed to a crawl. We death marched into the Grotto and boarded a shuttle full of daytrippers who smelled like hotel soap. "I think I'm ready to lose the crowds," she said, sounding like a backpacker.

I KEPT THINKING OF ALL THE PEOPLE COMING UP THAT LATE. THE DAYHIKERS—THERE WAS NO WAY THEY WERE GOING TO SEE ALL THE THINGS WE SAW.

CAPITOL REEF NATIONAL PARK, DAY 5, 5:30 P.M.

The teeth-chattering drive up the Burr Trail Switchbacks coiled a thousand feet up a cliff edge like a panicked diamondback. At the top we ditched the car and right away mom hit a new crux: "I don't know if I can do this!" she shouted into a vengeful wind, eyes bugging at the 20-foot friction scramble that would dump us into Lower Muley Twist Canyon. We needed to get to protected terrain before the sun set to get in position for a big day in Lower Muley Twist. A mile or 2 might have done it, but we wouldn't know until we got down there.

THIS WAS THE HEAVIEST PACK I HAD, WITH ALL THE WATER. AND WITH THE WIND. I DIDN'T THINK I COULD KEEP MY BALANCE. BUT I DID THINK: I CAN ALWAYS CRAB WALK.

She followed my steps, breathing hard. I heard a deep sigh when she reached the bottom, and a grimace turned into a smile. She might've been scared, but I thought she was having fun. A sandy path sliced around terraced colonies of cryptobiotic soil, and we crossed a broad wash to turn down a tight canyon. The wind picked up, and we covered our faces to ward off stinging sand. ➡

Facing down exposure on Zion's West Rim Trail

We camped in a bowl between tripartite barriers of pinyons and junipers. The wind picked up and sand filled our tent like a torpedoed submarine, but Mom just wanted to know, "What's for dinner?"

IT WAS REALLY HARD TO GO TO SLEEP WITH THE WIND POUNDING. I DIDN'T FEEL SCARED OR INTIMIDATED. IT WAS JUST, 'WOW. I DIDN'T KNOW THAT IT COULD BE LIKE THIS.'

In the bends and licks of the canyon walls, wind gusts boomed like zoo lions at sunset. She loved it. We found Orion and the Big Dipper before ducking into the tent. But it was a noisy night, and even several doses of whiskey couldn't blunt the din of flapping nylon. We laid awake for three hours.

Finally, a rogue microburst slapped the top of the tent into our faces, shattering a pole and thrusting it through the fly like a broken femur through leg meat. In my skivvies in the sandstorm, I had my little freak-out: I wanted Capitol Reef to be the conversion moment, a wild narcotic that keeps my mom fresh and alive forever, and it was backfiring. She was learning that the desert wonderland of her dreams is an inhospitable hellhole, and her son had spent decades mining routes to backcountry incompetence—his latest low point: forgetting to bring duct tape. Great. Transformative road trip squandered. I sought to lift my mom up and literally buried her.

The murmurs from underneath grew louder. Sand sloughed off her bag. Was she . . . convulsing? No. She was . . . laughing. Hard.

WE'LL JUST SLEEP IN A COLLAPSED TENT. WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

LOWER MULEY TWIST, CAPITOL REEF NATIONAL PARK, DAY 6, 9:30 A.M.

When we wake up, my mom's still chuckling. This time because her eyes are glued shut with sand; she asks me to pass the saline. The wind has died—it's still and cool—so we set to exploring the crazy-colored sandstone canyons. My mom resumes her obsession with naming formations: Mother and Child, the Alien Brain, the Coyote.

Sound tints any wilderness experience, but there's a peculiar way it grows acute in the desert. Our day without seeing another human amplifies our voices, and yet puts us on even footing with the rustle of cottonwood leaves or the cascading laugh

Sunset light strikes iconic Delicate Arch.

of a canyon wren. Muley Twist opens into alcoves deep and tall enough to house jumbo jets, and desert varnish spills down like black, iridescent tear tracks. We poke around until the fading light tells me it's time to go. She slows to a stumbly crawl in the last mile to our campsite, and I wonder if this is the wall. She tells me a story.

I'm six or seven, in Rocky Mountain National Park. I can't go any farther on the trail, but we're miles from the car. My father marches ahead with my little sister on his shoulders, but I'm sulking and whining in the dirt. She begins singing "the ants go marching one-by-one, hurrah, hurrah. . ." and I stand up, join in, and start hiking. She does this for a few miles, until her tongue goes numb and the words melt into gibberish. I never stopped hiking.

WE KNEW IF WE DIDN'T TURN AROUND IT WAS GOING TO GET DARK. BUT BEYOND EACH TURN, WE'D SEE SOMETHING ELSE AMAZING. WE KEPT SAYING, 'LET'S JUST DO ONE MORE.'

LOWER MULEY TWIST, CAPITOL REEF NATIONAL PARK, DAY 7, 8:30 A.M.

Mom wakes up in what we'll call Sandy Camp astonished that her joints didn't hurt. It's been days in the backcountry, and the issues that dog her in civilization have mostly vanished. And even her major concerns out here have faded. "I've never pooped in a more beautiful place," she tells me. We bolt out early to make our last stop: Canyonlands.

I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU PUT THIS IN!

A few hours later, we're hiking to the edge of the rim at Island in the Sky, setting foot in the park that eluded us the first time around. She swoons at the view, and we promise to come back for a longer trip soon—maybe a prelude to something bigger, like the Grand Canyon.

THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING. I WANT TO GO TO COLORADO'S SAN JUANS THIS SUMMER. AND THEN THE BIG ONE—GRAND CANYON IN THE FALL. FROM THERE, WHO KNOWS?

DELICATE ARCH TRAILHEAD, ARCHES NATIONAL PARK, DAY 7, 4:30 P.M.

Our trip ends the way it started: with a late start to see Delicate Arch. But this time we won't be thwarted. And no, I'm not pushing her. She says she needs to see it for herself.

Her steps are slow and deliberate, but she's gone from the couch to four backcountry nights and 35 miles in six days. She shrugs at the mildly exposed sections, zips past goggle-eyed tourists. It's a busy trail, a cliché view, and totally worth it. We get glory shots as Delicate Arch goes ruddy in the sunset.

We stand together and wonder how long the arch will stand, an unlikely bulwark against the grind of time. We know it won't last forever, because nothing does. But that doesn't seem to matter. We stand together today and it's enough. It's a gift.

PHOTO BY BEN HERNDON / TANDEMSTOCK.COM