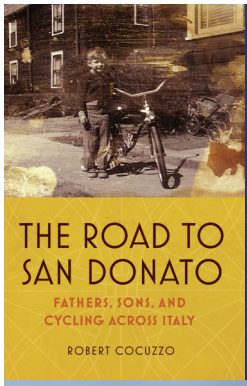
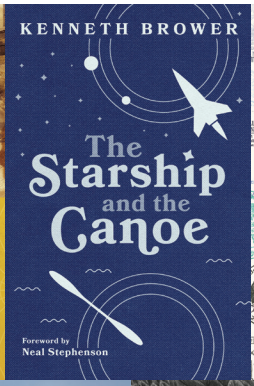
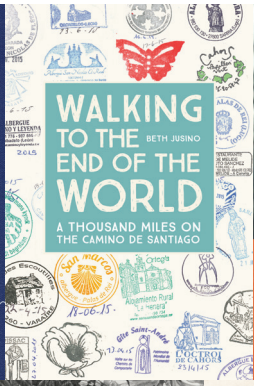
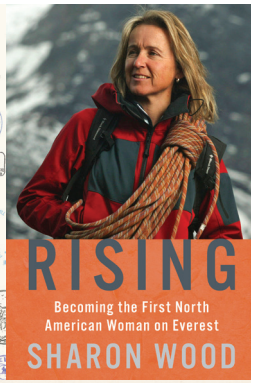
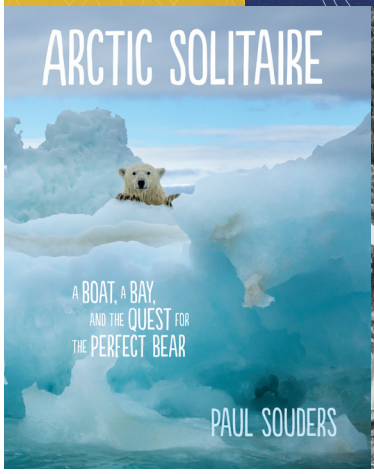
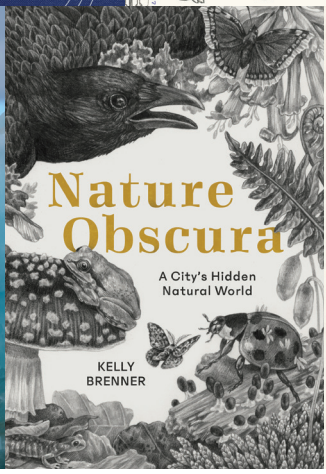


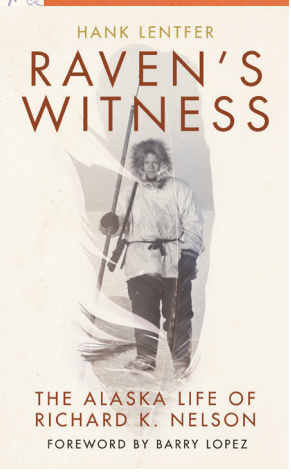






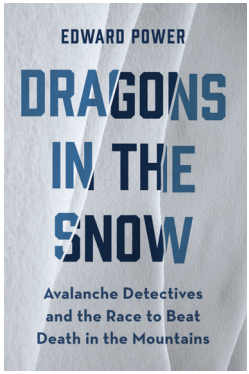


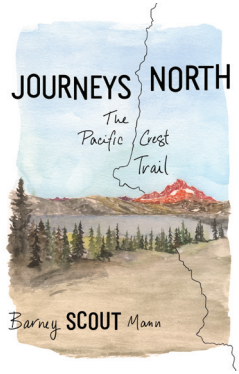


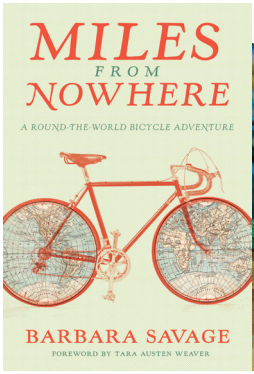


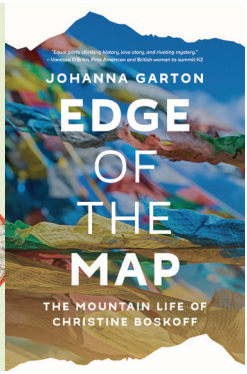
EDITORS' PICKS

MOUNTAINEERS BOOKS SAMPLER









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An independent nonprofit publisher since 1960

CONTENTS

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

This month of April marks the 60th anniversary of Mountaineers Books, an independent and nonprofit publisher based in Seattle. For sixty years we've been publishing books that educate readers about the outdoors, connect us all to wilderness places, and inspire everyone to find their own outdoor adventures. While we are widely known for our comprehensive and expertly researched guidebooks and instructional texts, we also have an extensive list of award-winning narratives—outdoor adventures, natural histories, biographies, memoirs, and more.

As we all now face a different kind of "adventure"—that of staying home, keeping our distance inside and out, finding new ways to explore and connect—the staff here is doing what we often do: turning to books. This reading sampler reflects some of our favorite books that we've recently published, or that will be published later this year. From the heights of Everest to the backroads of Tuscany, the distant reaches of Hudson Bay to intimate coves along the Inside Passage, the boot-beaten route of the Pacific Crest Trail to the centuries-worn path of the

Camino de Santiago, we've got a good story to share with you. As author Kelly Brenner writes in her new book *Nature Obscura*, "Writing is really just a type of camera obscura, a projection of the real world." With this sampler, and from the shelter of your home, you'll discover the real world tracks of sled dogs across the tundra as well as the existence of patterns and tufts in garden moss.

If you enjoy any of the samples collected here, get in touch with your local bookstore to order a copy. Or, head to our website and at checkout, use the discount code TIMETOREAD for 25% off your order. Not only will you get yourself a great book, you'll also be supporting an independent, nonprofit publisher.

Stay sane, stay healthy, and read well!

Best,

Kate Rogers
Editor in Chief

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ARCTIC SOLITAIRE

CHAPTER 12

ICE

I'll admit now that the message I left on my wife's voicemail did me no favors.

"Hi sweetie. I'm um . . . okay. This is my position: latitude 65° 38.92' north . . . longitude 83° 49.54' west . . . Hey . . . I've got a bit of a situation here. Could you take a peek in my office and look up the numbers for the boat insurance policy?"

I was standing on an empty stretch of gravel beach, satellite phone in hand, not another living soul within fifty miles. *C-Sick* sat trapped precariously on the rocks, surrounded by massive icebergs. From shore to distant horizon, I saw nothing but an uninterrupted sea of white.

I was so very, very fucked.

None of this was part of my plan for the day, of course. But almost getting yourself killed so rarely is. I had blithely motored out of Petersen Bay, giddy in the morning sunshine. A thin band of pack ice had blown against the shore, but a mile offshore the water remained open. *C-Sick* glided outside this ice edge on calm seas, and I scanned for polar bears and walrus through

C-Sick and arctic sea ice, Melville Peninsula east of Repulse Bay

my binoculars. I didn't get far. Just a few miles south, at the next little spit of land, ice blocked all but a narrow path. Beyond that, it stretched all the way to the horizon.

I heard the chuffing exhalations of a small herd of walrus swimming toward the ice and I gave chase, hoping to get some sort of picture. At the same time, I repeated to myself, "I do *not* want to get stuck in this." The walrus quickly vanished, so I let out the anchor chain and rowed my dinghy ashore, to take a look around from what meager elevation I could find.

The view was as stunning as it was disheartening: nothing but the unrelieved white of thick pack ice as far as I could see through the binoculars, all the way to Southampton Island twenty miles south. No open water, no channels or leads; a solid wall. The only way I could go any farther would be to start walking.

I scanned back and forth with my binoculars with what must have been a stupid look on my face. I kept thinking, "Where did *that* come from?" All the while ignoring one of the first rules of the Arctic: Watch your back.

When I finally turned around, the bay behind me was filling with ice. Like pieces of an enormous jigsaw puzzle, icebergs large and small began to assemble themselves into a solid mass, blocking my retreat. I took off at a dead run toward the shore, leapt into the dinghy, and rowed madly back toward *C-Sick*. On board, I gunned her engines and began weaving frantically through, around, and over the gathering ice, looking for any way out. Horrible crunches and grinding noises filled the cabin as I scraped through narrowing passages. It sounded like the fiberglass hull was splintering beneath me, and I waited for geysers of freezing water to start gushing in. I steered *C-Sick* toward shallow water, remembering that she drew less water than the biggest, more dangerous bergs.

In ten feet of water, the depth-sounder began its incessant beeping alarm. I smacked it again and again to silence the distraction, all while edging in closer to shore. Eight feet, then six feet of water under me. A small opening still led into the big, protected bay where I'd spent the night before. When I first looked, I had a quarter mile of open water. Suddenly it was down to two hundred yards, then fifty. I watched helplessly, in growing panic, feeling like a gate was slamming shut.

If I stayed out in the ice, I would lose all control. The pack would take us where it wanted. I might spend hours, or even days, trying to push my way clear. A four-thousand-pound boat against millions of tons of ice? I had a better chance of pissing over the side and trying to melt my way out. Worse, *C-Sick* faced the very real threat of being pinned, then slowly crushed between moving floes.

As the ice carried me closer to the rocks, I spotted one small patch of gravel beach. I had run aground more times than I cared to admit in my checkered boating career, but never on purpose. I turned hard to port, nudged the throttle, and pulled the outboards' blades halfway out of the water, where they egg-beatered behind me. Then I drove *C-Sick* right up on the shore. I thought the ice had sounded awful, but the noise of rocks grinding the length of her hull was far worse. My poor boat howled in protest, a sound like something dying. When *C-Sick* would go no further, I killed the motors, leapt overboard in rubber boots, and shouldered her in until she was firmly grounded in the shallows. Then I dragged the anchor and chain out thirty yards to make sure she didn't get any bright ideas about leaving me for good.

I needn't have worried. The ice continued to pile in all around us. *C-Sick* and I were stuck.

I was shaking from a cocktail of adrenaline and fear, and I looked wildly around the beach for something to do. Anything. But what?

I pulled out the satellite phone. My mind raced. Who exactly did you call to fix this? I had a few phone numbers scratched in my notebook, but there wasn't much anyone could do without a helicopter. I wondered how long I had to sit here before I could reasonably call the insurance company and start explaining my little . . . situation. I imagined hauling the Zodiac a couple miles across the peninsula on foot, then coming back for the outboard, and again for enough gear and gas to make a seventy-five-mile emergency run back to Repulse Bay. I could probably do it if I had to, but it sounded like an awful lot of exercise.

I settled instead on calling home, even though it was hours ahead of schedule. Janet didn't pick up. She must have been in a work meeting or on some conference call, so I left the message that would surely undermine what little confidence she still had in her husband's skills, safety, or sanity. I

sounded like one of those lost and doomed Everest climbers calling home for a final farewell.

That done, I settled down to my next agenda item: lunch. Nothing fancy, just a can of split pea and ham soup. It was the least bad food I had left, a favorite that I usually reserved for rainy days, but for this I was willing to make an exception. Then, in the manner of all castaways, I went off to survey my surroundings.

I made for the highest ground, a craggy ridge about 150 feet high. From there, I could see the ice stretching off in every direction I cared to look. To the north, the broad entrance to Petersen Bay was now blocked. I stared west across Frozen Strait. It looked packed solid, yet as I watched, more ice continually streamed in, borne on the tide. I did not want to dwell on my plight, and instead tried to enjoy the walk for its rare warmth. It must have been sixty degrees in the sun—tanning weather up here in the Arctic.

Fireweed and wild poppies filled the tundra like a well-tended park. I wandered through beds of luxuriant green moss, occasionally staring out to the (endless . . . unforgiving . . . frozen . . . white) horizon. Along the southern shore, slabs of sea ice were stacked on top of each other like building blocks, grounded on the tide. They towered fifteen to twenty feet high in spots, old multi-year ice from beyond the Arctic Circle, somewhere up near the Northwest Passage. In the soft sand, I deciphered no fewer than three sets of polar bear prints, including those of a big male. I could fit both my boots inside a single print.

The tracks were windblown and softened at the edges. The bear must have passed at least a day ago, but I was drawn to follow his tracks all the same. I hiked up the beach and over a draw, then stopped when I found a piece of fur. Polar bear fur. Twenty steps on, I found a skull and a scattering of bones. Judging from their size and the bear's gnarled, well-worn teeth, I guessed the skeleton belonged to an old, adult female.

Her fur lay wind-scattered across the stones and tundra, fireweed blossoms poking through the coarse white mats of hair. The skeleton had been there for some time—years probably. The hide and meat were gone, her bones scattered, and the skull lying a few yards off from the rest, bleached white by sun and wind. Enormous fangs and massive jaws dominated the skull; her

small front teeth were crooked and chipped. I couldn't tell what killed her, starvation, old age, or something else entirely. Big male polar bears aren't above cannibalizing cubs, nor taking on a frail old matriarch like this. She might have lived through twenty-five winters or more, and raised dozens of cubs. I stood with her a long time before turning to walk slowly back, past another perfect Inuit tent ring six or seven feet around. Moss and lichens, hundreds of years old, covered the rocks. I could feel the wind of centuries whistling through my bones. Cresting the ridge, I stopped again to scan the resolutely ice-covered horizon one more time through my binoculars.

That was when I saw the other bear. This one was very much alive. Perhaps two miles offshore, head held high, he sniffed at the air and began walking purposefully across the moving ice. Straight toward *C-Sick*.

Fear knotted my guts and a slick of sweat broke out across my body. With *C-Sick* grounded high and dry on the beach, I had no place to go, nowhere to hide. I set off downhill at a trot, clutching the twelve-gauge, and clicking the safety's action back and forth. Black side out, the gun wouldn't fire no matter how hard I pulled the trigger. Red side out: *bang*. I mumbled over and over the old gun safety mantra, "Red, you're dead." I had my cameras in a backpack, but didn't even think about wasting time with them now. If that bear got to the boat ahead of me and tore into the cabin, drawn by the scent of food, or even worse, if he caught me out in the open . . . I did not want to think about it.

I lost sight of the polar bear as I hit the beach at a run. Reaching *C-Sick*, I bounded over the gunwale and into the cockpit in one leap. I rushed inside to grab more bear-banger shells. Then, I counted out six other shells from another cardboard box, the lethal lead slugs I kept stowed away. I stacked them in a neat row.

Just in case.

In the boat, down by the tideline, I had no line of sight on the bear. He would be less than a hundred yards off before he even cleared the horizon, so I climbed back over the gunwale and stalked up the beach. When I could see the bear, he was still out on the ice, holding his nose to the air. Analyzing. Tracking. Thinking. And then, he yawned, in the way a bear does when nervous or stressed.

He must have picked up my scared-and-sweaty-old-man stink, over all the other smells of boat and food and dirty long johns. It was enough to spin him on his heels and send him off the other way, back out onto the ice.

Thank you, mister bear.

I dried my sweat in the afternoon sun, gulping down a nerve-settling beer. The falling tide had left at least one hundred yards of ice stranded between me and the water's edge, and the pack was pushing north at a brisk clip. Still, I could see some open water was now mixed in there, and it gave me dim hope that I might squeeze through when high tide returned.

The days were getting shorter: the sun set five minutes earlier and rose five minutes later each day. When I left around nine o'clock to hike back up and photograph the polar bear's skull in the setting sun's golden light, I misjudged the timing. The daylight was already fading, and the bear's remains blended into a mountainside of indistinguishable, lichen-covered rocks. It took me ages to find her bones, lost in the shadows. The last rays of sun still lit the ridge crest, and I carried the skull, heavy in my hands, with as much reverence as I could muster back into the light.

I placed her skull, like an offering, atop the stones. For just a moment longer, the midnight sun warmed her bones, then it was gone. The fading heat of the day radiated off those rocks like a warm sigh. I sat for a long time with the bear, staring into those empty eyes. The sky turned pink, then violet, and finally ebbed into a deep twilight blue. The first stars I'd seen in a month began to flicker overhead as I carried her bones back to where she fell.

One last time, I placed my hand on her smooth skull. I said a silent prayer to her spirit, hoping for some benediction for safe passage through her domain. Then I walked back to my stranded little boat.

When I reached the beach, *C-Sick* was already floating on the incoming tide. I felt a flood of relief as rushing currents broke the ice, and I could make out the beginnings of a narrow channel through open water extending to the west. I gathered the anchor chain, gave one last shove to encourage *C-Sick* off the beach, and we cast off. When I scrambled back over the gunwale, the

Polar bear's skull at sunset, Vansittart Island

boat shifted beneath my weight and seemed to waggle like a happy dog. We were back in business. Cautiously, I steered with the current through the shifting pans of ice near shore.

A path to safety slowly opened up before me. Last night's anchorage, less than an hour away, was now packed solid with ice. I pushed farther east into the bay, then tucked into a broad cove that promised some protection against the rising wind, the ice, and the chop.

I called home to reassure Janet that all was well, that my earlier phone message had been yet another example of unnecessary dramatics.

"Hey, honey. Everything's fine. Nope, no helicopter ride. No rescue," I chirped in my most reassuring, faux-jovial voice.

Relieved, to be sure, my wife remained unamused and unconvinced. She told me in no uncertain terms, "Don't ever leave me a message like that again. Do you have any idea . . ."

It was nearly midnight. I didn't bother making dinner. I just collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 13

PAY DIRT

By morning, drifting ice had filled the bay around *C-Sick*, and with it came a white wall of fog. I wasn't eager to head back out into the maze, but as ice crowded into my anchorage, I no longer had the luxury of choice.

As the fog erased my view, I was left to crawl blindly through the ice at one or two knots. The GPS told me I was moving west into Frozen Strait, but my radar showed only a Rorschach of vague blobs. As I stared at the display, I could see that it revealed hidden openings through the ice, a shifting but navigable pathway ahead. For the longest time, I had considered the Furuno radar dome another of Pastor Kirby's indulgent nautical purchases, one more electronic toy I neither needed nor wanted. I'd turned it on from time to time, strictly for its entertainment value, but had never even bothered to read the instruction manual.

Now, as I wound my way through the labyrinth, I sent a mental thank-you note out to the good pastor.

The fog continued to play tricks on me. In this white-on-white seascape, jumbled pack ice morphed into fantastical shapes. Soon, everything looked like a polar bear.

Nearby, I saw three slabs of vertical ice. I casually picked up my binoculars for a quick check and realized, with a start, the slabs were three polar bears—a mum and two large cubs. I slipped a telephoto lens out the window, composed the frame, and began to shoot. It was a ghostly scene: white bears

on white ice in a sea of white fog. Only their eyes and noses stood out, like a snowman's, black as lumps of coal. They seemed to look out at this rumbling ghost emerging from the fog with equal measures wonder and wariness. Soon, curiosity satisfied, they trundled off at a brisk pace across the ice and vanished into the mist.

The fog burned slowly away, and to my surprise, the day turned fine—staggeringly so, with a flawless sky, sunshine, still winds, and a mirror sea. The water here was three hundred feet deep, Caribbean blue, and clear as gin.

I spied five walrus nestled together on an ice floe and took *C-Sick* over for a closer look.

Walrus might be foul-smelling, ill-tempered, and unpredictable, but compared to polar bears, they are absolute pussycats. Large and brown, they gather in sociable groups and are a good deal easier to find. Their bulk and lassitude leave them disinclined either to run away or to tear your face off.

I shot them with the telephoto. I shot them with the wide-angle. I got inventive and hung my camera off a seven-foot pole and stuck it right up in a walrus' grill. That earned me stern looks and a gob of snot blown onto my lens, but otherwise they were imperturbable.

When I approached another herd nearby, one walrus shifted weight and the ice shelf collapsed, tumbling the whole group unceremoniously into the sea with a chorus of snorts and a collective splash. Even fifteen feet under the surface, I could see them swimming with all the grace they lacked on land. I had never appreciated just how elegant they could be in motion.

Then I pushed my underwater camera a little too close. A big male turned, gave the dome two powerful thwacks with a long ivory tusk, and swam away.

Suitably chastened, I motored back toward *C-Sick* and ghosted along the ice floe's edge. I glassed back and forth, searching for the shape of a bear amidst the shifting ice. To torture a metaphor, it was not so much a needle in a haystack as a vast field of haystacks set in motion by wind and tide. Maybe there was a needle in there, but probably not.

Walrus swimming beneath sea ice, Frozen Strait

I ranged back and forth for hours, but by day's end I had found no more bears and only a few, distant seals. Recorded on the GPS's screen, *C-Sick*'s wandering track read like a child's looping scrawl. The setting sun bathed the world in golden light, and in the day's waning moments the ice glowed pink with cobalt blue shadows. Just before it dipped beneath the horizon, I watched the sun flash emerald green for just an instant.

All my old anchorages in Petersen Bay were now clogged with ice, so I continued west toward White Island. My charts showed a promising-looking bay called Toms Harbour. When I arrived sometime after eleven, I had to admit that this Tom guy knew what he was doing. The cove was snug and well-protected. The surrounding hills were steeper and craggier and taller than any I'd seen since I first floated *C-Sick* into Hudson Bay.

After nearly 1,400 miles of travel, it felt like I'd finally arrived in the land I had been dreaming of.

I had seen five polar bears before eight a.m. but had made precisely zero pictures when I started grumbling to myself, "So that's how you're going to play it." I headed away from shore and back out toward the drifting ice, but hours more scanning in the harsh midday light yielded only a low-grade headache and a growing sense of frustration at this single-minded pursuit. The breeze stilled in the late hours of the day, and the sea again turned to glass. Sunlight reflected off the water in sinuous golden curves.

The ice, an impassable wall across Frozen Strait two days before, had dissipated into lacy ribbons. I motored at dead slow speed through the remaining frozen pans, eyes glued to binoculars, scanning . . . scanning. Every fifteen minutes or so, I cut the engines and marched out to *C-Sick*'s bow, then slowly turned a complete circle, peering hard through the 12x binoculars at every piece of the dirty snow and melting ice.

For two more hours, I muttered to myself over and over, "I know you're out there."

And for once, I was right.

There was one more yellowish fleck in a sea of white ice. I stared hard, then, maybe, could just make out the form of a sleeping polar bear. I motored closer, my eyes glued to the binoculars, afraid to lose sight of him in the

shifting jumble of ice. At a half mile, I could see his face: a fine-looking young male, fast asleep in the snow. I took my time and let the current push me in closer, briefly tapping the engines into the gear to stay on course. All the while, I struggled to organize my cameras. Weeks of cold and damp had taken a toll on their sensitive electronics; I could not find a single one that reliably worked. I had a half dozen cameras on this boat, thousands upon thousands of dollars' worth, and yet not one of them actually worth a damn.

C-Sick had settled into the ice fifty yards away from the still-sleeping bear when I started pulling apart my underwater housing. Ironically, the only camera that still worked was the one that actually *had* been dropped in the ocean.

I caught my breath and waited for the bear to wake. Eventually he yawned, did a big, full-body stretch, and sat up. He gave the air a sniff and, finding something to his liking, started to walk. Straight toward me. I switched from the telephoto zoom to a wide-angle. The bear wasn't slowing down at all.

I was standing out in *C-Sick*'s open back cockpit, and the boat's gunwales stood even with the iceberg's surface. In less than ten seconds, I would find myself eye to eye with a confident and now quite curious polar bear. In the rush to find a working camera, I had neglected to bring anything else out on deck with me—not even that pen-sized bear banger. The bear calmly crested a small hummock less than forty feet away. Whatever nerve I had to stand my ground vanished as he picked up speed for the final approach.

I backed into the cabin, closed the door, and dropped the engines into gear, eager to put a few yards of open water between us.

The commotion was just enough to dampen the bear's curiosity. He casually stepped off the ice into frigid water and soon disappeared into a maze of drifting bergs.

Almost immediately, I felt like a coward. Had I come all this way just to go chickenshit at the last second? In hindsight, it sounded like utter madness; no one in their right mind stands defenseless in front of an approaching polar bear, snapping pictures, no matter how pretty the light might be. Right?

But damn, it would have made a great picture.

Anchored back at Toms Harbour, I jerked awake at two in the morning when an iceberg raked against *C-Sick*'s hull. It was only a small berg, and,

in spite of the racket, unlikely to send me to the bottom. In the almost full darkness, I stared up for a moment at the novelty of twinkling stars. It felt like my Arctic summer was almost over.

While summer might have been winding down, at daybreak warmth wafted over me like a dry desert breeze off the land. It brought a cloud of mosquitoes that circled diligently until I motored *C-Sick* farther out from shore. It was a beautiful, still day on the water. Coming out of the harbor, I saw several ice floes packed with walrus. I motored out slowly, not wanting to spook any into the water. Walrus had been hunted for centuries here, and I would have understood if they were a little skittish.

In the Zodiac, I let the current pull me toward the nearest herd, but some reflection or noise startled one of the animals, and suddenly everyone was in the pool. One group swam in a slow circle close to the iceberg, and through the clear water the youngest of calves stared up at me with saucer eyes, small whiskers, and the sweetest expression of wonder, nestled under the protective flipper of his mother.

I took what pictures I could, then started looking around for *C-Sick*. I swallowed a small twinge of panic. I was forever losing things: keys, wallet, sunglasses . . . but my boat?

The water here was far too deep to anchor in, and the drifting ice rendered that idea foolish, anyway—a passing floe could easily catch the chain and drag *C-Sick* under. So, I'd simply let her drift. I had begun wearing my drysuit whenever I left the big boat, in case an errant iceberg or irate walrus flipped me and I had to swim for it. And I usually remembered the bright orange waterproof case that held my EPIRB beacon, satellite phone, and flares. But, still.

I so did not want to have this conversation with the hard men of Search and Rescue.

"Sorry to be a bother but I seem to have misplaced my boat. Could you fire up the chopper and give me a lift?"

Without binoculars, all I could see was an endless panorama of white reaching to the horizon in every direction. With the tide running, the ice, *C-Sick*, and my inattentively piloted Zodiac had all been moving at varying speeds and on different headings. I resisted the urge to backtrack at full

throttle, and instead forced myself to stay calm, remain still, and keep looking. Finally, I made out *C-Sick*'s radio antenna sticking up from behind a distant iceberg. She had drifted more than a mile. It felt like I'd turned my back on a much-loved puppy for one second and she had made a run for it.

I didn't let her out of my sight as I headed back.

As soon as I climbed on board, nerves still jangling, I made a point of squeezing the spare pair of binoculars into my survival kit.

I found the day's first polar bear, blood-smeared and looking pissed off, not long after that. In a moment, I saw the second bear of the day, molars deep in a walrus who was clearly past all sorrow. And the morning's third bear was busily swimming out from shore intent on joining the fun. I grabbed all my cameras and hopped right back into the Zodiac. Only belatedly did I think about my life jacket or the survival gear. Screw it. There were bears right here, and I didn't plan on going far.

There followed the usual ursine hijinks, even more spirited than normal with three hungry bears vying for that one tasty and nutritious walrus. For a bear-obsessed photographer, it was almost too much of a good thing. Where to even begin? I reckoned the walrus wasn't going anywhere, but kept one eye out for a brawl between the dining patrons. I focused at first on that bear in the water. If he kept swimming closer, or even better, arched his back and dove, I might be able to catch him floating underwater: a shot I've been imagining for years.

While I struggled to position the underwater housing near enough to get his face in the frame, the Zodiac drifted in closer. He lashed out with a warning growl, splashing me with ice water and raking his claws across the boat's thin, inflated surface.

Okay, maybe too close.

I threw one look over my shoulder toward *C-Sick* and my heart sank. Trapped in moving ice, the current was driving her toward White Island's rocky shore. In my haste, I'd also left the cabin door standing wide open with several hungry polar bears within easy snacking distance. Only then did I notice the slight but unmistakable hiss of air leaking from my dinghy. One of the tubes was already going squishy. I tried not to panic, but I turned the Zodiac toward *C-Sick*, racing back before it went completely flat.

I steered the dinghy in a wide loop away from the bears, shifting my weight off the deflated tube. Sweating inside my drysuit, I ran the dinghy into the ice hard enough to lift the bow out of the water. I hit the gas, trying to force a path in, but nearly tipped over instead. I grabbed hold of the bow line and scrambled over the side and onto the nearest iceberg. It wobbled ominously, but before it rolled completely I leapt to the next, then the next. With each step, the ice sank beneath my weight and threatened to pitch me into freezing water. Dragging the dinghy behind me like a sled, I hop-scotched across the final ten yards and hauled myself into the cockpit as that last small berg spun out from beneath my outstretched foot.

Panting, I swore I would *never* do that again. I fired up *C-Sick*'s motors and nudged her out through the ice and away from shore.

Once I caught my breath, I realized there hadn't been much real damage except to my pride. And to my detumescent dinghy, of course. I idled back to within sight of the feasting polar bear and that walrus kill. It was good, bloody fun, and I sat for a long time, watching and photographing the tableau. All the characters were assembled: King of the North, victorious and smeared in gore; Walrus, defeated, dejected, and partially devoured; the Jealous Rivals, waiting in the wings to steal his prize. They could have sold tickets.

But something was missing.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, the difference between a great picture and a good one is the difference between lightning and lightning bugs. I could see this was a good picture, but for the life of me I could not turn it into something great. The sun stood high in a cloudless sky and cast scalding light and harsh shadows on the bear and blood-smeared ice. I let *C-Sick* drift to within fifty yards and watched it all from the bow through my big telephoto lens. It was a record shot—perfect, or at least perfectly adequate, to illustrate predation in some obscure textbook. But fine art it was not.

Finally, the feeding bear, harassed by his circling brethren, began to drag the walrus to the edge of the iceberg. He backed into the water, and even as I was saying, "Oh man, you don't want to do that," he pulled the carcass in after him.

It turns out that, much like my deflated Zodiac, dead walrus don't float.

I motored until I found a sheltered cove farther north, along White Island's shore, then tossed the anchor out, and took a moment to regroup. Through all of my years of travel in inflatable boats, I had been inordinately lucky, never needing to fix a puncture out in the field. I'd always been more than happy to let the boat shop deal with any minor leaks when I got home.

I dug the repair kit out of *C-Sick*'s bowels. It contained a number of patches, a withered glue tube, and some vaguely translated and altogether non-specific instructions. While I lacked much in the way of boat repair skills, I could still conjure up memories of the many flat tires I fixed during a childhood spent bicycling over country roads that sparkled with broken glass. To a surprisingly cheerful tune, I began whistling to myself thinking, I got this.

My whistling soon turned chapped and dry, before expiring in a short, unhappy sigh. Perhaps there were not that many similarities between patching a bike tube and wrestling one hundred pounds of soggy, flaccid boat out of iceberg-filled waters at the Arctic Circle after all. It took me an hour of fiddling with ropes, improvisational rigging, and vigorous swearing just to tilt the injured boat up on one side and tie it into place with a series of half-assed half-hitches. I had to stand on tip-toes atop *C-Sick*'s gunwales before I could finally see the long series of parallel scratches that led to one pinpoint puncture.

Hmmm. That shouldn't be *that* hard to fix. I cut out a patch, smeared around some glue, made a suitable mess, and slapped it all together.

After lunch, I added just enough air to keep the dinghy properly afloat, then clipped it on its tether and motored *C-Sick* north.

The landscape along Frozen Strait held a stark, spare beauty, where craggy cliffs and steep hills fringed with soft meadows of tundra. In a distant alpine valley on the slopes of White Island, I counted twelve polar bears. They were all no bigger than white dots, not a single one close enough to photograph.

Even though I wouldn't have camped out there if you triple-dog dared me, I didn't want to leave.

There was, however, the matter of my dwindling reserves of gasoline, money, and patience. I was down to my last twenty gallons of fuel and I still faced at least seventy-five ice-choked miles back to Repulse Bay's gas station.

I took a hard look at the calendar. In years past, I'd been happy to extend trips and stay as long as I damn well pleased until I got the pictures I wanted or got sick of trying. Married life, even with a wife as understanding as mine, required compromise. Janet had been telling me for weeks, "It's been too long." I had been gone almost six weeks, and I still needed to retrace my steps and find a winter home for *C-Sick*, then make my way back to Seattle.

I turned the helm toward Repulse Bay and felt a sadness rising in my chest. I told myself, "That was that. Whatever you got, that's all you're gonna get."

Near the halfway mark, I ran into ice again, and reached around for my binoculars.

By the time I turned back, I hardly needed them. A young male polar bear was sauntering casually across the shifting floes. He picked me out almost immediately and stopped to watch my passage without a hint of fear. I bobbed on the lumpy waves as the wind pushed me toward him. For just a moment, as he passed in front of the setting sun, his fur glowed like an orange halo of light.

With my big telephoto lens balanced on the window ledge and my shutter finger pressed down, I sprayed frames and hoped I might just get lucky. I whispered to myself and to the heavens above, "That is one handsome bear."

I wanted to stop time, but I couldn't even stop the damn boat. The wind pushed me one way while the tide's drift pulled me another. I flung *C-Sick* into reverse and wrapped the dinghy's tow line around both propellers, stalling the engines. I'll never know what photographic magic I missed in the following few minutes. I was too busy hanging head-down over the transom, feet in the air and hands deep in ice water, struggling to untangle the propellers and get moving again to notice. Over all the cursing and the splashing of tangled lines, there just might have been the sound of ursine laughter.

By the time I emerged, breathless, freezing, and furious, the bear had swallowed any last chuckles and was headed off into the sunset.

It took three long days of motoring to run *C-Sick* back to Rankin Inlet, and getting her out of the water turned into its own dismal adventure. I'd taken John Hickes's polite but perhaps not entirely sincere offer to keep an eye on my boat as an iron-clad contract. I had hoped to avail myself of a corner of

his covered and heated Quonset hut garage, but *C-Sick* couldn't clear the doorway. John was out of town, so I relied on his friend Harry's borrowed trailer and fraying temper.

"Boats belong outdoors," Harry muttered as I unbolted the radar dome to shave a half foot off the top. "Goddamn boats belong fucking outdoors," he swore more emphatically when I started letting some air out of his tires.

Given the quantity of broken glass and number of vandalized vehicles I'd seen all across town, I was reluctant to leave *C-Sick* to the tender mercies of Rankin's under-supervised youth. But it was Harry's trailer, so we moved on to Plan B: John and Page's sled dog lot. There, Harry hit the gas on his pickup truck and unceremoniously dumped *C-Sick* onto a carpet of old tires I'd hurriedly salvaged from the dump. My beloved boat sat listing and forlorn. It felt like a crummy end to the summer's adventures.

I was up early the next morning, scurrying to clean out *C-Sick* and prepare her for the long winter ahead. By the time I finished, soaked in sweat and feverish from anxiety, she was wrapped stem to stern in enormous tarps and looked like a giant blue burrito trussed up in dominatrix knots. There wasn't much time left for an emotional send-off. I felt like a cad as I patted her on the stern, thanked her the fun times, then headed off to catch my plane.

Those final three or four days after I drove *C-Sick* onto the rocks and escaped the crushing ice had been almost magical, dreamlike. The sun shone brighter, the colors were more vivid, the animals more fearsome and graceful and beautiful. It had been riveting. I had made more good photographs in those few days than I had in the previous six weeks. Still, after all the time and money and risk, I wanted more. More time. More bears. More to show for all this trouble.

It was killing me to have worked so hard for so long, only to leave just when the going had finally gotten good.

There was something even more dispiriting about retracing my arduous, months-long northbound journey in less than an hour. I watched the miles rewind out an airplane window. Marble Island's haunted and protected harbor. Whale Cove with its headless and fly-covered polar bear carcass. Soon we were so high I could see only sea and sunlight and boggy tundra curving toward the distant horizon.

Even as the plane winged south toward Churchill and I began to feel gravity's pull toward home, I was already thinking about next year. How to get back, where to go, how long to stay. Oh, the things I would see.

DRAGONS IN THE SNOW

3

THE DRAGON AWAKES: "DEEP AND WIDE"

In the dying light of day, with snow still punishing the Uinta peaks, Jeremy Jones is falling. From the higher margins of the slope, his companions see him and they cannot believe what is happening. Even if they thought to scream, Jones could not hear them. Wind, and the sound of tons of snow and ice ripping through everything in its path, deafens him. As the convex roll of the mountain comes up at him, Jones disappears from the snowboarders' view. On high, a strange silence settles over the ridgeline. It's like the remaining riders are stranded, helpless, lost at sea while one of their own has vanished in a huge wave.

Below them, Jones fights for his life. He's struggling to stay on his feet, to retain some steerage of his snowboard. He fights to force his body to the right side of the slope, a blur of trees where he might escape the avalanche dragging him down the featureless face of the mountain. The slide is like a net he's ensnared in. It swarms all over his body. And then his feet run out from under him. The snowboard is like a plow blade caught downslope in a landslide. It anchors his legs deep within the violent whirlpool.

For a second, Jones feels himself angle a fraction to the right, and he thinks he might have a shot at "reachable freedom." Then a little wave of snow bucks him up from behind and flings him forward. His bid for the trees fades with the wake of the slide. He resorts to frantically slashing his arms at the turbulence around him, swimming to stay as much above the snow as he can, fighting for breath. Miraculously, he sees a small tree ahead. The slide hurtles him right at it. Jones raises his arms instinctively, hands splayed as if they are the only thing between him and certain death.

He catches a branch jutting downhill, his palms grasping just past the trunk. He feels his hands being ripped the length of the branch, breaking away needles and young shoots of pine. Then he feels only air between his fingers. The avalanche has sucked him back in, as if the tree was only an illusion of rescue.

"Death's not popping to mind yet," Jones recalls remembering in that moment: "You're not going to die on your kids today." His grasp of the branch has slowed his fall a little. He's plummeting from the rear third of the avalanche, still sliding but clinging to a sudden hope that the nose of the slide will crash into an obstacle and the rear will accordion into it, slow itself, and then settle with his body floating on top.

Just as Jones finishes the thought, he feels a sick tingle in his stomach. The second convex roller he slid over in his earlier run has now come up. The rear of the avalanche is like a wave peaking over the roller's sandbar. He feels the sudden punch of the roller's steeper pitch. Then he's rag-dolled up into the torrent of snow that breaks in a wave above his head. The slide slams his body against the rock-hard trunk of a tree. "As quick as I hit the tree and sat down, the slide stopped," he says. In the confusion of the moment and shock of impact with the tree, Jones passes out for a second or two. But then he's suddenly alert. He doesn't even sense pain from where his snowboard and legs have been smashed by the tree. "Adrenaline was so high at that moment."

Jones senses people bounding down the slope, coming to rescue him. Some seem to be below him. And then he hears them shout. "We're missing Mike!"

Somehow, Mike Nelson had dropped into a run off to Jones's side. Riding a snowboard without bindings, a kind of mountain surfboard sometimes called a "no-board" that is leashed to the rider, Nelson disappeared in the slide. Yells ensue for people to switch their avalanche beacons to "search" mode. Jones, dazed by his wild caroming down the mountain and the tree's battering of his lower body, confusedly starts to feel for his beacon. Although he can barely move, he knows that if his beacon remains on "send" it will confuse the searchers looking for Nelson. Finding the beacon still lashed to his chest, he switches it to "search."

Then rescuers are at his side. He has managed to unlock his right foot from his snowboard binding, but its "not there, it's just flopping." He shouts: "Find Mike!"

Already, five minutes or more have passed since the avalanche crested on the roller and stopped. While no one pauses to say it, the snowboarders have

had enough exposure to avalanche training to know about the ten-minute window for finding a buried rider. Much past that and they will be searching for a dead body.

DOWN THE SLOPE, SETH HUOT scans the debris field for any hint of color. In the dropping light and snowy sky, it's hard to discern anything other than a massive confusion of snow. It's like the avalanche's anger has dissipated here, and the field before Huot is hushed and gray as twilight hovering above a graveyard.

Huot covers ground fast. His beacon cradled in his hand, he tries to lock in a signal. Unbeknownst to him, the device is of no use. Earlier in the day, Nelson saw his beacon's "low battery" light click on and he switched it off. As Huot boot-packs his way through the deep snow and glances up from the beacon, he spots something. Off to the right, in the thick of the slide's main rubble, is a thin edge of Nelson's board, barely a fingertip of fiberglass poking through the snow.

Rushing over, Huot discovers a small stretch of the leash that was tied to Nelson's leg. He grabs it and begins to pull. There's weight at the other end, and Huot tugs harder until he reveals a portion of Nelson's leg. He realizes Nelson's head is pointing downhill. Swiftly, he clears snow where he judges Nelson's mouth is covered. Six inches under, he finds the man, his face shaded blue. Nelson has been submerged for about twelve minutes. Huot quickly frees him and Nelson coughs his way to finding measured breath again.

If the boarders are given a moment of comfort that everyone is alive, the enormity and urgency of the situation before them starts to weigh as sure as the cold and coming dark creep around them. Whatever margin for error they might have possessed, they know it has been used up in the avalanche accident itself. A realization dawns that might have seemed trivial that morning: they are well beyond any cell phone service.

Jones's circle of riders inventory the tools and tasks at hand. In the snowcat they have a machine that's the equivalent of a life raft, but they know it is slow, cold, and carries a checkered operational history. The only other option is to attempt to hike out. But the prospect of hiking for hours in deep snow and diving night temperatures feels like a suicide mission. Moreover, they know Jones is physically and mentally strong, but they don't know how extensive his injuries are. He could lapse into shock, or worse.

Brock Harris, one of Jones's core group, goes to work on Jones's legs. His right one is certainly snapped above the ankle, his left at least seriously

fractured. When he hit the tree, the left side of his body bore the initial impact, and he may have cracked ribs or other internal injuries. Using avalanche snow probe poles, Harris constructs splints for Jones's right leg. He lifts Jones from the snow and the two men try to walk toward the trail where the snowcat sits. After fifteen feet, Jones can't bear any more weight on his left leg.

Taking some cordage, Harris aligns Jones's snowboard boots, then wraps rope tightly around them so he isn't forcing weight onto a single leg. Harris slides Jones onto the deck of Nelson's no-board, and with the leash he slowly lowers Jones down the angle of the snow slope, six feet or so at a time. Tedious as the rescue is, Harris finally conveys Jones to the snowcat, where he is helped inside.

"I knew we had a long road ahead of us," Jones says. "I was wet, I was cold. My core was warm though. And I trusted my friends." Since the morning's initial gathering of the group, Jones has been reassured by the presence of his close friends. Now, he and Nelson come together in the cat, not just as old friends but as fellow survivors. The moment is awkward for the other riders, a little surreal for both men.

"I'm stoked you're alive, man," Jones tells Nelson. Nelson, stunned from having been buried alive and by the reality of their situation, manages similar sentiments. He lapses into a contemplative state as Jones, despite his injuries, tries to remain engaged with the group. As if he's still the leader, as if by displaying confidence he can reassure the younger riders that things aren't as bad as they may seem.

But it's hard to reconcile Jones's battered image with any sense of relief. There's additional preparation for the long transit to the trailhead. To make sure the cat's lumbering motion on the trail doesn't shake Jones's broken legs excessively, duct tape is tightly wrapped around his boots, immobilizing them as a makeshift cast. Pulling some extra base-layer clothing from his pack, Jones pulls on a dry shirt and one of the drivers loans him a coat. The engine noise jackhammers the cold cabin, the machine lurches forward, and in the dark they begin a slow trek back.

In his head, Jones begins another risk talk. "There's high risk and there's unknown risk," he says. "We got to the cat and the unknown risk starts to fade. But we're always at high risk." The day's unseen risk—the surprise breaking of the avalanche on a face they had already boarded across—has passed. But Jones knows there are a hundred things that can go wrong in the three hours he estimates it will take the cat to make the trailhead.

Looking around the cabin interior, he sees expressionless faces, people who have retreated into their own worlds of reliving the accident, guiltily wondering if they did anything wrong, if they missed some sign of the incipient slide. A trip that started out that morning on a note of excitement, and a feeling of privilege, has instead turned into a morbid journey back to a world that will have more questions than most riders want to answer. With the monotonous drone of the cat engine in their ears, the riders slip deeper into themselves.

AFTER NEARLY TWO HOURS OF progress, they meet their first obstacle. Just a few hundred feet from the clearing where they had stopped for morning beacon practice, the engine dies. The breakdown leads Jones to do some quick mental math. He figures it will add at least two to three more hours of being stranded in the backcountry. Whether the drivers get the cat going again, or a small party is forced to hike out and alert search and rescue, either way he is looking at a longer, colder night, the pain from his broken bones growing more pointed by the hour.

After some discussion, it's decided that three riders will hike the remaining two miles to the trailhead, drive a car into Oakley, and phone Summit County Search and Rescue. The snowboarders find at least two feet of fresh snow has fallen on the trail that day, on top of the already more than four feet from the weekend. With headlamps glaring, they punch through the drifts, disappearing in the dark like bare survivors who may never be seen again.

It's about 8:00 p.m., and Jones lets his thoughts run to his family and the friends who saved his life. He thinks back to all the years he and his core rider group practiced in the Brighton backcountry, their creation of the small survival kits that Harris drew from earlier when binding Jones's legs. "It was a phenomenal display of knowledge," he says, "once the shit hit the fan." For the first time of what will be weeks of a daily, mental replaying of the accident, Jones sifts through the day, through the precautions they took on the mountain, and whether there were signals from the surroundings, increments of wariness he might have overlooked or disregarded. When he plays the film in his mind, like those films he and his friends made back in the day, he sees himself on the first run down the mountain with no evidence of avalanche threat. Maybe, he thinks, after that run complacency took hold, that and the desire to get in one last run for himself and the group.

"I sort of let that slip more than I should have," he says. But even that sharpening of his focus on a single judgment point doesn't persuade Jones he would necessarily spot the cocked trigger of unknown risk next time. "In hindsight and regrets, there are none," he says.

As the hours pass, the three riders have made their way into Oakley and, with cell service restored, have contacted Summit County Search and Rescue. As the rescue team plans a mission into the backcountry on snowmobiles, an alert goes out to other Salt Lake–based responders. In the air above the city's Primary Children's Hospital, a LifeFlight medical emergency helicopter has just taken off and they pick up on the rescue notification. Not knowing the full extent of Jones's injuries, the chopper crew concludes the situation sounds dire at best, particularly given that the avalanche victim is marooned at night in the freezing backcountry. They know it will take time for Summit County rescuers to mobilize and travel on snowmobiles to the site.

The LifeFlight crew decides to fly in over the Uintas and see what the situation looks like from the air. An Agusta Grand 109, the chopper is designed for high-altitude flight, originally built for rescues in the Swiss Alps. It bears a collision avoidance system for navigating above mountains, a bundle of "Highway in the Sky" piloting instrumentation that guides pilots in low or zero visibility.

Even inside the snowcat, Jones and his companions hear the distinct, twin turbine sound of the heli coming in over the Uinta Range. When it grows closer, they realize it must be part of the rescue operation; the heli eventually hovers above the clearing and disabled cat. From its underbelly, a powerful searchlight pierces the falling snow and illuminates the ground below like the accident scene it is. Then the heli drifts down toward the clearing. Within minutes, the heli crew is inside the snowcat with a backboard. Two men and a woman question Jones about his condition and he offers a laconic "I'm good." The woman inserts an IV into his arm; she tells Jones she will give him an injection to kill pain and knock him out during the flight to the hospital.

Once airborne, the LifeFlight heli crew find the weather deteriorating. The snowstorm's full rage has come back in as if to wield its final vengeance. All ground reference has been lost and the crew is put into a twenty-minute holding pattern. Soon, one of the crew spots the bare, distant headlights of a vehicle weaving its way through nearby Provo Canyon. They track the vehicle's progress, knowing it will eventually lead them near Timpanogos Regional Hospital in Orem.

Inside his head, drowsy from medicine, Jones continues his risk talks. He's having worries about the helicopter navigating in the storm, about the holding pattern, and the search for a hospital with a clear landing site. He can't help himself. It's who he is.

When Jones would come home from all his days of backcountry training and survival rehearsals near Brighton, he would tell his wife about them. "'You're crazy,'" she'd say. "One day it will pay off," he'd respond. Injured as he is now, Jones believes it did pay off. "If you can outlive one, you're doing something right."

If you're not prepared to fucking survive—you won't.

IN SURGERY THE NEXT EVENING, Jones's broken legs are reset. He leaves the hospital in a wheelchair and begins the road back to the physical shape he'll need to go into the backcountry. There's no doubt in his mind he will get there. But maybe he's slightly more cautious about the world than before the avalanche. Nearly two months after his surgery, he's on crutches and decides he and his family need a break from the avalanche's aftermath. It's like they all have been living within the echoes of its thunder crack, triggering a massive wave of savage snow. So they drive down to southern Utah, to Saint George where there's sun and congenial bike paths for Sher, Adi. and Cru.

At the start of a recommended bike path, Jones finds his mind drifting back to the Uintas trailhead, to the beginning of that hallucinatory day in the backcountry. He feels a faint, inchoate fear rise inside him. Injured as he is, he can't ride the four-mile trail with his family. And he's forced to admit that if something happened—an accident—the best he could do is helplessly hobble on his crutches two miles in.

"I had this thing happen that makes me look at things differently," Jones says. Still, he doesn't shy from the prospect of returning to the out-of-bounds and even to the mountain slope where the avalanche swept him away. When Mike Nelson had been rescued and helped to the snowcat to regain his wits, Nelson realized that a GoPro camera he'd had strapped to his body had been ripped away in the slide and lost. Jones plans to go back out there when the snow melts, in the late spring or early summer, to see if he can find the camera and the video footage it may hold. It would be something to see the point-of-view footage of the avalanche that caught him and Nelson.

Jones thinks of the human factor of the accident. Though he bore the worst of the injuries, he will mend. Nelson skirted death but came back, like Jones, with insights about the out-of-bounds—and life. Seven other riders survived. "This for nine peoples' lives?" he questions, balancing on crutches and looking down at his legs.

"A pretty fair trade. A pretty fair trade."

4

CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATORS OF THE OUT-OF-BOUNDS

After filing his avalanche advisory early that morning, and putting in his usual two hours at the gym, Craig Gordon spends much of his Wednesday tapping into an extensive network of sources for reports from the backcountry. A big part of his forecasting job is to collect, on any given day, episodic, real-time missives from skiers, snowboarders, and snowmobilers who are traveling in the out-of-bounds or who have just returned from a day there. Emails, texts, and digital photos come his way each day from a wide array of contacts he's made over the years. While most of the data arrives digitally, as does information from all his electronic weather sensors in the mountains, Gordon knows he would have a blind spot if he didn't also get firsthand reports and newsflashes from skiers. Out there, they come upon fractures in the snow, witness slabs careening down like huge snow toboggans, and see other signs of the avalanche dragon waking.

Despite the extreme warning he issued that morning, Gordon's day is almost eerily uneventful. By early evening he's back home in Cottonwood Heights. Around 7:00 p.m. he gets a phone call from a member of his reporting network. The caller has a question specific to the Uinta range.

"Hey, do you know if the powder cats are down and clear?" the caller asks. "A friend of mine's wife called me and said her husband and some guys went cat skiing and should have been home by five." He mentions the name "Jeremy Jones" and at first Gordon mistakenly thinks it's another professional, a big mountain snowboarder from Wyoming who shares the same name. This other Jeremy Jones has an eponymous snowboard company in Truckee, California, and makes ski and snowboard films with his brothers as the owners of Teton Gravity Research. The caller dispels Gordon's confusion.

Gordon thinks the caller may mean Park City Powder Cats, a guided backcountry concern of four snowcats that operate in the Uintas. Gordon knows they roam a vast but private range called Thousand Peaks Ranch, and they typically finish their skiing day by 4:00 or 4:30. He remembers a conversation he had some months earlier with people operating a single cat in the Uintas.

Gordon's mind races, as if he's seeing an aerial view of specific Uinta peaks. Before becoming a forecaster with the Utah Avalanche Center, he worked as a heli-ski guide and pioneered some helicopter-accessed terrain in the Uintas. Months of scouting peaks where a helicopter could land have embossed in his mind's eye a mental, topographic map of the Uintas.

First Gordon thinks of an area called Chalk Creek drainage and a zone he calls Wallyworld, a lower-elevation canyon surrounded by avalanche funnels which he refers to as "massive avi paths." He imagines a scenario there where a snowcat has strayed into a terrain trap, a gully under high peaks, where a deluge of descending snow can bury a snowcat and all its passengers. His mind goes to another prominent destination for summer hikers and winter recreationists—the Smith-Morehouse reservoir. Summoning an image of it, he fixes on a "big amphitheater of mountain peaks that drain into the reservoir."

Given his advisory that day, either scenario leaves Gordon highly alarmed. Worse, the people who told him about the single cat operation also allowed that the machine has had breakdowns; the owners had once been forced to abandon it in the middle of the night and return later on snowmobiles to repair it. When Gordon hangs up the phone, he's back on the time clock. "I don't exactly know where these people are," he says, "but I have become part of the telephone and text string. And I am accountable." Aside from his professional obligations, he's "a little pissed." Of the still raging snowstorm, he says, "I know what's going on out there. You're always waiting for the shoe to drop. . . . An accident, a death. I made the effort to let everyone know how sketchy it is."

Sorting through his list of contacts, Gordon decides to phone Tyler St. Jeor, a Canyons ski resort patroller who also works with Wasatch County Search and Rescue. Gordon has seen more deadly avalanche accidents than he wants to recall, but he's also seen plenty of search parties called up and sent into the mountains at night when someone was perfectly safe and just a little late getting home. He's looking for St. Jeor to hear him out and then weigh in on possible next steps. "I didn't necessarily want to get the cavalry out yet."

St. Jeor knows the reputation of the Uintas, and he is as plugged into the weather of the last four or five days as Gordon. "If I was them I'd get a helicopter in the air," Gordon hears St. Jeor say.

Now it's past 8:00 p.m. and Gordon sorts through what little he knows and what he doesn't know. No one has mentioned a phone call from the snowboarders, which tells him they are likely still deep in the backcountry without cell service. That alone, knowing of the breakdown-prone snowcat, tells him "something worse has happened."

His phone rings again. It's Trent Meisenheimer, a colleague of Gordon's at the avalanche center. As word has gone out over the far-ranging network of patrollers, forecasters, and rescue people, Meisenheimer has talked with Sher Jones about her husband. She's just received word of the accident, the helicopter rescue, and Jones's injuries. Meisenheimer and Gordon decide they'll take snowmobiles out the following morning to investigate the avalanche. Just as detectives would scour a murder scene on a city street, they are bound to assess the aftermath of the slide and try to understand its origin. Knowing what caused it won't help Jones's legs heal faster, but there may be clues that will help in their forecasting in coming days and save other backcountry boarders from a far worse fate.

WAKING EARLY TO POST HIS Thursday, January 12, advisory, Gordon finds his cell phone's "texting telegraph" lit up with details of the avalanche, the wayward snowcat, and Jones and Nelson's rescue. Gordon will send out a report nearly identical to the previous day's, referencing the accident: "What we do know is two snowboarders triggered a large slide, were buried, recovered, and sustained very serious injuries, but at the end of the day survived."

Mentally he gears up for the day ahead. He'll have to be available for some early morning media before heading to the Uintas. As part of his job, Gordon is the main media contact for the avalanche center and does regular on-air reports in the winter months. Backcountry accidents mean he's on call to the Salt Lake TV stations as well as the area's newspapers. So many Utah residents ski, snowboard, and snowmobile that the report of an avalanche accident is similar to news that a kidnapper is roaming northern Utah. An avalanche accident in the Uintas means there could just as easily be one brewing in Little Cottonwood Canyon where ten-foot-deep avalanches often close the roads, or in the Ogden Valley, or just above Main Street Park City. It's cause for heightened

caution and, as local news goes, it's invariably the story of the day, something discussed in grocery store aisles, office hallways, hair salons, and brewpubs.

"Investigating an avalanche accident is like CSI," Gordon says, referring to the TV show about crime scene investigators. If the gravity of the situation may seem slightly less, the unfolding narrative of the accident demands that Gordon and his fellow forecasters use many tools that are remarkably similar to those of CSI detectives.

By the time Gordon and Meisenheimer reach the Smith-Morehouse trailhead, they are equipped like men going into battle. They have trailered a snowmobile behind their vehicle and quickly unload it to speed their journey out to the avalanche debris field. It's a bit under five miles, and two miles in they come upon the stricken snowcat. After Jones's evacuation, the snowboarders and cat drivers were rescued in the night by a Summit County Search and Rescue party on snowmobiles.

Knowing that some of the snowboarders almost certainly read his warning the previous day, Gordon admits to mixed emotions, feelings "of compassion and being pissed off." Arriving at the sight of the slide, he is bowled over by the sheer volume of the stagnant jumble of snow and ice. He and Meisenheimer record the avalanche's basic dimensions. It's three hundred feet wide across the slope, a football field. Above—where Jeremy Jones rode the slide in its rear third, down to where it buried Mike Nelson, and past that to where debris spilled onto the snowcat trail—it's eight hundred feet of devastation. The depth of the avalanche is four feet.

For Gordon and Meisenheimer it's not hard to imagine the weight and momentum of the slide—three football fields end to end, loaded with white cement up past an average person's waist, unleashed down a nearly forty-degree mountain face, inclined halfway to almost pure vertical. It's akin to the havoc resulting from a runaway locomotive dragging fifty to a hundred railcars behind it.

Gordon thinks of his advisory from the previous morning. "Deep and wide," he'd described the likely avalanches. His prediction sits before him, a manifestation in jagged snow. Using skis with climbing skins, he and Meisenheimer navigate around the snow to perform more tests. They've brought a video camera and a drone, which they launch to capture aerial footage of the slide zone and impart the huge, geographic scope of the accident. They carefully dig a snow pit going three feet across and nearly five feet deep, just below the suspect

snow's weak layer. Like CSI detectives, they find the hidden clue to the slide's break.

At just about the middle of the snowpack—four feet, the thickness of the avalanche—is a thin layer of what Gordon calls "faceted snow." It's sugary, rotting snow in which the moisture isn't acting as an adhesive, failing to bind the flakes together. Loaded with all the weight from the past four days' storms, the snowpack at that spot has cracked, releasing the layers above to answer the pull of gravity and human weight suddenly borne by it.

Gordon assembles a chart of the amount of water that's been added to the snowpack in the past four days—seven inches. He deems this measurement "a truly remarkable amount of water weight." It's difficult to precisely gauge the weight of the avalanche. But at eight hundred feet long by three hundred feet wide and four feet deep, the slide propelled about 960,000 cubic feet of frozen rain down the mountain. A cubic foot of water weighs just over sixty-two pounds. Fully loaded with water, the slide field would weigh about sixty million pounds. But snow is part water, part air. So if one cuts the water weight in half, the debris still weighs about thirty million pounds; cut it to one-third and the avalanche tops out at twenty million pounds. Enough force, in other words, to flatten anything in its cross hairs.

"No matter how strong the existing snowpack was," Gordon concludes, "even the slightest weakness will reveal its cards under this kind of load." He thinks of Jones and Nelson, caught in the horrendous turbulence, rocketing down the mountain face. "This thing is fucking smoking, packing heat, bursting trees. They are like toothpicks in a hurricane. You are just in awe of the power of nature."

Standing, Gordon cocks his head upslope as if he can hear a replay of the avalanche. There's the thunder crack of the break, and then its roar, nearly deafening as it gorges itself on more and more debris, splintering trees, raking loose rocks into white jaws. He imagines when the slide suddenly comes to a stop. The silence has its own wavelength of sound. It's the barely brushed drummer's cymbal, a building suspense, against which all other sounds are punctuated. The frenetic cries of the unhurt snowboarders, sprinting down, yelling about beacons and probe poles.

Then there's Jones and Nelson. He imagines Jones being first stunned and then elated that he's alive. He pictures Nelson under the snow. A sight Gordon has conjured hundreds of times in avalanche awareness courses as he describes

a burial and the slow onset of death. He sees the man's face, an ice mask forming before his mouth and nose as Nelson's labored breaths discharge more and more carbon dioxide into the small sphere above his head. The man tries to move, but it's like his arms and legs are lashed down. A weight has settled onto his chest and his lungs fight to find room to fully expand within his ribcage. The cold of the ice mask begins to turn the man's cheeks and forehead the blue of constricting veins.

Gordon forces himself back into the world at his feet. With more observations recorded and photos snapped, the two investigators prepare to load their gear on the snowmobile and head back to the trailhead, knowing they'll pass the broken-down snowcat, a sad reminder of all that went wrong in the Uinta backcountry. Scooting through the trees on the same path the cat had traveled, Gordon can't help but start assembling all the data in his head, urging himself toward a conclusion about the accident.

"Like any avalanche accident, it was a series of events," he says. "Like an aeronautical accident, it's a series of things and events that lead you so deep down that road you can't turnaround." His advisory had said anyone caught the previous day in an Uinta avalanche would find it "likely unsurvivable."

But there's one consoling detail: today Craig Gordon knows that Jeremy Jones and Mike Nelson are *alive*.

EDGE OF THE MAP

CHAPTER 5

BROAD PEAK

TUCKED INTO THE BORDER BETWEEN Pakistan and China, 26,401-foot Broad Peak ranks high on the list of 8,000-meter peaks for those in the game of summiting all fourteen. Though steep in sections, the mountain lacks any sheer vertical walls, and there's little technical climbing required. Broad Peak's wide summit stretches a mile long, offering stunning views of nearby K2 and both Gasherbrum I and II.

Accessing Broad Peak requires a trek of a week or more from Askole, the last village in Pakistan connecting climbers to the rest of the world. The hike to base camp funnels expeditions directly along the top of the Baltoro Glacier, a thirty-five-mile-long, three-mile-wide expanse of breathtaking beauty. Dividing the Indian subcontinent from Tibet, this part of the Karakoram Range packs in a few 8,000-meter peaks along with many just below that height, like younger siblings but nearly as formidable. An intoxicating stretch of rock and ice reaches a pinnacle at the convergence of the Baltoro with the Godwin-Austen Glacier. Known as Concordia, the intersection gives climbers their first views of K2 and Broad Peak. The sight has been known to stun and shock mountaineers in such a way that some climbers immediately wither, surrendering any hope of making it to the top.

IN JULY 1995, KEITH AND Chris took leave from their Atlanta jobs to climb Broad Peak. It would be the first attempt at this altitude for both of them. After years of partnering with Keith, Chris was going to get the

chance to test her fortitude with others, including Scott Fischer. Scott had gathered a team of friends suited to the challenges of the mountain. He'd also hired Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa, a high-altitude guide, who had become a trusted team member after summiting Everest with Scott. This climbing season bridged the gap between Scott's 1994 clean-up expedition to Everest and the Everest expedition he was planning with clients for the next year.

When they arrived, Broad Peak Base Camp bustled with activity. Its proximity to K2 meant that climbers attempting that lofty peak need only take an easy hike of an hour to visit with those on Broad Peak. The Mountain Madness camp welcomed climbers both established and unknown. Among the more famous was Peter Hillary, the son of legendary alpinist Sir Edmund Hillary. He'd be attempting K2 with British mountaineer Alison Hargreaves, who just months earlier had reached the summit of Mount Everest without the assistance of Sherpas, fixed ropes, or bottled oxygen.

Unlike Chris, Alison had climbed for decades before arriving at K2 in 1995. But like Chris, she'd risen without much initial notice in the sport of mountain climbing. In a field packed with men, the women in Europe who'd gained notoriety had often been heralded more because of their gender than their accomplishments. This move ran counter to Alison's core, just as it did with Chris, who thought of herself as a climber and not as a "female climber." Following her recent success on Everest, Alison knew that her passion for climbing raised eyebrows. The reason: she was the mother of two young children. The press and critics within mountaineering communities created a narrative that accused her of "acting like a man" and attempting to "have it all." As a leading professor of sport sociology at Brunel University in London put it: Alison's "heroism was conditional upon her safe return to her children. No such demand is placed upon men: their deaths are the purest symbols of heroism."

Nevertheless, she carried forth with a life dedicated to both climbing and her children. Writing in her journal at K2 Base Camp, Alison said, "It eats away at me—wanting the children and wanting K2. I feel like I'm being pulled in two." Being a father to young children and a mountaineer

himself, Scott respected Alison in a way others didn't. At Broad Peak Base Camp, he and Alison chatted about kids and Everest. High-end coffee and booze flowed while satellite phones stayed busy as the K2 alpinists checked in with the outside world.

Chris and Keith watched at a distance, setting up their tent and planning to move higher onto the mountain. They'd come to Broad Peak at the same time as Scott's team but planned to climb independently. Nonetheless, they couldn't help noticing the staging going on all around. The Mountain Madness camp buzzed with life, and the expedition members and high-altitude support team looked comfortable with their surroundings and their leader. Scott's energy radiated to those around him. Though they'd heard of his accomplishments, the Boskoffs felt secure in their own. They busied themselves preparing gear while absorbing the fact that they'd finally made it to the foot of an 8,000-meter peak. Camp itself was a mess of tents, each one serving a purpose for cooking, sleeping, or getting medical attention. Chris couldn't get enough of taking in the scene and the divergent personalities of the climbers and support staff.

Scott seemed the antithesis of Chris but also a potential match. His charisma allowed him to easily navigate a multitude of personalities, while Chris guarded her privacy. She and Keith kept to themselves, focusing on their goal of summiting. In a sport that required patience and calculation, Chris worked to find the balance. Her determination was an asset but also a danger as she longed for a summit. Her hunger for the top meant she was prepared to persevere, but she was still apt to overlook small details that more seasoned climbers noticed. Meanwhile, Scott felt a symbiotic relationship with the mountains and was content to wait as long as it took for the perfect weather window to move higher.

During a day of rest, Scott invited Chris and Keith over to his camp nearby. "You're pretty new at this, I hear?" he asked the couple as they pulled up camp chairs.

"Compared to you? Big time," said Keith, with a laugh. His broad smile put Scott at ease. Both men were from the East Coast, animated as they spoke.

"I can tell you, the big peaks—there's nothing like it," Scott said. "I did Everest last year and am hoping to go back again next year."

"You think you'll stick with it?" Chris asked as she reached for the mug of coffee Scott offered her.

He'd been on expeditions with women before, but Chris's aura was more purposeful. It was less about the trappings and more about the experience. "I don't know," he said. "It's what I do and I do it well. I've got a company to run and it helps to get publicity for these big peaks, but there are plenty of other things I'd like to get done. I've got a couple of kids at home. They'd like to see more of their dad, and I'd love to be around for them more than I have been."

"You know, Chris is going places," Keith said. He looked at his wife, amazed at his good fortune. "We've got solid business experience between us. Wonder if we could help out somehow?"

"Oh yeah?" Scott waved to his guides who were organizing gear just beyond the tents, then focused on Chris. "You've not done any of the big peaks, but you're a decent athlete and you feel okay up here at fifteen thousand feet?"

Chris shrugged. "Truth be told," she said, "I suck at sea level. But I've got the right genes. I feel good, the altitude doesn't bother me, and I'm fast."

"You've got this," Scott said, grinning. "Stick with us for the climb and then let's talk about ways I can get you involved in Mountain Madness. I think I'd be decent at running a business if there weren't other things I'd rather be doing."

Raising her eyebrows, Chris glanced at Keith as he leaned back in his chair, smiling. "Sounds good," she said. "We're gonna make a push for the summit tomorrow and see what happens."

"Tomorrow?" Scott cautioned, "You see those weather reports calling for wind and snow up top? Avalanche danger is real up there. Just chill down here for a bit. You've got oxygen for the final summit bid, yes?" He'd stopped paying attention to the guides, now compelled to understand the logic in Chris and Keith's pushing for the top in the face of a possible storm.

"Yes to the weather reports and no to the Os," Keith said.

"Suit yourself," Scott said, "but take it easy up there. You don't want your first to be your last."

The Boskoffs thanked Scott for the coffee and returned to their tent to prepare for the next day. Their decision concerned Scott, but their resolve—especially hers—reminded Scott of himself.

WATCHING THEM LEAVE BASE CAMP the next day, Scott turned to another climber on his team.

"I don't know, man," he said. "The mountain doesn't feel ready. The slopes are loaded—primed for avalanches. I'm not convinced they should be out there."

"She's strong, Scott," observed the other climber. "Look at Alison. She just summited Everest less than three freaking months ago. No Sherpas. No oxygen."

But Scott wasn't worried about Chris. "It's him," he said grimly about Keith. "He loves that woman. I can tell. He'll do anything for her, including going beyond where he's capable of going." Scott walked to the expedition's high-powered telescope. Wrestling with it, he fixed the tripod securely between rocks and trained it on the steep cliff leading out of camp.

LEAVING BASE CAMP, CLIMBERS HAD options as to where they'd lay their heads each night. A series of camps, each consisting of no more than a few tents, led up the mountain. At roughly 6,000 meters sat Camp 1. A second camp was set up at 6,500 meters. Camp 3 was located at 7,100 meters. A fourth camp just above that, referred to as High Camp, was the last stop before the summit. In preparation for reaching the top of any high peak, climbers spend weeks on rotations going up and down the mountain between the various camps. Each rotation brings them to a higher camp until the final push to the top, known as the summit bid. This lengthy process helps the body gradually acclimatize. By spending days pushing their bodies to higher altitudes, then returning to a lower altitude to rest for several days, mountaineers adjust properly and more safely than a straight shot up the mountain which would result in almost certain death.

Keith and Chris had done their rotations and were prepared for their summit bid. They targeted Camp 2 for the first night. What looked like decent weather when they'd started the climb from base camp became gloomy. Night painted the mountain and with it, winds. As they huddled in their sleeping bags, the sounds of the storm grew. By morning, the fate of the couple for the next four days was solidified. Locked in, Chris and Keith were battered in their tent by 100-mile-an-hour winds. Combined with snow, the blizzard proved survivable yet kept the pair captive inside day after day.

Finally able to descend on the fifth day, Chris and Keith recounted the experience to Alison and Scott, who couldn't believe they'd survived.

"She only hit me once!" Keith joked.

"I couldn't help it!" Chris said. "Holy crap, I wasn't sure we were going to make it. The tent flattened on our faces. We had to hold it up with our ski poles. I was sure the tent would rip or the poles would bust."

A few days later they made a second attempt, much to the shock of the others who watched the couple leave and trudge through waist-deep snow. This time, as they got closer to the summit, Keith's eyes became blurry and he got a painful headache. They turned back and returned to base camp. Scott's group had not yet tried for the top, but when they did, Chris intended to be ready.

Despite the deep blackness of the night sky, Keith's sunglasses covered his eyes as he lay in the tent a couple of days later. He'd been diagnosed with a high-altitude retinal hemorrhage. The lack of oxygen had caused dilation of blood vessels in his retinas, rendering him temporarily unable to see clearly.

Keith had accompanied Chris back up to Camp 2, but his days trying to summit Broad Peak on this expedition were over. At the opposite end of their tent, Chris strapped rope onto the outside of her pack. The steaming cup of sweet tea she was drinking sat next to her. She made sure to take in each sip, eager for the liquid before she started the ascent. Though she knew Scott's team was capable of leading her to the top, leaving Keith felt foreign. They'd always climbed together. Chris knew he was disappointed, but she had trouble reining in her enthusiasm for

a third chance to the top. Keith reached out a gloved hand, pulling her to him and held tight, the gap in their experiences about to widen.

CHRIS CAUGHT UP WITH THE departing climbers, stepping in behind the small group from Scott's expedition. A stream of headlamps lit the way as the group pushed for the summit well before dawn. At a pitch of fifty degrees, the sharp angle of the mountain surprised her, even on this third attempt. It was the equivalent of climbing a double black diamond ski run. The team was making good time, their bodies rested, while Chris's legs felt heavy from the two previous attempts. With Scott in the lead, they made it to Camp 3 within a few hours, assessed, and moved on. Chris was thirty minutes behind, each step now requiring several breaths.

Crampons digging into snow and ice, the last stretch of the ascent tested each of them. Snowpack from recent days required breaking more trail than they'd expected. As they cleared the final hundred feet, a hypoxic fog covered Chris's brain in a way new to her. Channeling Keith, she willed herself forward.

By 10:00 a.m., the climbers stood atop the wide apex of Broad Peak. Chris had summited her first 8,000-meter peak. She looked across at the swath of mountains, which included K2, where Alison Hargreaves and Peter Hillary were climbing at that exact moment. The view also included Gasherbrum I and II, favorites of Keith. Glancing down at the Baltoro Glacier and then to base camp, she hoped Keith was recovered enough to look up at her with the telescope.

"Congrats, Chris!" A member of the expedition offered his hand and she shook it.

"Hell yes, you did it!" Scott added. "How does it feel?"

"It feels awesome, and you were right—there's nothing like it."

Scott grinned at her, then checked with the members of his group. "Ready to go down? The weather's held, but it looks like it might change." The landscape of the Karakoram could be placid one moment, volatile the next. Competing air masses could strike each other at any time with no regard for who was on these mountains, nor the victories they'd achieved.

Chris had suceeded on her first 8,000-meter summit, but all she could think about was how cold she was and getting back to Keith.

"Let's do it," she said.

Descending Broad Peak, Chris's legs ached for rest. Normally fast when moving down, this time she lagged an hour behind the others. High camp had consisted of only a couple of tents, and all of those had been collected by the time she reached that point. The team had decided to retreat all the way to Camp 3. The decision was no doubt a nod to the weather. From the north, the storm Scott had seen gathering was coming to life. Winds gusting up to a hundred miles an hour from China pounded the slopes. Snow kicked up, blinding Chris's view and covering the tracks she'd been using as a guide.

Though she was relatively new to high-altitude mountaineering, Chris was an expert in engineering and specifically in analyzing data. With a keen eye for following scientific observations, she plotted the contours of the mountain, although she was barely able to see. Remembering the angles of the path the team had taken up the mountain, she knew that if things got desperate, she had a sleeping bag and could hunker down for the night.

With each movement, Chris longed to be lower. The lessons of the past few weeks played in a loop, her mind reciting each one. Patience. Deference to the weather. Listening to those with more experience but finding space to follow one's inner voice.

As daylight began to fade, her anxiety increased. The path to Camp 3 had been obliterated by wind and snowdrifts. Then a break in the clouds yielded a few seconds of sunlight. Chris scanned her surroundings, terrified to realize she was heading right off an ice cliff. Black spots marked an area far ahead, which she recognized as Camp 3. Chris stumbled forward, darkness and crippling cold engulfing her. Two hours passed until the black spots became the intoxicating sight of tents. Crawling into her tent at Camp 3, she heard the winds screaming. She had made it to safety, as had Scott's group. Broad Peak's position had sheltered it from the worst of the storm.

Nearby, the team on K2 wasn't as lucky, however. Peter Hillary had sensed the danger and retreated, leaving a band of climbers to proceed

upward to the summit earlier in the day. At higher altitudes, the unsteady air and winds had initially seemed tame. Lower, the intensity of the storm trapped climbers in their tents. The catastrophic winds raced up the slopes of K2, hitting those still on the mountain's highest points late in the day.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE SKIES were clear. The weary Mountain Madness climbers arrived at Broad Peak Base Camp, and Chris was reunited with a relieved Keith. There, surrounded by warmth, the climbers tracked the progress of their friends descending K2. By radio, the group listened as Canadian climber Jeff Lakes made his way down from Camp 3, buoyed by the encouragement of his waiting teammates. "You're almost there, Jeff. You're almost there," they called over their radios. After stumbling into his tent at Camp 2 at 1:30 a.m., Lakes died a few hours later, a victim of a combination of altitude sickness and hypothermia.

Scott's telescope was positioned for a scan of the mountainside, hoping to see signs of life. Alison and several other climbers were still unaccounted for. "I'm looking at something that looks like a slide path," he said. His sunglasses were off, giving him better vision as he looked through the scope. Lopsang inched forward, then Chris and Keith, who'd walked the short distance from their tent to join the vigil.

"It's . . . I'm looking at about a fifteen-hundred-foot slide path, and I see something at the very end of it," said Scott. "Oh god, I think it's a body." He stepped away from the telescope, giving others a turn to confirm. One by one, the group verified what they saw. A body was lying in a snowfield, most likely having been picked off the summit of K2 in high winds and tossed down the slope. Another day would pass until the body's distinctive clothing would be identified by teammates as that of Alison Hargreaves.

Chris squinted into the telescope at two figures digging in the snow at a point lower on the mountain. Her gaze stayed fixed, hoping it was only an illusion. She stepped away, horrified. The climbers were digging a grave for another teammate, further driving home the danger of this sport.

As their Broad Peak expedition closed out, Chris knew several things to be true. Her skills as a climber were exceeding Keith's, as she noted in journal entries referencing her conflicted desire to begin climbing routes she knew he was incapable of. She realized that, unlike Alison, she was limited in her ability to climb and be a parent, later telling a reporter she couldn't envision having children at that moment in time—"I don't even own a plant!" she'd said. As for her own family, Chris's parents were ever-present in her mind.

> *I dream about my mom and dad quite a bit now. The older I get and they get, the more I miss them. I realize I have the best parents in the world!*

THE FOLLOWING MORNING AS THE Broad Peak group made plans to trek out, they were met by climbers returning from K2, including Peter Hillary. Scott led them to the telescope, where they lingered, looking for any indication that other remaining teammates might have survived. Finding none, they turned to the task of alerting the world. Peter Hillary placed a sat phone call to his father, Sir Edmund. Scott reported the news of Alison's death via *Outside Online*, the newly launched web version of *Outside* magazine.

The days and months following saw a rash of criticism about Alison's "selfishness" in choosing mountains over motherhood. Chris ignored those opinions, focusing on Alison's fortitude and her own future on alpine slopes.

CHAPTER 16

OFF THE GRID

ON ANY GIVEN WEEKEND IN the majestic Cascades of Washington State, hundreds of climbers descend on trails to practice their sport. Equally bustling are the base camps at Everest, Cho Oyu, and many other mountains around the world that have been discovered, named, photographed, climbed, littered upon, cleaned up, and ultimately brought into the spotlight. With endless pockets of unknown peaks and luminous beauty, western China has long called to adventure-seekers less interested in those spotlights. In particular, a 500-kilometer area stretching from Dege County, Sichuan, in the north to Shangri-La City, Yunnan, in the south is home to the Shaluli Shan, *shan* meaning "mountains" in Mandarin. It's a landscape on the eastern Tibetan Plateau filled with peaks that have been called the "Tetons on crack" for their dazzling, craggy beauty.

One of the earliest explorers of the region was Tamotsu Nakamura, a Japanese climber who started coming there in the early 1990s. After several trips, he boldly stated in 2003: "Some convince themselves that veiled mountains in the greater ranges are an experience of the past. But [the eastern] Tibet [Plateau] has an incredibly vast and complex topography that holds countless unclimbed summits, and beckons a lifetime's search. The peaks there are stunning and magnificent, and many of them will remain enigmas for generations."

To get to the area, a typical launching spot for Westerners is the massive Chinese city of Chengdu. From there, the province of Sichuan

spills west into the mountains before hitting the city of Kangding. A natural border, the city contains a distinct mix of Han Chinese and Tibetan cultures. Over time, the Chinese government has implemented a policy of developing its western edges known as the Great Western Development Strategy. The policy incentivized Chinese to move farther west, infusing small Tibetan cities such as Kangding with Chinese growth, architecture, and infrastructure. The result is an odd mishmash of loud, Western amenities with traditional Tibetan influence such as small monasteries housing Tibetan prayer wheels of all sizes, spun by children and pilgrims alike.

Once west of Kangding, Tibetan culture is firmly rooted and the landscape opens up into sweeping, vivid green grassland panoramas, many speckled with Tibetan farmers and hundreds of grazing yaks in the summer months. Nomadic tents are planted along fields, each tent carefully constructed with yak wool. Herders spend their days tending to the animals that feed on the lush grasslands. When the weather cools in the autumn, the nomads travel to better feeding grounds for their herds.

The villages along the road west of Kangding gradually reach an altitude of ten thousand to eleven thousand feet. There the architecture is entirely Tibetan, and the region is known as Kham, one of the three traditional regions of Tibet. The buildings have simple stone or clay walls with flat roofs. In the more ornate homes, elaborate wood carvings decorate windows and doors. In nearly all cases, colorful Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags fly from the rooftops. At the center of nearly every Tibetan city is a hub of activity with trucks selling the day's harvest of vegetables, and groups of Tibetan nomads on motorcycles in town on supply runs. The time needed to "run into town" is now cut in half with motorcycles replacing horses. It's still rare in these parts for locals to encounter Westerners, and practically impossible to communicate when they do. All Tibetans in China have been forced to learn Mandarin as part of their formal education, but in the far western reaches of Sichuan, Tibetan is still the dominant language.

For certain avid Western mountaineers, such rare interactions provide incentive to travel farther, endure more discomforts, and risk

more unknowns than they would traveling a well-worn path elsewhere in the world. The Tibetan Plateau contains fascinating people, culture, and challenges. Rushing streams are adorned with wooden footbridges, each bursting with tattered prayer flags tied on year after year. It beckons with desolate rocky outcrops on the sides of roads. And in every direction of the Shaluli Shan in this part of western China, a feast of mountains explodes in every direction, all waiting to be treasured. Of all the jewels in the Shaluli Shan, several call to climbers for their particular challenge and splendor, and Genyen Peak, rising to 20,354 feet, leads this list.

WHILE CHRIS FASTIDIOUSLY RECORDED NOTES and thoughts as they traveled, Charlie stayed true to character with only brief email messages to friends. Months later, it was revealed by *Alpinist* magazine that before he'd left to meet Chris, he'd written a nine-thousand-word first draft of an article about his life as a climber. The final passages of Charlie's work were eventually published, setting forth bits of his philosophy and making an offering to those who knew them both.

> *K2 was a harsh lesson. We were fit, acclimated, and climbing in good style on a fine route but got shut down by bureaucratic, arbitrary rules. I've always felt mountains belong to everyone and government management should be limited to protecting important cultures and resources. Mountains are not a commodity to be bought and sold. "Freedom of the Hills" is not a cliché. It's my credo.*
>
> *I've always looked to the future and been skeptical of tradition, while trying to learn from the past. I long to return to the wild country of Tibet and Patagonia, those vast lands that feel like home. I want to share my knowledge, following the example of modern-day explorers like Tamotsu Nakamura.*
>
> *Lately I've been looking homeward for inspiration and challenges. Surrounded by a mythic history and ancient culture, the American Southwest remains wild and remote, free from excessive rules and regulations and prime for exploration and adventure. A small group of friends and I have been establishing dozens of new*

climbs from the desert to the mountains in remote southwestern Colorado.

Throughout my life, climbing has been a progression. I've slowly built on past experiences, learned from friends and mentors, trained hard, and done my homework. As a guide, I progressed down the same path, but ultimately guiding is about helping others fulfill their dreams. To fulfill my own dreams, I chose to follow in the footsteps of the great French guide Gaston Rebuffat, who made the transition to writing and films and reached more people in the process. Now I spend my days reading and writing and filming and climbing as much as I can.

I have an insatiable appetite for knowledge. Long ago I realized mountaineering is the best education for me. I need to travel around the world, passing through the exciting, dirty, and dangerous cities with a friend or two by my side. Somehow we find our way to the towns and then to the small villages and trek through the pristine meadows to the glaciers and on to the summit. Thanks to my education as an alpinist, there is not much I can't see or experience of this small, lonely, fragile planet.
—Charlie Fowler

BY NOVEMBER 7, 2006, CHRIS and Charlie had already climbed two peaks in remote parts of western Sichuan. The first was a second ascent of Haizi Shan, also known as Yala Peak. At 5,280 meters, it was a mountain that Charlie had eyed for years. Chris captured the experience in her climbing journal:

October 22, 2006
We left HC (high camp) at 5:00 a.m. I started out breaking trail, then Charlie led, and I took over again toward the last couloir. We reached the ridge at 1:15 p.m., the entire time mostly in the clouds. Two pitches with rope. Took us an hour and forty-five minutes to reach the top at 3:00 p.m. On the way down, lightning and thun-

der. Downclimbed the entire route except one rap and left one pin. Reached HC at 7:00 p.m. Ten hours up. Four hours down.

The second objective was Yangmaiyong, a 5,958-meter peak on the southern rim of the Shaluli Shan. The pair stopped short, turned back by thin snow over rock slabs that made them both wary about the stability of their next steps. Chris wrote:

November 4, 2006
Woke up at 2:55 a.m. Left camp at 4:10 a.m. Two hours we were above col. Waited for sun for forty-five minutes. Climbed another thirty minutes. Hit dead end on unprotectable snow over rock. Turned around 5,400 to 5,500 meters. Downclimbed to High Camp. Waited until 5:30 p.m. to descend to base. 3.5 hours camped at lake around 10:30 p.m.

WITH THE WEATHER TURNING, CHRIS was anxious to get home. She'd been gone since August and had climbed her way through Russia, Nepal, and now China. As promised, Chris checked in with Mountain Madness from China. In email messages to friends and colleagues, she mentioned being tired, something many of them remember as an uncharacteristic comment. "She was tired and she missed her mom," said Jane Courage, Chris's friend and climbing partner. "She wanted more than anything to come home. She was burned out and wanted to get out of China. But god our last conversation was full of laughs, too. It was her mom's birthday in mid-November, and she had arranged to send her a giant teddy bear. She couldn't wait to hear her reaction."

Before heading to the Genyen Valley with Charlie, Chris had one final call to make.

"SO YOU'LL BE HOME FOR the holidays, right Chrissy?" Joyce Feld asked. The call from her daughter sounded like it had originated right next door and not from the other side of the world.

"Absolutely, Mom," said Chris. "I'm going to try to get home earlier than I planned. Charlie and I just have one more climb."

"And your guiding went well?"

"Really well. I'm good at what I do, Mom."

"I know you are. The best."

Chris knew she wouldn't be able to call her mother on her birthday, November 17. "We'll be in a remote area, Mom. But I'll be thinking of you."

JOURNEYS NORTH

7
"Blazer, I Need You"

MONDAY, APRIL 30, 2007

AVOIDING THE HEAT, Amanda set out an hour earlier on her second morning with redheaded Alan from Wesleyan College. He'd seen Amanda and her two companions arrive late the night before. The three had joined his group of hikers around a campfire. Watching Amanda with her companions, he thought, *bossy and intense.* But he hadn't written her off completely and acquiesced when she asked, "Can I head out with you?"

Alan had a Martin backpack guitar strapped to his pack, the instrument's disproportionately long neck dwarfed its shrunken, triangular body. He was still learning to play, but his enthusiasm ran high. Even hangdog tired after a twelve-hour day of hiking, he'd limber up his fingers on the frets of the spruce soundboard, which, depending on your ear, gave off a tone dulcimer sweet or softly tinny. The guitar weighed two pounds, two ounces, more than twice as much as his Z-Rest, the sleeping pad he'd brought to cushion his back at night. Ounces for body comfort, pounds for his soul. Unlike Amanda, he carried pages torn from the *Pacific Crest Trail Guidebook* published by Wilderness Press—the three-volume bible of the trail.

Many hikers expected the Southern California section of the PCT to be desert. In fact, National Geographic, in an hour-long special, had branded the whole southern section "700 miles of desert." But Amanda and Alan would soon learn that they were traveling through a string of sky islands: conifer-laced mountain ranges, some running over 100 miles long, split

by valleys with a dozen different variations of desert climates, including sagebrush scrub, chaparral, and Joshua tree woodland.

The *Pacific Crest Trail Guidebook* divides the PCT's entire 2650-mile length into sixteen different zones of plants and animals. The driest is creosote bush scrub, and the highest is alpine fell-field, where it seemed every other plant had the word "alpine" in its name. The first 700 miles has fifteen of the sixteen zones. No other PCT section rivals that diversity.

Crisp air hit their cheeks as Amanda and Alan hiked through open chamise chaparral, punctuated by oak-shaded nooks. "You romp easily north," the guidebook said, the only instance of this particular verb in over one-thousand-plus pages of the three volumes. Even in the pleasant chill, neither Amanda nor Alan thought "romp" described what it felt like to labor under packs with full loads of water. If they'd been there later in the day, with nature's oven set to broil, a different four-letter word would have come to their lips.

On that spring day in seventh grade, when Amanda came home to find Arwen and Jeremiah looking crushed, she heard many four-letter swear words in her father's slurred voice. But it was what he said last that really hurt—so much, that she blocked out her father's exact words. But her brother Ian remembers.

Ian was seventeen, poised to graduate from Saint Marys Area High School. He didn't hear the message that afternoon, because his three younger siblings hadn't dared to tell him—but they'd also been too frightened to erase it. Before Ian left for school the next morning, he noticed there were messages on the answering machine, so he pushed play. He heard the slurred voice, foul as a drunk's breath, spewing invective.

"And I married you even though you were pregnant with another man's child."

Ian understood immediately. *She was pregnant with me!* A shiver went up his spine. *He's not my father. I'm not related to that dysfunctional man.* Disgusted, yet awash with relief, Ian erased the messages and left for school.

Amanda and Ian never talked about that day. But she did discuss it with Arwen and Jeremiah. "He's still our brother," she protested. "It doesn't

matter." Nevertheless, now Amanda knew that her big brother Ian, the one she felt closest to, was not her full-blood brother after all.

Amanda and her new hiking buddy Alan were still close enough to the Mexican border to see frequent evidence of migrants—empty water jugs, worn socks, and torn scraps of carpet used to muffle footsteps. *I've never seen anything like this,* Amanda thought. *What were their lives like? What made them flee their country?* Six miles past Lake Morena, the trail went below Interstate 8, the first underpass of many. High above them, cars—filled with people heading to work, worried about what their boss said yesterday, stressed over emails, the day's headlines, their kids, their spouse—rushed by at breakneck speeds.

Amanda had other concerns. *I better make sound water choices today*, she thought, feeling like such a rookie. Anxiously, she asked Alan about his plans for water. From him, she learned that there was water 13 miles after Lake Morena at Cibbets Flat, a campground less than a mile off the PCT. "Do you want to stop there for lunch and fill up?" he asked. "Sure thing."

Alan lengthened his stride and soon disappeared around a bend, leaving Amanda to climb into the Laguna Mountains, the first sky island, by herself. Even though they were hiking "together," like most hikers that meant leapfrogging, each moving at their own pace. She'd eaten little throughout the day—hiking in the heat often suppresses people's appetites—and Amanda thought she'd done a good job of conserving water. There'd even be a little left when she hit Cibbets Flat.

Trekking poles clicking, Amanda had been in a zone when she realized she wasn't sure how far she'd gone—and she was down to a quarter liter of water. It was the heat of the day, so she decided to wait it out by napping just off trail under a canopy of mixed oaks. At 3:30 p.m. she woke and continued on, hiking into a long canyon. She was starting to get frantic about water. Unlike Alan, Amanda wasn't carrying maps from the guidebook, but only truncated descriptions from three adjunct aids—the *Pacific Crest Trail Data Book*, *Yogi's Pacific Crest Trail Handbook*, and the Water Report. None of these were intended to keep a hiker on trail. That's what happens when you have only twenty-one days to prepare.

Amanda had climbed 2100 feet since Lake Morena and was walking in and out of an oak woodland in the Lagunas that was transitioning to mixed pines. At mile 37, she passed the first trailside conifer, a 118-foot-tall Jeffrey pine. She felt even more desperate as the shadows lengthened and she realized she had missed Cibbets Flat. Was Alan ahead of or behind her?

Finally, Amanda heard the sound of running water downhill from the trail. Without hesitation, she plowed down a 100-foot steep embankment, sliding on scree and loose sand. But the water at the bottom was completely inaccessible. *It's all dagger bushes*, she thought, thwarted by a wall of *Rosa californica*, as thorny and dense as Br'er Rabbit's briar patch. She tried to bull her way through and not get too scratched, but then a shoe slipped and both feet gave way. Awkward and top heavy from the pack on her back, she somersaulted down and landed in a dagger bush so thick her body was suspended above the ground.

Scratched and bleeding, her sunglasses lost, Amanda hung catawampus, caught upside down in a tangle. Every movement opened new bloody scrapes. Finally, wrenching herself free, she fell in the creek with a splash. Soaking wet, bloody, hungry, and tired, she filled up on water at last. After satisfying her thirst, Amanda climbed back to the trail. A few hundred yards later she found a gentle stream flowing nicely beside the PCT.

Amanda never caught Alan that night. Instead, under a full moon, she camped alone for the first time in her life. Around her was spring grass, scattered oaks, and Jeffrey pines set on a rough-shouldered mountain edge, 2000 feet taller than the highest peak in her home state, Pennsylvania. Bedded down with aching shoulders and a dozen still-seeping cuts, Amanda thought, *How can my blisters hurt so much?* But calluses had begun to form, just like a burgeoning sense of power inside of her. *It's so painful.* But in a distant corner of her brain: *This feels glorious. I'm a trail god.* It had been an 18-mile and two-rattlesnake day.

The trail the next morning was cushy pine duff, a relief after loose rock and jarring desert hardpan. Without further incident, Amanda reached the crest of the Laguna Mountains and the junction where hikers leave the trail to access the Laguna Mountain Store. Eager to catch Alan, and

not wanting him to worry about her, Amanda continued on the trail. Alan, meanwhile, was sitting on the store's porch, wallowing in its joys.

In college, Alan, unlike Amanda, didn't have to foster a backstory about a perfect middle-class family. He'd grown up in a two-story house in an attractive neighborhood in Boulder, Colorado. Even with two siblings, a brother ten years older and a sister seven years older, Alan never had to share a bedroom. Birthdays were looked forward to, not feared, planned precisely by his parents, everything known the day before. *What would it be like to have a surprise party?* was the biggest birthday regret he could muster. Every year, a twelve-foot-tall Christmas tree stood under the ceiling with ease. Alan and his siblings loved to throw ornaments from the banister and see where they'd stick. No home is perfect, but Alan's was one of those that Amanda would have liked to call her own.

Though Alan was never the popular kid, he always had good friends, guys he could be goofy and make elaborate plans with. Even as a kid, Alan kept buddies for the long haul. He was never one for flash-in-the-pan friendships. He wondered who would enter that circle while he was on the PCT.

One of the worst moments in his childhood was in fourth grade, when he was given his first report card with letter grades: straight Bs. He felt stoked on the way home. *Yeah, all Bs, that's great.* When his parents—academics for the National Center of Atmospheric Research—scanned the columns, they made no effort to hide their disappointment. Alan tried to hold back the tears as they told him, "These are mediocre grades. You are more than mediocre."

That moment was a turning point. It helped propel Alan to a top-ranked liberal arts college where he earned a dual degree in physics and math. Then he deferred his grad school acceptance—planning to take a year-long deep breath before reentering academia. His gap year began with a job doing fieldwork for a lab studying ecology and climate change in the San Jacinto Mountains of Southern California. The PCT ran right through the study area—it was the first time he had heard of the trail. That winter, listening to an older coworker talk on and on about his Appalachian Trail thru-hike in the '80s, Alan started to consider a hike of his own.

But it was a girl that nudged Alan to hike the PCT. Laura, his first love, was going to hike with him partway, and he was looking forward to the time they'd have together. She was as free as anyone he had ever met, and Alan thought he was emulating her ability to get the most out of life by hiking the trail. But when he visited Laura just days before starting, she told him, "No. I'm not going." She wasn't going to hike any part of the trail. Now as he walked the PCT in his wraparound sunglasses, Alan hid the effects of a sucker-punched heart.

Alan had no way of knowing that Amanda's last experience with love had been even worse than his—it had been four years since her last date, for reasons that she kept buried deep. Fending off advances was now second nature.

The trail tread on the Laguna crest butted cheek by jowl against a dramatic desert overlook, yet Amanda's view of it was intermittent at best. Between the horizontal rain and microbursts, the 4000-foot plunge into the desert was frequently obscured. Worse, her pack thermometer wouldn't budge above forty degrees. Suddenly, the sky opened and cleared, a reminder that springtime weather can turn quickly in the mountain ranges of Southern California. As she sat on a rock, snacking on a Snickers bar, Alan strode into view.

"Hey, what happened to your arms?" he asked. Alan was sympathetic as Amanda told him the full story, but he couldn't help himself; picturing Amanda upside down, water still out of reach, he started laughing.

"You're Blazer," he blurted, overcome by the image of her crashing downhill, trailblazing toward water. The name stuck.

As dusk approached, the pair finished the descent from the Laguna Mountains. From a landscape of Jeffrey and ponderosa pines, they dropped into a hardscrabble desert wasteland better suited for the likes of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner. Only one man-made feature broke the otherworldly moonscape: Scissors Crossing, the junction of two little-traveled roads. It was there, nearly 80 trail miles north of the Mexican border, that they found their first water cache: fifty one- and two-gallon plastic water jugs stacked on makeshift plywood shelves in rows three deep. In the middle of a 15-, 20- or 35-mile waterless stretch,

a Good Samaritan would see the need and start a water cache. Usually, they would manage to keep it stocked, but the trail adage was: Never rely on a water cache, take only what you need, and be grateful.

Blazer and Alan attempted to set up camp nearby. There wasn't a designated campsite—there seldom would be—but thru-hikers can generally camp most anywhere, except on private property. Like most hikers, they observed Leave No Trace principles: camp more than 200 feet from a water source or the trail, and camp on durable surfaces and on an already-impacted spot.

All day the pair had been at the mercy of the changeable weather, but this was the worst. Knock-about gusts of wind whipped through at 40 to 50 miles per hour, ripping tent flaps from their hands and pulling up stakes. Much like the weather, Alan found his attitude toward Blazer shifting. He'd seen her vulnerable rather than bossy, free-spirited rather than intense. He'd seen her laugh at herself as the butt of a story, and in the teeth of pain. Even as her scabs tore and bled, she'd embraced the name Blazer.

Then they saw two other hikers camped underneath a nearby bridge. Hunched down, Alan plowed his way through the buffeting winds to see if there was room for their tents. He found the other two not only snug but smoking a marijuana pipe. They offered Alan a couple hits.

Alan made his way back to Blazer to let her know they could move. But his tent became tangled when he started trying to pack it up, his mind now fuzzy and his hands feeling like they belonged to a stranger. Finally, leaning into the blasts, Alan started to drag his tent flapping in one fist and his backpack in the other. About halfway to the bridge, he staggered, was knocked down, and then started crawling on all fours.

Alan called into the wind, "Blazer, I need you. I'm not okay right now." Blazer had wrapped up her tent in good order, shoved it into her pack, and was only a few feet behind Alan. Without comment or judgment, Blazer firmly took his hand, helped him with his backpack and tent and brought him safely under the bridge. Wordlessly, they set up his tent together. From then on, Alan knew he could rely on her.

In her journal that night, Blazer wrote nothing about helping Alan. Instead she wrote: "Blisters! Foot pain! Blah!"

By noon the next day, Blazer had climbed eight miles into the San Felipes. These brawny hills were painted with a palette of sun-bleached browns, and the trail weaved from one dry canyon to the next. It would be another 16 waterless and shadeless miles to Barrel Springs. Alan was ahead—they planned to meet up for lunch and camp together that night.

Blazer's foot woes were getting harder to keep at bay. She'd used every weapon in her blister arsenal—Dr. Scholl's Moleskin, super glue, 2nd Skin, medical tape, duct tape—and aired out her feet every chance she got. Nothing helped.

Then Blazer met Yogi smack in the middle of the San Felipe Hills. A hiking phenomenon, Jackie "Yogi" McDonnell was hiking the PCT for the fourth time. She was the author of a handbook to the PCT and could be either talkative or curt. At that moment, she was refilling her water from jugs at the second PCT water cache, Third Gate cache, at mile 91. The water here was hiked in by volunteers who loaded themselves Sherpa-like with five or more one-gallon jugs.

Blazer peppered Yogi with questions. As she took her socks off, Yogi let out a long, empathetic, "Ouch." The torn blisters between Blazer's toes were partly covered by swaths of medical tape and narrow strips of duct tape—a futile attempt to keep them from rubbing. More blisters capped her toes, and inflamed pockets of fluid bulged beneath her nails.

"Your feet have actually swollen," explained Yogi. "Girl, you have to get out of those shoes." As with many hikers, Blazer's feet had expanded from the many miles she had pounded out over the hot terrain. It was her too-small shoes that were the problem, not inadequate blister remedies.

Ten miles later, after a knee-jarring descent from the San Felipes, Blazer arrived at Barrel Springs. As happy as she was to see Alan there, she was more excited to see an iron pipe trickling water into the aged cement horse trough, a tenuous, precious flow from a spring on the hill above. Blazer and Alan had hiked 24 miles, their longest day yet.

While Alan yanked his gear out in a stream-of-consciousness pack explosion, Blazer laid out hers A to Z as she prepared for the night. She was meticulous and a self-confessed obsessive-compulsive—luckily, no one had suggested OCD for her trail name. Despite their differences, Blazer and Alan found they could goofily chatter on about everything.

Just 10 miles ahead was Warner Springs Resort, an isolated hot springs and golf resort that pulled in tired hikers sure as a siren's call. The aging resort had two mammoth pools—one straight from the hot springs—and condo-style bungalow units available to hikers for eighty dollars. Blazer and Alan planned to split a two-bedroom unit with another pair of hikers for twenty dollars apiece.

After the two walked into Warner Springs the next morning, with Alan running the last 100 yards, they hit the resort's Golf Grill for their first town food in almost a week. Blazer peeled away from Alan when a familiar voice called, "Blazer, come here." It was Yogi beckoning, who then marched Blazer straight to the Warner Springs hiker box.

Hiker boxes are a trail institution, where anyone can leave extra clothing, gear, or backpacking food, free for the taking by another hiker. There's one in nearly every trail town, usually in a post office, cheap motel, or handy store. Rooting through the Warner Springs hiker box, Yogi saw what she'd hoped to see, a well-worn pair of men's shoes exactly two sizes larger than Blazer's.

Blazer wore those hand-me-down shoes for the next 70 miles. It was the last time she saw Yogi on the trail, but that good deed saved Blazer's hike.

That night in Warner Springs, Blazer shared a guest room with Alan and two other guys. Except Alan was now Dalton. That day in the pool, two hikers had christened him after the lead character in the movie *Roadhouse*, which they discussed ad nauseam.

For the first time in years, Blazer was sharing a bed with a man. Carefully rolled up in opposite directions on a luxurious, foot-deep mattress, she didn't miss her thin sleeping pad. Neither Blazer nor Dalton had wanted the other to sleep on the floor, so they each kept to their respective sides. They'd become close, but had not touched.

Blazer was contemplating telling Dalton more about herself. For instance, since starting the trail, she hadn't told anyone she was a trained physical therapist. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. What did that make her in the land of aches and pains? All around her she had seen hands rubbing at knots in shoulders and massaging aching backs, clenched fists pressed knuckle-deep into a calf or kneading a

thigh. Blazer worried that the moment she told someone she was a physical therapist, all she'd hear would be, "Will you look at this?" She could barely keep her own head above water. And if she told Dalton that, would she share the rest of what was bottled up inside her?

Not now, she thought. *I'm not going there. I'll never get any sleep.* She started to drift off. *I can't deal with that. I won't breathe a word to anyone.*

16

Naked Bucket Brigade

SATURDAY, MAY 19, 2007

BLAZER EXITED THE San Bernardino Mountains astride two dramatic features—the Tunnel Ridge earthquake fault and flood-carved Deep Creek. Cutting a 400-foot vertical cleft in the earth, Deep Creek is a careening slash that runs northwest out of the mountains and then skirts west, paralleling the Mojave Desert before disappearing into flat, baked wasteland. For nearly seven miles the PCT clings precipitously to the canyon wall high above the creek.

For Blazer and Dalton, their 6:00 a.m. start made little difference. Like a griddle on full flame, the day heated fast. Looking down, Blazer thought it was such a tease, the sight of cool water tumbling far below as they walked amid shrubs, scattered ironwood, and needle-leafed greasewood. Only eight years before, intermittent spruces and pines would have provided beach-umbrella shade, but the Willow Fire of 1999—which scorched 64,000 acres—ended that. Now the guidebook warned, "Expect the entire gorge to be shadeless." It had also appended a bland geologic note, about the "friable" cliffs above Deep Creek. For Blazer and the rest, the cliffs buttressing the trail could crumble in an instant.

The two passed mile 300 without comment, but soon along the catwalk they spied a string of eight prayer flags hanging limply above the trail. Blazer knew this was coming, but it was still a shock. One year before, sixty-three-year-old No Way Ray had come to this same spot while thru-hiking with his wife, Alice. He was just out of view when Alice heard

the skittering tumble of rocks. She raced around the corner, but he was no longer there—it was as if he fell through a trapdoor. No Way Ray had tumbled to the base of the 250-foot escarpment. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Blazer had been preoccupied, chewing over two things, when the flapping prayer flags jarred her from her reverie. *I'm not invincible,* she thought. *I need to be careful.* But she had to balance being careful with moving quickly. One of the two things tag-teaming for her attention was her brother Ian's deadline. Dalton heard about it every day. There were only twenty-two days to cover the 400 miles to Kennedy Meadows—there was no slack. Most hikers planned three, four, or possibly five zero days in that time; Blazer could allow perhaps one. *Will my feet hold up till our June 9 meet-up?* She wouldn't even think about the Sierra Nevada that followed, reputedly the PCT's roughest stretch.

The second thing on Blazer's mind was nearer at hand: Deep Creek's much-anticipated hot springs. When first mapped in the 1930s, the PCT had two on-trail hot springs, Deep Creek in Southern California and Kennedy Hot Springs in Washington. But in 2003, a 100-year flood wiped Kennedy Hot Springs off the map. Deep Creek's hot springs were now the only ones left along the trail. Composed of a mélange of hot pools circling a set of cold-water swimming holes, Deep Creek's largest swimming hole had huge rocks well suited to jump from.

Only two miles from the nearest road, Deep Creek's visitors were a mélange as well. Arriving midday Saturday, Blazer and Dalton found ten thru-hikers and a few dozen others. After lunch, when Dalton took a dip, to his left were old Dead Heads tripping out, on the rocks above older men wore nothing but sunhats, and, in the water, two gentlemen from Israel insisted on calling him Dolphin. Dalton, who was wearing a cutoff Hawaiian shirt he'd bought for fifty cents off the sales rack at a Big Bear City thrift store, fit right in.

A KABOOM broke the revelry—Dalton and Blazer felt the sound in their chests. Soon after, a Chinese man came down the wooded bank yelling, "Fire!" His propane stove had exploded, setting the brush ablaze.

With the fire only 75 yards uphill from the river, Blazer, Dalton, and the other thru-hikers quickly secured their gear, making sure that no matter

how fast the fire spread their packs would be safe. Then one of them called out, "Everyone grab your water containers." Grabbing their pots and bottles, they ran to scoop up water, then rushed upslope to the fire. One hiker's never-used ice axe was employed to dig up smoldering roots. Water carriers tripped on loose rock—someone was going to get hurt.

But their efforts were inefficient and futile, and the flames grew larger. Then a voice hollered, "Make lines to pass water." Two lines formed, one passing full water containers uphill and one passing the empty ones down. Hikers muscled about in skivvies pressed into service as swimwear, interspersed with a passel of buck-naked men. In the frenzy, someone dubbed their fire line "the naked bucket brigade."

Two hours later, the last smoldering roots were finally drenched. A loud cheer rose from tired bodies blackened with soot and ash. After that, the party started up again, louder and wilder than ever. Blazer and Dalton decided it was time to leave. As they walked away, the sun falling behind the horizon, they heard conga drums blasting and a woman screaming "ay ay ay ay" at the top of her lungs.

That night, as Blazer drifted off, her thoughts returned to another fire, this one long ago.

She'd been in sixth grade. Though still skinny, Amanda had already shot up, her body showing hints of maturing. Against a backdrop of thick, black curls, she'd been experimenting with lipstick. Recently she had confided in her diary, "Soon I'm going to get a sports bra without Ma knowing."

Amanda had been hanging out with an edgy off-and-on-again friend, Lila, who definitely managed to get in trouble. Amanda's mom discouraged their friendship, but that made Amanda want to hang out with Lila even more.

They were in the girls' bathroom at school when Lila pulled out a lighter. She asked Amanda to hold a piece of paper and then lit it, grabbed it out of Amanda's hand, and threw it in the garbage can. Everyone ran except Amanda. *I have to put it out.* As the others shrieked in the hallway, Amanda willed her hands to move faster as she scooped water from the sink next to the garbage can, but flames kept shooting up. "Out of the way," a male math teacher shouted as he ran in and put it out. Then he

grabbed Amanda by the ear, twisted it, and marched her straight to the principal's office. She was suspended for ten days. From that point on, her school peers looked at her differently, she felt labeled, tarred as a bad seed, she wasn't miss goody two shoes anymore.

Looking back, that fire was the moment she veered off on the wrong path. Amanda started hanging out with the older toughs at Kaulmont Park. They were mostly high school kids and she was by far the youngest. She'd babysit after school and not tell her mom when she got off. Instead of going home, she'd go to the park. One day someone in the group brought tequila and they started drinking straight shots. The toughs thought it was hilarious to egg on thirteen-year-old Amanda as she chugged them down. Competitive even then, Amanda downed seven. She stumbled in late and drunk to a friend's house. When her friend's mom saw her, she told her to stay away, yelling, "You can't play with my daughter anymore." Amanda had become the bad influence, the one that mothers warned their daughters to avoid.

At age fourteen, Amanda was still hanging with the toughs at Kaulmont Park. That summer, a charismatic 18-year-old guy, just out of high school, started hanging out with the group. Amanda, about to enter ninth grade, was drawn to him, fascinated by his stories. She was flattered when he flirted with her. One day he turned to her and asked, "Do you want to go for a ride?"

"Dalton, there's something I have to tell you."

She had his full attention. "Dalton, off the trail, what I did, well, I'm a physical therapist. That's what I do." Blazer's brown eyes pleaded with him. She was afraid he would look at her differently, that it would change the way he, and everyone, treated her. They'd only see her as someone who could mend their physical injuries. She just wanted to be one of the hikers. She wanted to fit in.

Having started, Blazer told Dalton about her traveling contract job—telling it as if it were already hers—about how she switched positions every three months, how she'd get to see the world, and how she was paid a great premium. Caught up, she found herself feeding Dalton the happy story, just like she'd done with her college chums. She didn't tell Dalton

about the tests she'd failed, but she had unwittingly transferred a burden to him. *Keep this a secret.*

After four miles, the PCT left Deep Creek behind, and raced to an open flat. Briefly dipping a toe in the edge of the Mojave Desert, it quickly veered away from that storied wasteland, into low, brown, rolling hills. Heading west past Silverwood Lake and onto Cleghorn Ridge, the PCT then dropped into Little Horsethief Canyon before leaving the San Bernardino Mountains for good. There, between sky islands, a trail legend loomed—the one set of Golden Arches on the PCT, a trailside McDonald's.

Like many of our fellow hikers, Frodo and I had not been inside a McDonald's for years. But on the PCT, almost every hiker stops in—even vegetarians. Near Cajon Pass at mile 342, right before the trail passes through a puddled culvert under Interstate 15, hikers can turn right and in the distance of two city blocks walk into McDonald's. For hikers who want even more civilization, just three blocks farther are two gas stations, a Best Western motel, and a Subway sandwich shop.

Inside the McDonald's, thru-hikers occupied half the restaurant tables—Frodo and I crammed with six others into one booth against a windowed wall. Food soon occupied every square inch of the table. Among the hikers in the next booth, one young woman stood out. "Blazer," she said, chewing, and flashed us a bright smile before eagerly getting back to work on the food arrayed in front of her—Egg McMuffins, hash browns, coffee, orange juice, apple pie, and cinnamon rolls chased with a full cup of icing. We all played musical tables so we could hear everyone's stories.

Hikers usually linger to stay out of the intense heat, but we couldn't fall back on that excuse because it was a cool, foggy morning. None of us could believe how long we stayed, but every time we'd think about leaving, another hiker that we hadn't seen in days walked in. Somehow, in the crush of smelly bodies and our food-induced comas, I didn't meet or talk to Dalton. Ultimately, Frodo and I were there four hours. Blazer and Dalton stayed for five.

McDonald's is certainly an air-conditioned oasis in what's usually ninety-degree heat, but there was another reason hikers flocked there—food.

Town food. Thru-hikers constantly run a calorie deficit, as twenty-plus-mile days chew through five thousand to six thousand calories. In her handbook Yogi says, "Long-distance hikers are different from any other athlete. We typically hike for 10 to 14 hours per day, 6–7 days a week, for 5 months straight. The amount of energy required to keep our bodies going like this is unmatched in any other sport."

On trail, hikers repeatedly face decisions about what food to pack: simple or flavorful; calorie-rich or ultralight. Most hikers cook one-pot trail meals, such as Top Ramen. Yogi's all-time favorite trail dinner is Idahoan mashed potatoes. Blazer's favorite is Kraft macaroni and cheese. Frodo's is our home-dehydrated chicken paprikash. Mine is Stove Top stuffing mix with freeze-dried chicken. All are prone to be bland.

Town food is a huge contrast from what hikers eat on the trail. Frodo's favorite town combo was milkshakes and onion rings—far from her normal fare. Nadine's favorites were a big salad and watermelon—on trail she fantasized about the red flesh and black seeds.

"Did you score any condiments in town?" A deft snatch of a hand at a fast-food restaurant could reap a rich reward. Hikers pocketed packets of salt, pepper, ketchup, mustard (yellow or Dijon), mayonnaise, relish, salsa, soy sauce, horseradish, crushed red peppers, and barbeque sauce. Taco Bell's Border Sauces come in three flavors, mild, hot, and fire, all spicing up the one-pot backcountry meal. Then there's olive oil. Many hikers spike every warm meal with olive oil, to load up on calories. Some even add it to oatmeal.

After McDonald's there is a long slog as the trail rises into the San Gabriel Mountains. Dalton's birthday was the next day, and Blazer had a plan. Fourteen miles after they'd crossed under Interstate 15, they camped high on a foggy ridge with Big Cat, another thru-hiker. Dalton woke the next morning to the sound of voices singing. Louder than a rooster's call, Blazer and Big Cat pumped out a rousing version of Happy Birthday. Then Blazer stuck both hands under Dalton's tent flap. In one hand was a lighter which she flicked into a birthday candle flame and in the other was a McDonald's apple pie. Beaming wide, Dalton thought, *this is what it*

feels like to have a surprise birthday party. Blazer's effort filled a rare gap in his childhood. As Dalton exited his tent, Blazer thought: *Mission accomplished.* She loved to see Dalton smile.

Seventeen miles and a 2200-foot climb brought them to their next trail town, Wrightwood, population 4000. The handbook advised, "Good place for a zero day." But Blazer's schedule allowed her only a single overnight.

Nadine had started her hike a mere six hours after Blazer. She overlapped Blazer in Big Bear City, staying with the boys—Tony, Ryley, and Gaby—on the opposite end of town. Now, twenty-six days after they began the trek, Nadine and Blazer would meet for the first time.

Three days before, Nadine was delayed when the resupply box Lori sent to the Best Western motel near McDonald's was late. The boys hadn't waited, expecting her to catch up later that day. Even with their newly intense bond, Nadine and Tony clung to a thru-hiker's fierce independence, heeding the call to move ever-quickly on.

After 56 miles, Nadine still hadn't caught them. On her third night apart from the boys, she was camping at Cooper Canyon Trail Camp, midway through the San Gabriel Mountains. Unknown to her, Tony, Ryley, and Gaby had set up camp just a few hundred yards ahead.

It had been a long day. All days were long at that time of year—over fifteen hours of daylight. Blazer used all those to hike—fifteen hours lugging ten pounds of water piled on her thirty-pound-plus pack. She had already covered 25 miles on her second day out from Wrightwood—"Another big up, big down, exhausting day," she journaled. Dalton had fallen behind her. She was alone, but on the PCT "alone" is a relative term. Thru-hikers tend to bunch into a loose-knit bulge, and she was about to catch up to "the herd," an ever-moving and changing clutch of hikers near the center of the class of 2007.

When Blazer walked into Cooper Canyon Trail Camp, which a sign described as "primitive," she was pleasantly surprised to see mainly women. Amid the relative luxury of the camp—picnic tables, a seasonal stream, and wide, flat, soft ground—there was a pair she'd heard so much about: Nadine and Pacha—stories about the lone thru-hiking dog were readily passed along.

Blazer's mind raced the moment she saw Nadine and Pacha set up their tent nearby. *I can barely take care of myself out here*, she thought, *Nadine is out here hiking with her dog.* From trail scuttlebutt she had built up Nadine as a mysterious superwoman, and Pacha as her steely super dog. Nervous, Blazer snuck sidelong glances from a dozen feet away as she settled into her evening routine. She laid her Tarptent flat to cowboy camp, set each piece of gear in its place and started doing yoga planks.

Nadine thought, *Incredible, is this woman doing push-ups every evening on the trail?* She noted Blazer's close-cropped hair, her crisp execution, up, down, up, down. Just as with Tony and with me, Pacha broke the ice, bounding over to Blazer, who dropped down mid-plank and reached out a hand to stroke behind Pacha's ear. Nadine laughed, "Hah!" And with that Blazer relaxed.

Around them were five other women, all 400-trail-mile veterans—Breeze, Sage, Heidi, Munchkin, and Feather—and one guy, D-Bone, outnumbered and quiet. Blazer told her trail name story. Those that had been there regaled Nadine with the Deep Creek Hot Springs fire tale—"We called it the Naked Bucket Brigade." As spirited voices rose and fell, Nadine's laugh boomed off the hills and Blazer's woes blew away like pine needles in the dry breeze. The night could have gone on forever. But tomorrow was another day—20 more miles to hike.

35
Lost

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2007

INDIAN PASS WAS the crossroads, a point of no return. It was a place where hikers asked one another, "Are you taking the detour or the old PCT?"

The focal point of the old PCT's flood-ravaged 45 miles was the Suiattle River crossing. Swifter, deeper, and triple the width, the Suiattle made Muddy Creek look like a diminutive cousin. Had Ladybug fallen into the Suiattle, 30-30 would have had no chance to act before she'd been swept away. Even before setting foot on the trail, hikers spoke of the Suiattle River in hushed tones.

Twenty-five hundred miles later nothing had changed. Every year, boulders crashed loudly as they raced down the milky flow roaring off Glacier Peak, but for decades the lion had been tamed. The Suiattle bridge had been a wilderness wonder—miles from any road, 150 feet long, high off the water, a buttress of four-by-four timbers, six-inch logs, steel girders, and I beams held together by inch-thick bolts. The US Cavalry could have thundered across it two abreast, but a single Cascades storm four years before had ripped the bridge from its moorings and deposited it in a twisted heap downstream. The guidebook and the Forest Service now advised taking an official but unmaintained 50-mile detour.

You'd have to spend a day and a half retracing your steps if you reached the Suiattle and it was impossible to cross. If someone got injured or worse, you were on your own, with no way to call for help. We'd heard the rumors, both good and bad. Of the good, "There's a log over the Suiattle

near the old crossing," and "Last year, some late-season hikers took the old PCT." Considering the bad, "Landslides washed away the trail. It's crazy." And, "There are hundreds of blowdowns—trees fallen across the trail." Many of Washington's steep slopes are passable only because of deep-cut trail; it was hard to imagine traversing one with the trail obliterated. For us the decision loomed two days ahead. At its center was the Suiattle, a black hole, the big unknown.

In the eleven days they had spent together since reuniting, Blazer and Dalton had taken no zeros. In fact, Blazer hadn't taken one in almost three weeks, not since Timberline Lodge. Now, a day before they reached Highway 2 at Stevens Pass, and still 205 miles from Canada, the first snowfall arrived. They woke to a winter wonderland and a thick layer of snow weighing down their tents. With it still snowing outside, Blazer slept in, holding Dalton back with her. Once they were finally up and moving, their "wonderland" glee melted. Snow and rain tag-teamed the pair for miles. All day, the overgrown, water-logged brush soaked them. Their fingers and toes were numb. If they had stopped to eat, they would have frozen.

I had the same initial glee on seeing the snow that morning. Frodo and I were a half day ahead of them, and we climbed Trap Pass in three inches of accumulating snow. "Slow down," I told Frodo. I had my camera out. I wanted to work the scene, to capture these shots. After all, this might be our only snowfall, and I wanted photographic proof that we had hiked in snow. The first deep drifts usually weren't till mid-October, so I knew Frodo and I were safe. We planned to finish two weeks before that.

But no matter how harsh the conditions, the Cascades charmed us, ensuring the day wasn't an entire drudge. Every bend held the promise of a miracle. One day at noon, on a high pass above tree line, I was hunkered down in a drenching rain, answering nature's call in thirty-seven-degree weather. Suddenly I felt a large displacement of air around me. I looked up. Gliding slowly as if I didn't exist, a bald eagle passed over. Barely clearing the pass, its wings were stretched out to their full width—possibly as much as seven feet or more. It was so close I could have reached up and touched the feathers on its breast.

That first day it snowed, the thermometer on Blazer's pack never topped forty degrees. She and Dalton pushed through 27 teeth-chattering, tough miles without a break, finally arriving at Stevens Pass at 9:00 p.m. The two huddled under an outhouse awning, vainly punching cell phone numbers. No service.

They were trying to reach trail angels Andrea and Jerry Dinsmore. The Dinsmores were as famed in the north as the Saufleys were in the south. Blazer sat, fully spent, her back to the outhouse, as Dalton ran off to find a pay phone. Pressed against the rough siding, she drew her knees to her chest, trying to ward off the sleet.

Thirty minutes later, when Blazer saw Andrea Dinsmore's headlights pierce the rain, her weary spirits surged. She melted into the warm car seat before the three of them drove off, the windshield wipers thrumming. Blazer thought, *Just sitting here is a miracle.* When the two arrived at Andrea and Jerry's home, they found hot pizza waiting. Blazer could have cried.

Town stops weren't the only thing that offset the misery of the rain. The countryside stunned the senses. The glaciers here are at 6000 and 7000 feet, not 10,000. Dark, razor-edge peaks marched rank upon rank, the rows split by plunging valleys with dangerous rushing streams. The views—when the weak sun deigned to spotlight them—could thrust even Muir's Sierra Nevada onto the back shelf. And it might snow any month of the year.

One northwest attraction was both a threat and a treat. Huckleberries. The scrumptious delights were nearly enough to derail a hike—something we learned just north of Timberline Lodge when we hit our first big patch. Blazer, Frodo, and I stopped so often we stained our tongues purple. "Look there's more over here!" It was Frodo who saved us in the end. Stamping the trail with her high-school-teacher feet, she ordered, "Let's get hiking!" Even now, in late September, we ran into significant patches.

Anytime Blazer or Dalton started to wallow in rain- or cold-induced self-pity, they only had to think of hikers who were worse off. Once, when Blazer was joshing about how hard it was to leave her tent at night, a guy brought up his bout of stomach flu. To go puke in the rain, he first

had to force himself into his half-frozen rain gear. And there was the Appalachian Trail veteran who confessed that this was the first time he'd ever cried from misery on any trail. At the Summit Inn at Snoqualmie Pass—Blazer had allowed herself a one-night stay—she watched a hiker walk into the lobby directly from the rainy trail and hyperventilate for minutes. It was the pure release of not having to hold it together anymore. Washington was serious country.

"Come on, Dalton. Let's get going!" Blazer's voice rang out brightly, calling from inside her tent. It was September 24 and the sun was shining, giving them both a morale boost. There were only eight days and seven nights left. The detour decision wasn't till tomorrow. She'd woken early and eager, her body suffused with opened-eyed enthusiasm. They had camped by Lake Janus, a half-mile-long jewel set high in the Henry M. Jackson Wilderness. The spacious lakeside site was theirs alone, besieged and surrounded by a riot of colored flora—swaths of brilliant red huckleberry bushes, carpets of yellow sedges and fescues, and, on higher ground, stands of deep green conifers: Alaska cedars, firs, Engelmann spruce, and pines.

Bright as it was, the sun was a pale candle compared to the heat lamp of Southern California. Still, it was such a blessing, welcome after so much rain. Blazer shivered only a little as the pair set out from Lake Janus. She might have done well to remember her Roman mythology—the lake's namesake was a two-faced god.

Dalton suggested they have lunch at a campsite roughly 12 miles ahead. With Blazer's nod, he sped ahead toward their destination. Having found a groove, Blazer hiked more slowly and reveled in the beautiful day. She had her first view of Glacier Peak—the snowcapped volcano dominated this section, like Mount Shasta had in the south—and let her mind wander. At Pear Lake, eight miles along, there was a fork. Stuck on autopilot, she took the path down toward the lake.

Hiking on, Blazer climbed a terribly steep hill. *Man, it would stink to have to go back down that again.* After two hours, she realized, *I'm seeing fewer footprints, and where's the campsite?* A good hour later she came to a sign. Trail

signs are few and far between in Washington, and usually Blazer found it a relief to see one. This one, secured by thick lag screws to a tree, marked the wilderness boundary. If she'd walked into it and banged her head, the result wouldn't have been more sickening.

I shouldn't be here. She sat down, pulled out the map, and plotted where she was. When she realized she had walked six miles out of her way, Blazer was pissed. As she started backtracking, the consequences sunk in and she kicked herself harder. *Dalton will be worried. He won't know where I am.* She even tried running once, but that ended fast. As the sun lowered, it became more and more clear—she wouldn't be able to make up the miles between her and Dalton tonight. Blazer stopped, her chest heaving, and threw her arms up. She screamed, "Why!"

The same day that Blazer took that wrong turn by Pear Lake, over 140 miles farther north Tony was unerringly headed toward his objective—the northern monument was in his sights. He hadn't seen another hiker for 60 miles and three days, not since the PCT's last trail stop before Canada, the village of Stehekin.

Layered clouds roared in and just as quickly fled again, whirling from translucent white mist to polished gun-metal blue and then thick, puffy gray. As the sun set, they took on yellows, ripe shades of orange, and then deep pinks. Over and over Tony thought one word, *Breathtaking*. It never got old. Even when he woke to snow blanketing his tent, the sun would come out and turn the mountain golden. But amid all this wonder Tony felt he was on his last legs. At this point, he was practically shoveling ibuprofen into his body.

Only days before, Tony had left a phone message for Nadine, hoping it would catch her shortly after she crossed the border into Washington. He'd heard she was hiking solo. "Nadine, don't hike the Goat Rocks alone." That length of trail—called the Knife's Edge—was like a tightrope along the spine of the Cascades. Tony had been exhilarated—this was the adventure he'd craved and sorely missed on the Appalachian Trail—but he'd hiked near others for that high-wire act. Windswept and miles long, the narrow track had multiple points where the drops on both sides dropped more

than five hundred feet. You needed the sure-footedness of the mountain goats for which the wilderness was named to safely traverse it.

In good weather, Goat Rocks required careful footsteps. In bad weather, it required extraordinary care. And in truly inclement weather, a transit of Goat Rocks might be life threatening. *Be careful, Nadine.* Tony was still thinking about her and Pacha as his hike came to a close—*There are people on this trail I know I'll be close to forever. That's what I want with Nadine. I'm just not sure if she'll allow it.*

I'd fought for one particular photo since the start. My point-and-shoot lived in the front cargo pocket of my pants so that, like a high-noon gunslinger, I could slap my hand down, whip out the camera, raise it, aim, and fire. Mostly I'd miss, but what I wanted to freeze-frame was a butterfly poised on a wildflower. In five months, I had succeeded four times.

The butterfly effect. An MIT meteorologist, Edward Lorenz, theorized that the flap of a butterfly's wings in the Amazon basin might set a cascade of events in motion that could end in an Atlantic hurricane. Even the smallest movement could have an outsized effect. So, was it on this day, while Blazer wandered lost, that it all started? Was it a few days before? Somewhere in the Bering Sea on an Aleutian Island, a butterfly launched from a wildflower. No one took its photo. It flapped its wings and there was a swirl which begat a zephyr, which spawned a depression, that rose to become a storm and then a series of storms, each lined up to wallop the north end of the PCT.

The phone message Glacier left us was joyous. We'd parted eight weeks ago, only days before Frodo broke her teeth. "No goodbyes." Now Glacier had finished. I doubt she'd ever sounded that elated in her entire twenty-five-year-Forest Service career. I'd never heard Glacier sing or even hum, but the rise and fall in her voice had hints of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."

"Hello, Scout and Frodo! This is Glacier calling. I am here in Manning Park. I rolled in last night and I am pretty happy to have finished the Pacific Crest Trail! I wish you guys were here! I'm thinking of you. I sure hope and pray that the weather doesn't close in."

Nadine wasn't amused when she put down the phone. *I'm a strong hiker, what's he warning me for?* Tony's message about Goat Rocks had backfired. Not only did Nadine still plan to hike the section alone, but his voicemail left her both insulted and scared. "Staying close forever" might be his goal, but Tony hadn't done much for his chances.

Nadine walked smack into four days of freezing rain and then snow, which dusted the Goat Rocks. Just trying to stay warm had her and Pacha eating their food bag down to the dregs—for the final two days she gave Pacha her lunch. On the Knife's Edge the wind keened fiercely. Worried that Pacha might be knocked off her feet or blown off a ledge, Nadine roped the two of them together. More than once Nadine thought of Tony's warning. But despite the conditions, and despite missing the long-promised views, Nadine stayed optimistic, focused on the end. She'd reach White Pass in a few hours, where she'd connect with a friend.

Chris, an old boyfriend, was going to hike with her for the rest of Washington. Another friend, Rob, was driving him out, and they would have her resupply with them. Of primary importance, she knew they'd have town food.

But still it was a great surprise when they greeted her on trail six miles in from White Pass. Rob handed Nadine a quarter of a chicken; she snatched it from his hand. He then turned to Chris and asked, "So how does this work? Do we keep throwing food at her like at a petting zoo?" Nadine attacked all that they'd brought—chicken, pizza, and a whole blackberry pie. She would have warned them to watch their fingers, but her mouth was too full.

Nadine got lucky with Chris. Many hikers find that when friends or relatives hop on trail it can be a mixed bag. Thruhikers wonder: *Will they keep up? Will I need to watch out for them?* But Chris proved the exception, remaining good company even as the weather continued its downward spiral. He was the first up in the morning, popping out of his tent before Nadine to get coffee ready for when she emerged. She journaled: "He jumped right into the thru-hiker routine without a hiccup. From day one we were hiking 20-mile days and he wasn't daunted at all by the Cascades' rough terrain." She continued, "Chris and I have about two

weeks and 250 more miles to go. Then we'll celebrate in style at Manning Park Resort."

Far off, a pair of butterfly wings flapped.

Passing the banks of Pear Lake a second time, Blazer allowed herself a moment's relief. She was finally back on the PCT. But when she looked at her watch, she saw it was 6:30 p.m., nightfall, even though she'd been hiking hard. Instead of dinner, Blazer pulled out her last two Snickers bars and wolfed them down.

Frodo and I both saw the headlamp bobbing along the trail. I had just finished brushing my teeth at our makeshift campsite near Saddle Gap. We'd had a sunny day, no rain, and we were within 150 miles of Canada. Moments before, I'd done what I did every clear night—spotting the Big Dipper and tracing a finger to the North Star, I'd pictured myself at the monument. I saw those five fir pillars, and my hand signing the register. "I, Scout, have completed the Pacific Crest Trail."

During the last few weeks, I'd augmented that vision. My parents—Dad was eighty-three and Mom was seventy-seven—had decided to meet us at the end, Manning Park Resort. They'd fly from Los Angeles to Seattle and then make the four-hour drive. From the PCT monument, at the border between the two countries, I'd hike the final eight miles to Manning Park. There, I'd find my father and give him a big hug. After five months of persevering, hiking through a cracked rib, losing toenails, and always keeping that steel fist clenched inside, I'd hold tight to the man who cheered me when I took my first tentative step almost fifty-five years ago. I'd lean down and whisper in his ear, "Daddy, I'm done. I don't have to be strong anymore." Deep inside, for the first time in five months, the fist would unclench; I'd let myself relax.

Frodo had painted her own portrait of what the end would look like. She'd asked our stalwart resupply daughter, Jordie, to ship CDs and a player to Manning Park Resort. Frodo imagined soaking in a hot tub as part of a celebratory night at the lodge, then boarding the train the next morning in Vancouver for the two-day trip home to San Diego. And there on the train she'd put her feet up, move absolutely as little as possible, and

listen to Enya for hours on end—for her, the aural equivalent of comfort food.

It had been dark for two hours by the time we spotted the bobbing headlight. "Hello hiker, who goes there?" we called out. Puffing and out of breath, Blazer stumbled into our camp. She started sobbing even before we had her in our arms. "I lost Dalton." The story came out in fits and starts. "I have to hike on. I have to find him." She'd covered 26 miles—rugged Washington miles, not the Bonneville Flats miles of Oregon. "I have to go on." She sloppily wiped her nose on her threadbare yellow bandanna.

Frodo looked at her, hazel eyes boring into Blazer's brown ones. "No child, you need sleep. Stop here. Dalton will be fine." Closer to the end of her rope than she once thought possible, Blazer set up her tent as we turned in to ours. When we heard her rustling stop, Frodo and I, from inside our snug nylon home, began singing. It was a lullaby, one we'd sung to her the night before Seiad Valley. Then we went on to the next. Inside her tent, Blazer listened, and soon her red-rimmed eyes closed.

In the dim early morning light, Dalton hiked alone until he saw a tilted signpost emerge from a chill fog. He had reached Indian Pass. There were two aged trail signs, one for the PCT and one for Indian Creek. On the post the Forest Service had thumbtacked two notes. "Please take the Detour," implored one. The "please" was underlined three times. The second described an ongoing search and rescue mission for a missing PCT hiker not many miles before the Suiattle River. Standing alone in the wilderness, Dalton had to decide.

He hadn't planned to be here by himself. The night before he'd stayed awake into the wee hours, hoping Blazer would arrive. That morning, he'd drawn out his normal packing routine. He kept looking up, wishing Blazer would catch up to him. But she hadn't, and he'd pressed on. *I only hope she's hiking with others.*

He had been stressing about this section for weeks. While he knew there were trail washouts and intimidating river crossings and hundreds of blowdowns, Dalton fought his urge to prove that he was strong, capable, and worth a damn. That was both a strength and a weakness on the

PCT. He had heard that a few hikers had successfully navigated the old PCT route, and, after so many miles, the drive to stay on the official trail ran strong. But the deciding factor for him was his need to prove to himself, "I am a courageous person."

North on the PCT or east along Indian Creek? As the fog changed to drizzle, Dalton headed out north, bound for the Suiattle.

Four hours later, Frodo, Blazer, and I reached the same spot. The fog had lifted and was now hovering a hundred feet above our heads. We saw the warning notes—"Please, take the Detour." We did the opposite. After 2500 miles, we made our own decisions.

The Forest Service hadn't officially closed the trail, and at Stevens Pass we'd spoken to someone who'd hiked the old route southbound. So our decision wasn't totally foolhardy. But the magnitude of the choice to head north on an unmaintained trail started sinking in as we began tallying the blowdowns. Step-overs didn't count—a blowdown had to significantly interfere with our pace. Often we veered yards left or right, scrambled through broken limbs and brush, or handed our packs over a tree trunk, rock, or other obstacle. It chewed up time, tried our patience, and sometimes led to taking a dicey shortcut. As dusk approached, Blazer looked up one gorge and spied a twenty-foot log bridge wedged sideways between bus-size rocks. "Why's a bridge up there?" Then she realized—upslope we'd recently forded a stream—that bridge had spanned the stream before the 2003 flood.

At nightfall when we made camp, the blowdown tally had reached sixty-two. Our group of three had expanded to eight. Of the newcomers, Blazer was especially happy to see Not-a-Moose. They'd last parted in Ashland, six weeks ago. As for the other four, three were close to Blazer's age—Chigger, Miso, and Mr. Pink, Miso's boyfriend from the trail. Miso would answer to Tofu, or for that matter, any soy product. The eighth and last was Lotto, who was new to us.

We counted the hundredth blowdown the next morning—leaving a trail note to designate it as such—but it wasn't the most memorable blowdown. Neither was number two hundred or three hundred. Nor was the blowdown that dwarfed Frodo, an ancient western red cedar with

a twenty-five-foot circumference. What a sound that forest giant must have made when it crashed!

The most memorable blowdown wasn't nearly that large. The trail had been crabbing sideways across a steep-angled slope, and this blowdown was a ten-foot long, chest-high, broken stub lying across the trail, its rotted top hanging out over a cliff like a slide to oblivion. *One slip and you're airborne, launched off the mountainside*, I thought. With chilled fingers I clawed into slimy, partially rotted wood as I clambered over first, and then reached back to help Chigger. Blazer came next, but she waved me off. "You've got this, Blazer," I said as I started to turn. She placed one foot on the top and had just lifted the second off the ground. That's the moment her first foot slipped. Her body hit the slick wood and her feet shot over the edge as my hand flew to grab her—my fist barely closing around her wrist. Blazer's weight hit me with a jerk, and my arm tensed like a steel rod. Chigger's chin dropped as she watched me start to slide toward Blazer. I dug in my feet and leaned back, my heels searching for traction. My second arm flailed behind me for something to hold, but grabbed only air. The quick intake of our breaths was drowned by the roar, far below, of a Cascade river tumbling boulders like a child's marbles. Then my balance caught. And my grip held. Blazer's legs hovered over air as we looked at one another.

When she was finally able to walk again her knees trembled. *I nearly went over*, she thought. *I could have been just like No Way Ray.*

The second day after Indian Pass we reached the Suiattle. Once a channel, the streambed was now a wide, rock-strewn floodplain. Trail ducks, a trail marker of three rocks stacked one atop the other, led us to the log. Two feet thick and six feet above the water, the trunk spanned forty-foot-wide rapids. I went first, unbuckling my hip belt to lower my center of gravity, and to make sure I could wiggle the pack off my back if I fell in. I walked across upright, but just past halfway, I thought, *This is really stupid.*

Nevertheless, I pressed on, heart in my throat. Next, Chigger scooted slowly along the length of the log, lifting her rear and inching forward time and time again. Frodo followed. It took 60 to 70 scoots to cross. Then

Lotto stepped out. He looked like he might walk across, but after three steps he retreated—then scooted across too.

Blazer hadn't seen any of this. Over the roar, we hollered out, "Scoot across," and pantomimed the motion. She nodded an acknowledgement, but then stepped confidently out onto the log. We held our collective breath as she moved, her hiking poles marking time in front of her. I'd never seen her concentrate more fiercely. The exhale of breath was palpable when she reached the other side.

Four hundred and twenty-six blowdowns. That was the final tally when the detour track rejoined the PCT, seven miles past the Suiattle. We were so pleased to be back on the maintained official trail we could have kissed the ground. Twenty miles of tread now lay between us and Stehekin. For most, it was the final resupply stop before the end. With 100 miles and five hiking days left, we were on track to meet Frodo's itinerary end date of October 2.

MILES FROM NOWHERE

CHAPTER NINE

Morocco

On the high cliffs along the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula near Algeciras, Larry and I stopped in the rain to lean our bikes together and look out across the straits. Africa loomed dark and ominous in the distance. Its towering coastal mountains erupted like great monuments of rock from beneath the black stormy sea. It was an awesome sight. And as we stared long and hard at the strange new continent, we felt nervous about what might lie in store for us.

It had rained all day and was still at it when we pedaled up to the ferry terminal in Algeciras. On ship, we pulled on dry clothes and wrung out our wet ones. We were the only bicyclers on board.

Ceuta was a bustling, duty-free port city, still controlled by Spain. The Spanish dock workers directed us to the cheapest place in town to sleep—under the overhang outside the ferry terminal. We pushed our bikes along the cement, past rows of sleeping bodies—young travelers from Europe who, like us, had just arrived on the ferry from Algeciras, or who were waiting to ship out for Spain first thing in the morning. I propped my bike against a wall and draped my wet clothes over my handlebars and rear panniers to let them dry out overnight. Then we laid our mats out on the cold, damp cement and pulled our muddy, sweaty bodies down into our sleeping bags. It had been two days since we washed. Larry stuffed our valuables into the foot of his bag, and we fell asleep.

In the morning we hit the public shower facilities in the station parking lot, then changed our money and stocked up on food: rice, cauliflower, bread, eggs, and two pounds of cheese. Larry scouted around for a map of Morocco, but even the cheapest ones were selling for five dollars; so, instead of buying one, he memorized the road to Fès. The route seemed simple enough—all we had to do was to keep to the main road south. We hoped any forks in the road would have signposts.

After spending nearly two hours filling out forms and standing in line at the border, Larry and I entered Morocco in the early afternoon of April 14. We pedaled right out of modern civilization and into the past. Feet and donkeys were the common mode of transportation, and the hilly countryside, not paved roads, was the main avenue of transit. There was no jumble of economy cars; no Toyotas, Datsuns, or Fiats cramming the road. Only wealthy Moroccans owned cars, invariably Mercedes. Occasionally a compressed collection of people, boxes, animals, and crates rumbled past us in one of the country's many moaning, dilapidated, public buses.

But while the twenty-five miles of paved road between the border and the first city due south, Tetouan, were nearly deserted, the surrounding countryside was crawling with human figures in transit. Creeping mounds of clothing—ground-length skirts, blouses, sweaters, scarves, and shawls, topped by gigantic beach towels—littered the hillsides. These mounds proved to be Moroccan women. The beach towels, which they draped over their heads and fastened under their chins, were their veils. The only exposed flesh on a peasant woman's body were her hands and a small portion of her face. These women traveled with bulky cloth sacks stuffed with most of their worldly possessions slung over their backs, and they always walked, while the men sometimes rode donkeys. The women never looked directly at me or Larry, but the men, dressed in long, hooded, heavy cloth robes and slipper-like leather shoes with pointed toes, peered out from under their floppy hoods and smiled and waved.

On one side of the road stretched empty, white sandy beaches and the clear blue Mediterranean. On the other side were grassy green hills dotted by trees and occasional rocks. There was a total absence of litter. The peasants were too poor to know the luxury of thoughtlessly tossing things away. What little was discarded, primarily orange peels, was quickly devoured by the passing donkeys.

As we entered the city of Tetouan, I prepared myself for the onslaught of whistles, shouts, and leering faces that had so often greeted me in southern Spain, expecting Moroccan males to be as obnoxious as the Spanish. But I was surprised. The men smiled and nodded to me, and the teenage boys all shouted a polite *"Bon jour, madam! Bon jour, monsieur!"* Then, jabbering away in French, they gestured that they were pleased that Larry and I were bicycling through their country.

We wanted a cheap map of Morocco, but the stores in Tetouan were closed when we pedaled through. A policeman explained that, as in Spain, the shops in

Moroccan cities closed between two and five o'clock, and he directed us through the city center and out to the road again.

Five miles outside of town, we stopped in a deserted area to eat a snack and relieve ourselves. There was no one in sight when we pulled off the road and walked back among some rocks and shrubs, but no sooner had I scouted out a circle of bushes to squat behind than the surrounding hillsides sprang to life. I could hear people shouting to each other across the narrow valleys, and within seconds they materialized around us, the men in their long hooded robes. Realizing what I was doing, they kept their distance, staring down at us from the low hilltops. But when we pedaled away, they climbed down to the spot where we had rested and searched the area for anything we might have left behind.

My knees were swollen and sore this day. Some days were like that; my knees would ache for a day or two, and then one morning I'd wake up and they'd be as good as new for the next month. Because of my knees, we began our climb through the Rif mountains, just south of Tetouan, at a slow pace—slow enough to make us ripe for attack. The mountainsides were sprinkled with groups of children tending sheep, goats, and crops, and these children were unquestionably some of the fastest and farthest-running humans on the face of the earth. The minute they spotted us grinding slowly up the inclines, they dropped everything and were off and running. Squeals of delight exploded in the air as the children pounded up and down slopes, across fields, over rocks, and onto the road, the boys running in their baggy pants and shirts and the girls in their long skirts, loose blouses, scarves, and jewelry.

Each child tried his or her damnedest to reach us first and have the initial crack at a possible cigarette. Cigarettes were what they all wanted. They never asked for anything else, never food nor money, only cigarettes. The "Cigarette! Cigarette! Cigarette!" chanting began with the first arrivals, and it amplified into a deafening roar as the others plunged onto the scene.

A number of things happened when the children found we had no cigarettes. When we were creeping uphill, they crowded around us and slapped our bikes. A stern, loud no was usually enough to send them scattering. When we were pedaling downhill and could stay out of their reach, the children either chased behind us for a half mile or so before giving up, or they heaved whatever they had or could get hold of—rocks, sticks, hoes, hatchets—at us as we whizzed by. They never aimed to hit us, everything was tossed a little to one side. But a few times someone would go too far.

Once, a boy grabbed Larry's spare water bottle off the back of his bike. Larry stopped, climbed off his bike, and walked angrily back toward the boy. The culprit's older brother, sensing a bad situation developing, grabbed the bottle out of the boy's hand, handed it back to Larry, and slapped his brother on the side of the head. The group then stood silently and meekly by as we pedaled away.

Ten minutes later we were enveloped by a crowd of teenage boys as we inched our way up an especially steep grade. As the gang swarmed around us, some of the boys grabbed our arms and legs, while the others tried to yank our bikes out from under us. Larry and I threw a few punches to scare them away, but they kept clawing us. Just as we were about to hit the pavement, a shiny new Mercedes rounded the top of the climb. The driver took one look at what was happening and gunned the car straight toward us. Brakes screeched, and out jumped two Moroccan men in western dress. They chased off the kids and motioned for us to make our getaway, but three miles down the road we were mobbed again.

As it turned out, the bands of children and their screams for cigarettes plagued us every day, every three or four miles, all the way to Fès. And while the mountain children wanted cigarettes, the men wanted to sell us hashish. In the Rif mountains, the Moroccans cultivate hemp, from which they produce hashish. Whenever we passed a gathering of adobe houses, men dashed out and chased after us with huge cubes of hashish in their hands.

"You want hashish?" they yelled. "You stay here. Hashish and shower." The mountain men knew just what the foreigners wanted.

"You me distributor?" asked one man. "You buy me hashish cheap, sell in you country. Much dollar."

At day's end, we were still in the mountains, pedaling along the steep slopes that dropped into deep, narrow valleys. The far slopes were speckled with clusters of adobe houses. There were no roads to these remote settlements, only an occasional footpath. We could hear people shouting across the mountains and valleys to one another. Whenever an adult walking near the road spotted us, he called the news to the people farther up the cliffs, and immediately hooded heads popped out from behind the trees, rocks, and houses. Some of these silent human forms surveyed us from afar, while others came down the slopes for a closer look. When there were adults nearby, the children never bothered us.

As darkness approached, Larry and I had no idea where to pitch our tent for the night. The mountain slopes were too steep, and we worried that the children would chuck rocks through our tent. Without a map, we didn't know whether

or not we were nearing a town, although we could see what appeared to be a pass up ahead. We kept pedaling and my knees ached. I prayed that we'd find a settlement at the summit.

Small Moroccan settlements, the few that were scattered along the road between Ceuta and Fès, generally consisted of mud-brick houses with dried straw roofs; a bar-cafe, which, because consumption of alcoholic beverages is forbidden by Muslim law, served only mint tea and soft drinks; a community well or fountain; some wandering chickens; and no electricity or plumbing. Except that it boasted two cafes instead of one, the village that greeted us at the pass fit this description perfectly. It sat at the center of a narrow, marshy plateau.

This night, for the first time on our trip, we would be among people whose primary tongue—Arabic—we could not speak. As we leaned our bikes against one of the cafes, we were wondering what hand motions we should use to ask permission to pitch our tent on the wet, soggy land next to the building. We were a bit anxious about what the reaction of the townspeople would be to our arrival and request.

At the entrance to the cafe, a hunk of rotting, hairy, fly-covered meat rested on a dirty wooden table. A primitive scale, consisting of a rod and two pans and a small collection of round weights, sat beside the meat. The butcher knife was caked with a layer of hardened blood and dust.

Larry stepped past the meat and into the cafe, and I followed behind. I wasn't sure exactly what my role as a female should be in this Muslim country, where so far I'd rarely seen women and men talking together and never once saw a woman in a cafe.

The tables in the cafe were filled with men smoking hashish and sipping mint tea or soft drinks. When we entered the room, all conversation stopped, and the silent faces examining us remained totally expressionless.

"Hello. Does anyone here speak English?" Larry asked hesitantly.

No one said a word. One man, the only one in the cafe not dressed in a long robe, shook his head.

"Habla español?" Larry asked.

"Si!" answered the man in the tattered suit, who, it turned out, worked for the Ministry of Justice and had stopped in at the cafe on his way north to Tetouan from Meknes. His name was Merouane, and he spoke Arabic, Spanish, and French. In Morocco the educated youth spoke French as a second language, and some of the older people, who were schooled when Spain controlled parts of Morocco, still remembered Spanish.

Larry explained to Merouane what we wanted to do, and he in turn explained our intentions to the men in the cafe. When Merouane finished talking, the hooded men appeared extremely pleased. Merouane motioned for us to follow him, and everyone emptied out of the cafe behind us. By now the village children had spotted our bikes resting against the cafe wall and were busy spreading the word. It wasn't long before all the men and children of the town had gathered around us. But no women ever appeared.

"Put your tent anywhere," said Merouane. "We want to watch."

Larry and I scouted out the driest area near the cafe and set about pitching the tent. As we worked, Merouane asked us questions about ourselves and our bike trip then translated our answers for the others. When the dome of our bright blue and yellow tent popped up, everyone, including Merouane, stood transfixed. A few of the children started to move in closer, but they were held back by the men, who shot us questioning looks. As soon as Larry motioned for everyone to go ahead and examine the tent, the men squatted down and peered in through the windows, then gingerly touched the nylon walls or studied the aluminum poles and stakes. After a while they asked Merouane something.

"We want to know how you get inside," Merouane explained.

Larry unzipped the door, then crawled in and looked back out at us through the windows. That impressed everyone; and when I unpacked our sleeping pads and down sleeping bags, the men took turns feeling them. Merouane wanted to know if President Carter owned a tent like ours.

Just as we finished unloading our gear, it began to sprinkle. Merouane quickly bid us farewell, then climbed into his car and drove away. The other men pulled their hoods down over their foreheads, hunched their shoulders, and hurried upon pointed slippers or bare feet to the shelter of the cafe or their nearby homes. Larry and I climbed inside the tent, while the children huddled around the windows and stared in at us. They waved and giggled.

With Merouane gone, we figured we had lost all verbal communication with our newly adopted village. But suddenly the worried face of the cafe owner appeared at one of the tent windows. In very broken Spanish and with the help of a spectrum of hand motions, he told us that the ground around the tent would flood if it rained hard tonight. He had a better place for us, and gestured for Larry to follow him. I waited inside the tent and rested my knees.

The better place turned out to be a large windowless room made of cement blocks, with a corrugated steel door. The room was newly constructed and would

soon become the village's only market. The cafe owner was its proud proprietor, and a broad smile burst across his face when we told him that we greatly appreciated his offer and agreed to spend the night inside.

We collapsed our tent and moved everything into the dark room, which would shelter us from the rain and the noise and lights of passing cars and trucks. Then we walked with our stove, cookset, rice, and vegetables to the cafe, where we could cook and eat by the light of the kerosene lamps. Two young men, who spoke French and could read some English, joined us at our table. I pulled out the *Time* magazine I'd bought in Ceuta and handed it to them. They opened it, pointed to a picture of Carter, Sadat, and Begin, and smiled.

"Jimmy Carter," one of them nodded. "Good. Peace."

The other fellow pointed at a picture of an atomic bomb exploding, then wrinkled his brow and shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he didn't understand. His friend glanced at the picture and said "Hiroshima," and the other nodded that he understood.

While the two studied the magazine together, they were smoking hash and holding hands. In Muslim Morocco the young men in the country settlements had no sexual contact with women until they married, and our two new friends, like so many other young Muslim men we would encounter, shared their sexual desires with other men either because women were off limits or because they preferred male partners.

While we ate our dinner, a truck driver stopped in for his evening meal of beef shishkebab and tea. He spoke to us in Spanish, and before he left he informed the men in the cafe that we had no map. That news prompted everyone to put their heads together and draw us a map detailing the route to Fès. Afterward, someone wrote in the place names in French. It was a sketchy map, but the road had only two forks in it: the turnoffs to Chechaouen and Meknes.

After we'd finished eating, Larry and I thanked everyone for the map, told the fellows next to us to keep the magazine, and started back to our cement room. The cafe owner was worried that we might be too cold, but we assured him that we had enough bedding.

The village was quiet. The usual modern small-town sounds of televisions, radios, cars, water faucets, and flush toilets were absent. The children had all been put to bed, and only a few tall hooded figures moved about in front of their silent homes in the darkness and the light rain. They nodded to us and smiled, and a peaceful feeling permeated the crisp night air. Larry and I relieved ourselves at

the edge of the village, then entered our pitch-dark room and pulled the heavy door closed behind us. While I groped for my sleeping bag, I remembered the advice of a German woman I met in Spain.

"If you're going to Morocco," she said, "be sure to always stay in a nice hotel. Get a room with a good lock on the door. You can never be too cautious with those crazy Moroccans. They're very dangerous people, all of them. They'll rob you and they'll slit your throat. They steal everything."

I smiled to myself, then I slid down into my bag and fell asleep at the complete mercy of the "crazy, dangerous" Moroccans.

The next morning, after we'd eaten breakfast inside our room, we pushed open the corrugated door and walked with our bikes to the community fountain. The men and children were heading out into the mountains to tend their animals and crops, and when they saw us at the fountain, they walked over to watch us clean our dishes. Two men kept asking us something we couldn't understand. Finally, one of the men hunched his shoulders, crossed his arms in front of his chest, clenched his hands and shivered, then pointed to the cement room.

"They want to know if we got cold during the night," Larry decided. We shook our heads and everyone smiled. Before we headed south, we stopped at the cafe and thanked the owner for his hospitality.

From the south end of the plateau, where the road dropped down off the pass, we could see snow on the tops of the high mountains to the east. The air was still damp and cool again, and I would be comfortable in my sweat pants and sweat shirt, which was good, because I wanted to keep my legs and arms covered out of respect for the Muslim dress code.

"Oops, looks like trouble up ahead," I called to Larry as we coasted to the foot of the mountain. Blocking the road stood two men with their motorcycles. Even from a distance, I could see that they were armed. Like most Moroccans, both of the men were slightly darker in complexion than southern Spaniards. They were tall and heavyset, with black hair and thick mustaches. There was a fierce look in their eyes. Larry and I rolled to a stop. There was no other traffic on the road.

"Passport!" ordered the shorter of the two. They were policemen. We fished out our passports from our handlebar bags and handed them over. The policemen eyed our bicycles curiously, then they each grabbed a passport and stared in amazement at the front covers.

"U-ni-ted States of A-mer-i-ca," one slowly read aloud.

"Americain?" the taller one asked incredulously.

"Yep," said Larry.

"But how here with bicycle?" The shorter policeman could speak some English while his partner spoke only French.

"We flew from America to Spain with our bicycles. We've cycled here from Barcelona."

"Long, long way! Where go Morocco?"

"Fès."

"Americain?" the taller one was asking again. He was having a difficult time comprehending the concept of two Americans arriving in Morocco on bicycles. His partner explained.

"Americans travel only tour buses!" he said. "But you no. You bicycle. That good. Come, we help."

They led us into an isolated bar-cafe up the road and told the owner to bring us some food. The man handed us a small loaf of bread and some packets of processed cheese packaged in foil, and the policemen bargained the price.

"The last thing we need is more cheese to add to the two pounds we bought in Ceuta," Larry groaned. "But I'm sure as hell not going to argue with these guys." We smiled and thanked the owner and the policemen, then continued south.

After a few hours of pedaling through grassy mountains, the road suddenly filled with men, women, and children, moving south on foot or on donkeys with large baskets strapped to their sides. We felt uneasy. It seemed as if the entire mountain population had joined a mass exodus, and we wondered if there had been or was expected to be some major catastrophe we were unaware of. But, although the people were moving quickly, everyone appeared calm. One old man riding on a donkey led by a woman began laughing hysterically when he saw us pedal by. No one traveled by bicycle on the open road in Morocco, and there were no bicycles in the small towns. To the Moroccans, Larry and I were a queer sight.

We pedaled for nearly ten miles alongside the flood of people and donkeys before we reached its end at a large village and discovered the reason for the mass migration—it was market day in the village. A circular brick wall with one wide opening stood at the center of the village. Inside, the farmers had set out their produce for sale, and merchants were selling beach towels, clothes, and candles from makeshift wooden stalls. The market was crowded and so muddy that the people had laid down wooden planks to form dry pathways. Larry and I wanted to go inside and buy food for lunch and dinner, but that meant we would have to leave our bicycles outside, out of eyeshot.

"I don't know about you, but I've decided the rumors about the Moroccans all being a bunch of cutthroat thieves are a lot of bull," Larry said. "At least I don't think anyone's going to steal from a couple of bicyclers. I get the feeling they respect what we're doing. I think we could leave our bikes here and nobody would touch anything on them. What do you think?"

I was a little leery but thought it was worth a try. Using gestures and mime, Larry asked one of the thirty children who were crowded around us to watch our bikes while we shopped. The boy, once he realized he alone had been chosen above all the others to guard the possessions of the two newly arrived aliens, quickly assumed an air of supreme self-importance and took his position next to our bikes. I knew right then that we had nothing to worry about.

Inside the market, we plodded through the slush of mud and donkey manure and looked over the stalls and food. Some of the merchants tossed us packets of hard candies, and everyone shouted a cheerful *"Bon jour, madam! Bon jour, monsieur!"* One of the farmers spoke to us in Spanish and sold us two pounds of oranges, some carrots, zucchini, onions, and tomatoes. The total bill came to a whopping $1.50. To a couple of cheapo cyclers who loved to eat, Morocco was looking better by the minute. The man dropped a bag of candy in with our food and wished us a safe journey.

We reached Quezzane, the only city between Tetouan and Fès, by midafternoon, and we stopped to buy bottled water and bread. The man at the bakery told us that we could find bottled water at the bar in the tourist hotel up the street. Two Spanish couples from Malaga were seated on the patio of the hotel sipping soft drinks, and one of the women gasped in disbelief when she saw us ride up.

"Diós mío! Did you come all the way from Ceuta on those things?" she shrieked. She and her friends were returning from Fès, and they offered us their maps.

"The road forks up ahead," the woman explained. "We came by way of the main road, which is relatively flat, but it's in terrible condition. There are potholes big enough to swallow your bicycles, and there are rocks all over the road. I'd advise you to take the mountain road to Fès. It might be better than the main road; at least it couldn't be worse."

An ultramodern, air-conditioned tour bus pulled up to the hotel just as we finished talking with the Spaniards, and we decided to ask the driver about the two roads going south. We wanted a second opinion before we took off over the tiny mountain road, which was a barely visible line on the maps the Spaniards had given us. When we approached the bus, we could see that the passengers

were Americans. Both of us were excited to have encountered some fellow countrymen, and we rushed toward them to strike up a conversation.

The expression of horror on the passengers' faces when they looked our way brought my forward motion to an abrupt halt. At first I couldn't understand what exactly had terrified them. But then it occurred to me that Larry and I were caked with dirt and sweat. We hadn't washed in a while. Our clothes were tattered; mud and donkey manure clung to our shoes; our hair was greasy and matted; our bicycles were dusty and battered. I froze. *They're afraid of us*, I said to myself. *They're afraid of us because we look like filthy weirdos, and they're going to keep as far away from us as possible.* I looked over at Larry. The poor soul was busy making a hopeless effort at starting a friendly conversation with the folks from back home.

"Hi everybody! Are you all Americans?"

Silence.

"Say, can someone tell me where your driver went? I'd like to get some directions from him."

There was no response to that question either, but I knew exactly what the people were thinking: You *want to talk to* our *driver? Forget it. You're not catching a ride with us. No sir. We don't allow any degenerates on* this *bus. We're into good clean fun, and who knows what you two filthy freakos are into. Probably hashish and stealing our money. You and the Moroccans would steal us blind if you got half a chance. Rob us and use the money to buy drugs. No sir. You're not talking to* our *driver! No way, no how!*

As soon as Larry walked close enough to the unloading passengers to give them a good whiff of his killer body odor and scented shoes, they fled to the bar inside the hotel—all except one man from San Jose, who was tottering his way toward me.

"Shay. Wh-what er ya two doin' 'ere? Ya studying' fer yer pos' doctorate en fereign geography?" the man asked sarcastically. His "little something to nip on" was tucked into the right-hand jacket pocket of his bright orange leisure suit. Gold medallions dangled on his hairy chest, exposed by an unbuttoned, flowered shirt. Around his bulging abdomen he wore a wide belt of shiny white plastic, which matched his equally shiny white loafers.

"Did I shay *ge*ography or *porn*ography?" he continued in his inebriated slur. "Shay, did ja know dat da Vatican 'as da worldses larges' collection of por-no-gra-phic art? Yep, nude statues and pitchers everwhere."

Larry and I shook our heads.

"OK. Now ya do. Name's Adams and I'm en con-struck-shun in California. Know where dat is?"

"Yep. We're from California ourselves," answered Larry.

Mr. Adams seemed perplexed by Larry's response. He rolled forward on his toes and squinted to bring us into focus.

"Ya A-mer-i-cans?" he asked suspiciously. "Ya don' look like us 'mericans. Shay, wha's dat on da seatta yer sweat pants?" he wanted to know.

I had turned to look at the donkey that was sniffing our bikes and unfortunately had given Mr. Adams a clear view of my rear end. I'd forgotten about the sheep turds. The day before, when we stopped to eat our afternoon snack just below Tetouan, I accidently sat in a pile of sheep droppings. And the warm and gooey brown pellets the size of marbles had embedded themselves into the seat of my yellow sweats. I had forgotten all about the hardened mess that decorated my rear and emanated its own rancid odor, similar to that which wafted from my shoes. I'd forgotten because the Moroccans never took any notice of it. In Morocco, peasant's clothes stayed dirty and smelly for a long time before they were washed.

"Sheep turds," I said as I turned around and shot Mr. Adams a wide, pleasant smile.

Mr. Adams had pulled out his flask by now, and was pouring the brew down his throat. When I spoke, he stopped abruptly and stuffed the flask back into his pocket. Then he gave me a long, hard, suspicious look. I continued to smile as innocently as I possibly could.

"Whad ja shay?" he slurred.

"Sheep turds."

"Sheep? Sheep? Now don' ja blame *dat* on no sheep!" Mr. Adams yelled angrily. Then after a moment's hesitation, he got his bearings and made his way to the bar to join the others. What he was about to tell them would greatly substantiate their already abysmal opinion of Larry and me.

When we climbed on our bikes to leave, the bus driver walked out of the hotel. We asked him about the two roads to Fès, and he warned us against the mountain road. "It's nonexistent in places," he explained.

The Spaniards were right about the potholes, rocks, and rough blacktop. But since there was almost no traffic on the main road, we could ride in either lane to avoid the obstacles, and we managed to keep our speed up enough to stay just ahead of the packs of children who chased us. By late afternoon we were out of the mountains and pedaling through gentle rolling hills and flat fields of wheat.

We stopped in a tiny settlement to fill our reserve water bottle with water for cooking and washing dishes.

While Larry searched out the community fountain, I stayed with the bikes. Two barefoot girls about twelve years old ran toward me. Bright red and blue scarves tied back their dark hair. Each wore bead necklaces and bracelets, a blouse, and a long skirt, and both of them were holding one hand behind their backs. About six feet from me they swung their hidden hands in front of them; they were each carrying a gigantic, sharp, lethal-looking sickle. They moved their sickles back and forth through the air, and with their free hands they drew their index fingers across their throats to indicate that they were about to slit mine.

My initial thought was to drop the bikes and run like hell, but eventually I decided that the girls were only teasing. Besides, I reasoned, the old man sitting near me wouldn't let them slice me up. I called their bluff.

"Bon jour!" I blurted in my best attempt at French. I held out my hand but kept my eyes on the sickles and my legs ready to sprint. The girls giggled in delight. They lowered their sickles and each one took her turn shaking my hand and cautiously touching the strange blond hairs that covered my exposed forearm.

At sunset Larry and I found ourselves in a flat area devoid of trees, bushes, or roadside settlements. We pushed our bikes into a barren field and started setting up camp. As always happened whenever and wherever we stopped in the countryside, human forms materialized out of thin air. It was an eerie occurrence, which we never quite got used to. This night, the first person to approach was a rugged and crazy sheepherder, who ran around in circles uttering weird gurgling sounds. Each time we glanced in his direction or tried to talk with him, he broke into wild hysterical laughter and ran off, only to return seconds later and resume his circles and noises. Eventually he ran off for good.

Three young men, who spoke only Arabic, and their donkey were the next to wander over. Fortunately, these three fellows seemed completely sane. They sat down beside us and indicated that we should continue preparing our dinner. One fellow pulled from his robe what remotely resembled a handmade ukulele. The body of the instrument was a metal can with a hole cut in the center of the front. A flat stick protruded from the top of the can. Two metal wires were secured to the top of the stick, drawn down across the hole in the center of the can, and attached to the bottom of the can. The instrument was played with a pick.

While Larry and I cooked our meal of steamed zucchini, onions, and tomatoes over rice, the Moroccans serenaded us with melodic wailing accompanied by the

plunkity-plunk-plunkity-plunk of the two strings. In fifteen minutes they exhausted their repertoire and were ready for a different form of entertainment—donkey riding.

"I'm not gettin' on that thing," Larry protested. "Besides, it's you they're pointing at. They want *you* to ride it, not me."

"Oh, what the heck," I said, "I've ridden horses before, this oughta be a piece of cake."

And I calmly climbed onto the donkey. Once I was on, though, I realized there were no reins, which meant that I'd be riding bareback with no means of controlling the beast's direction of movement. I thought better of the situation and started to climb off, but the Moroccans shoved me back on. One fellow gave a shrill whistle and I was off and running—*bouncing* is a better word. The little animal blasted into a fast trot, and it was all I could do to hold onto its shaggy mane. My crotch smashed into the donkey's protruding backbone several times a second as we bobbed across the fields.

"Whoa!" I screamed.

The animal kept going.

Big problem, I thought; *this donkey, being Moroccan, does not understand English.* I tried yanking its mane, slapping its neck, and emitting bloodcurdling screams, all to no avail; I continued bouncing farther and farther away from my beloved husband. We bounced toward a lone farmer, who looked as if he were viewing the arrival of some otherworldly apparition: a strange, light-haired female wearing peculiar yellow slacks and screaming unintelligible words, while jostling wildly atop a donkey. But before I had time to say anything to the farmer, I heard a high-pitched whistle, and he was immediately out of my field of vision. The donkey had executed a swift 180-degree turn, and we were thundering back to its master.

Even before I'd climbed on the donkey, my rear and crotch were sore from the afternoon's rough bicycle ride. And so, when Larry pulled me off the animal's backbone, I was in excruciating pain; but I forced myself to smile at our three friends, who were anxious to know if I enjoyed my ride. They appeared pleased by my attempt at enthusiasm. It was dark now, and they headed toward the hills to their makeshift tents at the edge of the fields.

After they had gone, Larry and I pitched our tent by the light of the moon and stars overhead. The field was completely silent now. There was no traffic on the distant road. I felt uneasy and vulnerable lying inside our tent. 1 had my bottle of dog repellent close at hand. It was a chemical spray that could tempo-

rarily blind an animal or human. I was thinking about the farmers' warnings that wandering nomads might throw rocks at our tent if we pitched it in a field, and also about the stories I heard in Spain of foreigners being raped and murdered by Moroccan bandits. Tonight we had no cement walls around us and no village people to watch over us. Larry, however, wasn't worried in the least.

"The Moroccans have been nothing but kind and generous," he said. "The children are a problem, but they don't go wandering through fields in the middle of the night. There's nothing to worry about, Barb. Forget about the rumors."

Ten minutes later we heard people approaching. I grabbed my dog repellent. The voices stopped just as the footsteps reached our tent. Then there was a long agonizing silence, and beads of perspiration popped out all over my body. *How many are there*? I wondered. *Why don't they move? Why don't they say something?* No one stirred, and the silence seemed endless. Then came a noise—*plunkity-plunk, plunkity-plunk, plunkity-plunk*. A warm, safe sensation washed through my body. Our friends sang softly, and soon Larry and I were fast asleep.

A Moroccan and his cow joined us for breakfast in the morning. The young man first built a small fire with some twigs he was carrying to warm the animal, then he sat down with Larry and me. We offered him a piece of cheese, which he attached to the end of a long stick. He squatted next to the fire and proceeded to roast it. After a few minutes the cheese was a gruesome, hot, rubbery glob, and not even the cow knew what to do with it when the man flicked it at her in disgust. He motioned for another piece of cheese, and this one he dropped into the pocket of his robe for safekeeping.

After breakfast Larry brushed his teeth. A perplexed expression crept across the young man's face. He stuck his head directly in front of Larry's and watched incredulously as Larry moved the end of the brush around inside his mouth. All of a sudden Larry pulled the toothbrush out of his mouth, grinned a big, wide smile, and forced a flood of white frothy paste out from between his teeth. Our friend broke into hysterical laughter and trotted around his cow, slapping himself and pointing to Larry's foamy grin.

Soon after we started out, a fork appeared in the road that was not shown on our maps. The signposts were all in Arabic, and Larry and I studied them thoughtfully.

"Well, what do you think?" Larry asked. "Which looks more like Fès? The squiggles on the right or the ones on the left?" While we examined the squiggles, two boys who were tending goats in the fields nearby came running over to have a good look at us.

"Fès?" Larry asked, pointing in the direction he figured Fès was located, to the left. The two nodded. "Fès?" he asked again, this time pointing to the right. We had learned that some children answer yes to whatever they're asked; so we were careful to always double-check. The boys shook their heads no and pointed back to the left.

By noon we were within twenty miles of Fès. The terrain was dry and dusty, and the temperature had pushed into the eighties. I continued to cycle in my sweat pants until I couldn't stand it any longer.

"I've got to get these sweats off," I called to Larry. "Keep your fingers crossed. We're about to find out what happens if a woman wears shorts in a Muslim country."

I ran off the road behind some boulders and hurried to change before any curious forms began to materialize. I returned wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt and my black cycling shorts, which extended much farther down my legs than my gym shorts. I felt totally naked.

For the first few miles, I wouldn't look at anyone. I was embarrassed by my exposed skin. Convinced that everyone was staring at me in utter disgust, I couldn't bring my eyes to meet theirs. Eventually, I summoned my courage and searched the farmers' faces for disapproving scowls. There were none; the men looked at me no differently than they had when I was heavily clothed.

We saw the Atlas mountains before we saw Fès; their peaks still covered with snow. Fès sat in the plain at the base of the range. The oldest of the Sultan's four traditional capitals, Fès had been there for over 1200 years. In the mid-fourteenth century, it was the center of learning and commerce, and it was still the center of religion and traditional crafts. At the outskirts of the city, Larry and I stopped at a modern gas station, something we hadn't seen in days, and asked directions to the campground. The attendants sent us to the separate "new city," founded in 1916.

New Fès boasted modern shops and hotels, and nearly all the men and some of the women dressed in western clothing. It shocked us to see women wearing knee-length skirts, high-heeled shoes, and tight blouses. The majority of the women, though, wore long, hooded, tight-fitting satin robes, which covered their clothing. Some women pulled their hoods over their heads and wore veils that covered their whole faces except for their eyes. Others wore hoods or scarves but no veils, while still others wore neither, only the long robes, with the hoods resting on their shoulders.

The campground was tucked into a classy residential area of New Fès and surrounded by a high brick wall with two guards stationed in front. Inside there

were showers, squat toilets, sinks to wash dishes in, and cement basins and washboards for washing clothes. The camping fee for two people was five *dirhams* a day, or $1.90. The showers were ice cold, but in the heat they felt wonderful. We washed away the dirt, sweat, mud, donkey manure, and sheep turds that had attached themselves to our bodies and clothing over the last two and a half days. I bought oranges, bread, and yogurt for dinner at the shop across from the campground, and by six o'clock Larry and I had collapsed into bed.

We were up early the next morning, walking the eight kilometers to visit the *medina*, the walled, ancient city of Fès. The brilliant sunlight could barely filter through the smoke, dust, and shadows that filled its intricate maze of crowded, narrow passageways. Flies dotted the hazy strands of sunlight. The smells, sights, and sounds of the *medina* were exotic and alien. Odors came from the steaming mint tea, the hashish, and the fresh warm piles of manure left by the donkeys, which were used to carry everything into and out of the labyrinth. The dying vats in the giant open-air tannery had their own special smell, as did the decaying buildings, the spices, the dirt and dust, the freshly baked pastries, and the rotting meat at a few of the butcher shops.

Through the odors, made especially pungent by the heat, swayed a collage of white turbans, red fezzes, jeans, tailored shirts, knee-length skirts, long hooded robes, veils, scarves, beach towels, and flat leather slippers. Women tourists in scant tube-tops and shorts moved along beside Muslim women who exposed only their eyes. People were pushed awkwardly against the walls of the shops lining the pathways by the force of the crowds making room for passing donkeys laden with boxes or baskets of merchandise. The dark men leading the donkeys were continually calling out to the wall of bodies up ahead, but often the confusion in the bustling narrow passageways drowned out their pleas for more room.

Static and grating high-pitched singing blared from radios inside the tea shops, and five times a day the summons to prayer was cried out by the *muezzin* from the top of the slender, towering minarets. Below, cramped into tiny one-room stalls, which opened onto the alleyways, carpenters, leather and brass craftsmen, weavers, and tailors worked feverishly. Young boys hired as weavers' assistants stood some twelve feet up the alley from their shops, each holding three or four strands of wool fibers in his hands. The strands extended into the shop, and were woven into robes and suits by the weaver. The boys moved the fibers around as the men weaved, the children running past sometimes tripped over the strands. Old men stood nearby selling mint leaves, five cents a bunch, for tea, while small children begged good-naturedly from the foreign tourists,

and the butchers hung out the severed heads of the animals whose meat was for sale.

Rugs, hardware, footwear, fruits, vegetables, blue jeans, fabrics, furniture, lamps—nearly everything imaginable—were stocked or produced in the shops of the *medina*. The diversity of shops matched the multiformity of people, smells, and sounds. Inside the Qarawiyin mosque, the oldest mosque in North Africa and the seat of a university founded in 859, devout Muslim men knelt on exotic handwoven rugs and bowed toward Mecca in prayer to Allah. At the bus station just outside the walls of the *medina*, the blind, deformed, and destitute begged from the Muslim passengers, most of whom passed them a few coins.

Each day for part of a week, Larry and I lost ourselves in this tangled, exotic world, which at times seemed like a surrealistic dream. We watched and we listened and we breathed in its aromas, and then we pulled ourselves away and headed back to Ceuta.

Taking the bus to Ceuta seemed like a good idea for two reasons. First, we would avoid spending two days retracing the two hundred miles between Fès and Ceuta. And second, we figured the bus ride might prove to be an interesting experience.

At five thirty on the morning of April 22, we pedaled from the campground to the bus station. The sunlight had yet to brighten the dusty air, and sleeping bodies clogged the alleyways around the station. For thirty-five *dirhams* (eleven dollars), we were given two seats on the six o'clock bus. Our gear we could stuff under our feet and seats, but the bicycles had to ride on the roof, and that cost us another ten *dirhams*. The bikes joined the large packages and crates carried up a ladder at the back of the bus, placed on the roof, and secured with a net. During the eight-hour ride, whenever the bus stopped to take on more passengers and crates, Larry climbed up the ladder behind the boy doing the loading to make sure our bikes were still there and in one piece. Because of the rough road surface and the bus's apparent absence of shock absorbers, the parcels banged noisily against the roof and each other. Each time the bus plunged into and leapt out of a road-wide pothole, we half expected to see our mechanical companions come flying past the windows.

If only Mom could see me now, I kept thinking, as the bus headed out of Fès. Here we were, Larry and I, squashed into our tiny seats with hardly enough room in front of us to place our knees, legs, and feet. The two men standing in the aisle next to us each held two live chickens, one in either hand, upside down by their muddy feet. The chickens hung there motionlessly.

The bus's radio speakers were located just over my head, and the driver had the volume turned up as far as it would go. What came out of the speakers were the voices of wailing Moroccan mammas accompanied primarily by static. A few miles outside of Fès, the man in front of us banged the back of his portable radio-cassette against the back of the seat in front of him, and his electric box burst to life. He preferred wailing males, yet with the identical nerve-racking accompaniment. The bus was close and hot, and I leaned my head out the window for some dusty fresh air and wind in my ears.

Once, when the bus lunged into a pothole, one of the men in the aisle was caught off balance. He let go of the chicken in his right hand and grabbed for a seat back to balance himself. The loose chicken went berserk, and by the time someone had wrestled it down, there was hardly a feather left on her body. She was returned to her owner. The music blared on.

There were only three scheduled stops between Fès and Ceuta—Quezzane, Chechaouen, and Tetouan—but our driver stopped for anyone waiting at the side of the road who signaled for a ride. The blind rode free. At Quezzane, before anyone was able to get off the bus, a few beggars climbed on board and made their rounds. Then children selling fruit, candy, and gum streamed in. Almost every passenger got off in Quezzane to stretch and stop at the cafe. They all left their possessions unattended on their seats, which made me wonder what had happened to all the Moroccan thieves the foreign travelers warned us about.

In Tetouan the two men seated in front of us got off, and two smartly dressed Moroccans in their early twenties took their places. Both fellows could speak English, but their speech was slurred and they giggled a lot. Shortly after they sat down, one of them pulled out a half-empty bottle of gin and two glasses. This was the first time Larry and I had seen a Moroccan with alcohol. The others on the bus glared disapprovingly at the bottle, but the two ignored the hostile stares and commenced belting down whole glassfuls of straight gin. With their third glass, they each swallowed a strange looking pill. It wasn't long after that that they both started laughing uncontrollably and experiencing great difficulty in sitting upright, especially the one seated next to the aisle. The other Moroccans hissed in disgust.

Giggle, giggle, flop. The torso of one of the gin drinkers tumbled into the aisle; the armrest prevented the remainder of his body from following. The other drinker leaned over, grabbed his friend's nearest dangling shoulder, and yanked his body upright. There was more laughter, and in their drunken

stupor the two offered the hooded farmer seated across the aisle from them a sample of their beverage. The farmer raged in horror and stormed off to another seat.

Giggle, giggle, flop. The fellow on the aisle fell overboard again. We were now within fifteen minutes of the border and the Spanish border police, who were internationally notorious for their exhaustive hashish searches. It was well known to anyone traveling in Morocco that getting caught bringing hash into Spain could put a human being away in some black hole of a Spanish prison for the good portion of his lifetime. Fifteen minutes from the border, and zeroing in at forty miles an hour, the two gin drinkers lit up a joint.

"Oh won-der-ful," groaned Larry. "Their number's up now. The state they're in, I won't be surprised if they offer all the customs officers a hit or two. This here ought to be one real interesting border crossing!"

The bus rumbled on and the two kept smoking. And they smoked and they smoked and they offered. "No thank you, no we don't care for any hashish right now, thank you very much," we answered. And then the border appeared and the bus stopped.

"Oh great. We smell like hash," Larry grumbled.

Sure enough, our clothes, skin, and hair reeked of hashish as we rolled our bikes up to the crossing, but no one could smell us over the aroma of donkey manure and exhaust fumes. "No customs' checks until Algeciras," the Spanish border official shouted as he waved us through.

Before we headed into Ceuta, I looked back at the bus. It was empty except for the two drinkers. They were still slouched over in their seats, smoking joints and laughing hysterically. They never made it to the ferry that night.

AT ROTA, SPAIN, NINETY MILES northwest of Algeciras on the coast near Cadiz, there was a US naval base. Lee Trani, whom we had met with his wife, Sheila, at the campground in Granada, was stationed there. Lee and Sheila had masterfully bribed us to visit them at the base by handing us a giant jar of extra chunky peanut butter and intimating that there was more to be had at the commissary in Rota. After three months of the sweet, pasty, Spanish concoction ever so loosely referred to as peanut butter, our first spoonful of Yankee extra chunky was pure and simple ecstasy. And so, on April 23, when Larry and I rolled off the ferry from North Africa, we pedaled straight for Rota.

In the mere forty-eight hours it took us to travel from Morocco to Rota, a self-contained little America, we leapt from a past century into what felt like

the twenty-second. While Spain, with its cars, electricity, plumbing in the villages, and heavy farm machinery in the fields, seemed modern in comparison to Morocco, Rota was a step beyond. The base had a drive-in theater, a motorcycle track, a golf course, tennis courts, and in front of the houses sat power lawn mowers and recreational vehicles the size of four or five Moroccan homes. The Trani's home sported a stereo, a bathroom with wall-to-wall carpeting, and a queen-size mattress in what was to be our room.

We stayed in Rota for three days. It felt good to talk with someone in English again and to reminisce about America with people who had lived there. It felt good to be settled for a while and not have to scout for food and a place to camp each night. It felt good, and it stirred certain emotions that made us think of home and caused us to wonder if maybe we weren't getting tired of traveling. In the past when people had taken us into their homes, we usually felt revitalized by their friendships and eager to travel on and meet more kind, caring people. But in Rota we felt homesick.

Lee and Sheila stuffed our packs with chocolate and oatmeal cookies, peanut butter, and granola the morning we left Rota and headed north—directly into a stiff headwind. The terrain north of Rota was uninteresting, and besides, we had seen it all on our way down from Sevilla. Rows of low gnarled stumps covered the dry rolling hills, and the wind lifted the dust from the Spanish vineyards and tossed it into our eyes. The headwind and our homesickness dampened our spirits.

After three hours of battling the wind and a strong desire to hightail it back to Rota, Larry and I pulled off the road to eat lunch. We both felt drained from not having slept much the night before, and our muscles ached from fighting the headwinds. The wind blew dirt and trash all over us—the roads in Spain were often littered with trash and garbage, and some of the streams were so polluted the reeking water looked black and sudsy. A passing motorist slowed down long enough to shout and whistle at me, even though I was clad in sweat pants and a baggy T-shirt. And I thought back to how the arrogant woman at the bakery had jacked up the price of her bread when we, *"turistas,"* walked into her shop. And soon, depression, homesickness, and physical and mental fatigue were taking their toll, and Larry and I started to argue.

"I wish you hadn't made us leave Rota. I wasn't ready to leave," I blurted. I could smell the garbage that someone had tossed out of his car, rotting nearby.

"Me! I didn't want to leave either. I thought you wanted to leave!" Larry shouted back.

"Then why didn't you tell me? Why don't you communicate what you want to do and what you don't want to do? Why didn't you tell me you didn't want to leave Rota?"

"Because we always do what you want to do, so I didn't even bother."

"Now that's a crock! We *always* do what *you* want to do, and you know it!"

The next thing we knew, the two of us were standing beside our bikes screaming about being sick of traveling, sick of the trash and dirt, sick of the Spaniards whistling at me, and sick of each other.

"When I get to Sevilla, I'm flying home! I've had it! I'm through! The end! I'm going home!" I shouted. "And I never want to see you again, ever!"

"Fine! The feeling's mutual! We're through!"

In his anger, Larry grabbed up my bike and tossed it into a ditch. I rushed over and picked it up, pushed it out to the road, jumped on, and pounded the pedals. I had no idea whether or not Larry was following behind me, and I couldn't have cared less. After ten or fifteen minutes, Larry eased up alongside me.

"Let's pull over and talk," he said in a surprisingly even tone.

"No! I've got a plane to catch!" I shot back.

"Now come on, let's calm down and talk." I pedaled on for a while without saying anything. Larry stayed behind, giving me more time to get control of myself.

"OK, let's talk," I finally agreed.

We sat side by side at the edge of the road, and Larry stretched an arm over my shoulders. This time neither of us noticed the litter, wind, dirt, or passing motorists. We both felt sorry, very sorry, for what we'd said to each other. Larry explained that he was depressed and tired of traveling, and I tried to rally our spirits.

"We're in a slump right now, that's all," I reasoned. "We've got to figure that on a two-year trip like this we're going to hit some lows every once in a while. We had a great time in Morocco. Rota just made us homesick, and we feel lonesome 'cause we're sad about leaving Lee and Sheila. And these headwinds aren't helping either. But something will happen pretty soon to set us on another high. It always does.

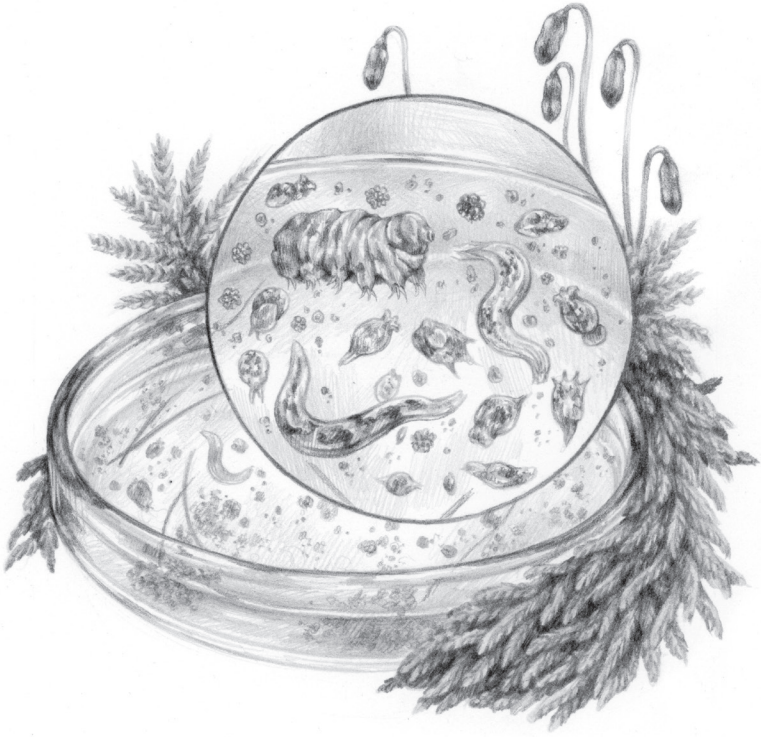
"Look, the most important thing for us to do on this trip, especially as we head further east and the touring gets more difficult, is to support each other. If one of us gets irritated or depressed, instead of just yelling back, the other person's got to take the responsibility for calming that person down and caring for his or her feelings. We need each other's support to keep going through the

rough times and the lows, and that's going to take some real effort on both our parts; because not getting upset when the other person is is tough to do sometimes, even under the most ideal circumstances.

"I love you Larry, and I'd never be able to do this alone. I'm sorry I got mad, and I'm going to be more understanding from now on. Everything will be OK. Portugal will probably turn out to be a great place, and even if it doesn't, we've got my parents' visit to look forward to. They'll be in Madrid in less than a month."

When we climbed into our sleeping bags at the end of the day, Larry and I held each other tight. We still felt homesick, but we could also sense a new closeness forming between us. The knowledge that we had only each other to share, and to struggle through, whatever our journey might throw at us was drawing us together and strengthening our relationship.

Nature Obscura



WINTER PRELUDE

There are such a lot of things that have no place in summer and autumn and spring. Everything that's a little shy and a little rum. Some kinds of night animals and people that don't fit in with others and that nobody really believes in. They keep out of the way all the year. And then when everything's quiet and white and the nights are long and most people are asleep—then they appear.

—Tove Jansson,
Moominland Midwinter

During winter, the natural world appears to sleep, cloaked in a blanket of gray clouds, while city residents seem to hibernate, or shuffle along outdoors hidden under umbrellas and raincoats. A closer look reveals that nature is very much awake, but changed. With people huddled indoors the city feels more peaceful, and those who venture outside are heftily rewarded.

At Seward Park, a forested peninsula in Seattle that juts out into Lake Washington, small coots, black with bone-white bills, band together in large swimming flocks, hundreds strong,

as bald eagles dive at them, trying to find the weak. Along Lake Washington, which borders the entire east side of the city, the noisy boats of summer are replaced by swans quietly gliding across the surface of the lake, which may be smooth as glass one day and an angry, churning mass the next.

In the peninsula's forest refuge, tiny birds flock together; chickadees, bushtits, kinglets, and nuthatches swarm through the trees, passing through like a whirlwind, sweeping observers up in their frantic tweets and cheeps before moving on. Every night, throughout the city, crows congregate, creating rivers of black in the skies as they head to their roosts.

In bare-branched trees and on lawns gracing streetsides and yards, moss hides tiny secrets, a universe contained within each green clump. On freezing days, delicate hair ice sprouts from dead wood, and ice crystals grow around the edges of fallen leaves. Occasionally, snow falls on the city, transforming the dirty gray landscape as though freshly painted.

The Patina of Time

To a naturalist nothing is indifferent; the humble moss that creeps upon the stone is equally interesting as the lofty pine which so beautifully adorns the valley or the mountain . . . .

—James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*

Before I climbed up onto the railing outside our back door, I first looked around to see if any neighbors were in their yards or walking down the alley. When the coast was clear, I hauled myself up and stood on the railing before stepping across the gap to the roof of our detached garage. I scooted on my backside across the roof, where I lay down, stretched out across the asphalt shingles.

Conventional wisdom says that moss on your roof is bad and that it'll make the shingles too wet, causing them to rot, or that the roots will lift up the shingles, leading to water damage. A mossy roof is considered an eyesore in the city and better suited to a rustic old cabin in the woods. But I'm curious and tend to question the status quo.

As I lay on my belly, I studied the rows of moss organized neatly along the shingle edges. The moss grew in tiny clumps, no more than a half-inch wide at most. The little green tufts with silver tips were nothing short of adorable, a miniature landscape growing far above

the ground. I saw no shingles being forced up into the air, and when I pulled a couple clumps off, they came up easily, without a fight, leaving nothing behind. I couldn't see any damage at all. As I studied the moss, poking and prodding at it, I began to question whether it really needed to be removed.

The problem, I quickly found, was that there are scant studies conducted on roof moss. Some sources, notably roofing companies, say moss is damaging. Others, like those of the green roof industry, state that moss can be beneficial, protecting shingles from sun damage. But the information on both sides is largely anecdotal. Since there was no consensus, I turned to the person whose name is synonymous with moss: botanist and professor Robin Wall Kimmerer. In her book *Gathering Moss*, Kimmerer writes that while mosses do produce tiny rhizoids, which are the moss equivalent of roots, she strongly doubts they "could pose a serious threat to a well-built roof."

And yet, in a city where everything is meticulously maintained and managed, moss defies our modern, neat and tidy landscapes. A mossy roof is a mark of age. We accept moss in the forest or on an ancient stone wall in the country without question, but in the city, we've decided it's unseemly and must be scraped away.

When we moved into our house, I was happy when the moss began spreading under our maple tree. It was pretty, softer to sit on, and didn't require any maintenance. I considered it a win-win. I'm not alone in thinking a blanket of moss is preferable to the dramatically higher maintenance grass. In recent years the idea of a moss lawn has grown on gardening websites and in books, and now you can buy moss in sheets or as a blended moss and yogurt milkshake to spread out and grow in your garden. But it's not a new idea; gardeners have used moss as a deliberate design element for almost seven hundred years.

Not far from Seattle is a place that has become famous for its moss garden, and one day I traveled across Puget Sound on the ferry *Wenatchee* to Bainbridge Island, where the Bloedel Reserve is located. During the passage I stood on the front deck, braced against the cold winter air as I looked for orcas and birds. A few gulls flew overhead along with the ferry, as though escorting it across the Salish Sea.

By the time I'd driven to the Bloedel Reserve, on the opposite end of Bainbridge Island, I had just about warmed up. For more than thirty years the 150-acre reserve was the private landscape of Virginia and Prentice Bloedel. Mr. Bloedel had a complicated relationship with the land; he was heir to his family's timber business but he was also an environmentalist. Under his leadership, the company was the first to plant seedlings after harvesting the trees. Following his retirement, his connection to the land played out in the Bloedel Reserve, where he frequently walked and worked with landscape architects to form the grounds. Today the reserve contains formal gardens, woodland trails, meadows, and the award-winning Garden Sequence containing four "rooms," including the Moss Garden.

The Bloedel Reserve's Moss Garden is legendary not only locally but widely among landscape architects. It's a place I'd learned about while earning my degree in landscape architecture. I was to meet the garden's current caretaker, Darren Strenge, and its previous caretaker, Bob Braid—who had tended the Moss Garden since 1985 before handing the reins to Darren and turning to manage the nearby Japanese Garden.

Together, Darren and Bob led me into the Moss Garden, telling me it had been completed in 1982 and was inspired partly by Japanese gardens and partly by the rainforests of the Olympic Peninsula. At two acres, it is the largest public moss garden in the United States. Designed by acclaimed Seattle landscape architect Richard Haag, the Moss Garden,

or Anteroom as it is also known, is part of the Garden Sequence, a series of four rooms starting with the Garden of Planes (now a Japanese rock garden) and moving on to the Anteroom, the Reflection Garden, and the Bird Refuge.

Not only was the idea of a moss garden unique when it was designed, but entire dead logs and stumps were brought in and left to rot in place, to be claimed by moss. Initially, 275,000 plugs of Irish moss (not a moss at all, but a perennial plant) were planted until native mosses took over. And they did, until the garden became a mosaic of varying shades of green containing more than forty species of moss with almost none of the original Irish moss remaining, outcompeted by the native moss.

Throughout the garden, moss-covered mounds of vague, fuzzy shapes—remnants of the original logs—slowly collapse in on themselves as they gradually rot. Bob told me that Mr. Bloedel was fascinated by these stumps and nurse logs. Native plants such as sword fern, evergreen huckleberry, and salal grew on some of the stumps and logs while along the southern edge of the garden, the thorny devil's club marked the border. Old western red cedars towered over the garden, creating a shifting pattern of light on the ground where the sun filtered through. Moss crept up the flare of the tree trunks, making it hard to distinguish where the ground ended and a tree began.

The more I looked, the more I could begin to detect patterns in the ground. It was not a simple blanket of green, but a complex tapestry of many tones, some tending toward blue, others tipping to yellow. In between the greens stood patches of rust from the reddish capsules of common smoothcap moss. But the pattern isn't random, and to know the mosses is to understand the various microclimates they favor. Some species are tolerant of the sun and boldly grow where no other mosses dare to

creep. Others crowd around the soggier parts of the landscape, wanting to keep their toes constantly wet. Some live high, hanging on the branches of trees and never touching the ground. A few grow side by side, competing in a slow-motion struggle to gain more ground.

As we walked through the moss garden, Darren occasionally hopped off the path to pluck out various species, and I could easily feel his connection to the outdoors. He's been working at the reserve since 1997 when he decided, after finishing his master's in botany and working in a lab studying pollen fertility, that he'd rather spend his days outdoors than in a laboratory. He has been getting to know the reserve ever since, and the Moss Garden in particular, after he took over its care in 2017. At one point on our tour, he leaned down over a bed of green, teased out a single tiny plant, and handed it to me. He said it's called Menzies' tree moss, and I could easily see why. The foliage of the "tree" sat atop a long, brown stem, reminiscent of a trunk. The slender leaves radiated down along arching "branches," and as a whole it looked like a miniature tropical tree. However, unlike a tree, the plant had two thin stalks protruding from the top. These setae, part of the moss's reproducing sporophyte, were red at the base, with the color shifting in gradients to green at the top, where two bright green, oval-shaped capsules sat, nodding downward, nearly ready to release their spores.

Next Darren handed me snake moss, which he said he liked showing to visiting kids. One after another, he pulled up tiny, individual plants of different mosses, and as they started to accumulate on my notebook, I could see how different they were one from the other when removed from their mats. One stood at least four inches tall with dark green, swordlike leaves. Another sprawled seaweed-like in a tangle of bright green, and still another looked like a feather taken from a parrot. They were all green, but the textures and variations of green were astonishing.

To describe the garden as a carpet would be a disservice because it looked much softer than any human-made carpet. The temptation to feel that soft, damp green on my feet was irresistible, and I joked to Darren that I would love to take my shoes and socks off and walk through it. He replied that he actually does that sometimes, when no one is around. I don't think he was joking.

Once Darren and Bob left me to return to their duties, I retraced my steps back to the beginning of the Moss Garden, where two moss-covered rocks stood as guardians, to walk through the garden again, alone, in the quiet of the reserve. But what I didn't realize was that I was starting my walk out of order, in the second room of the Garden Sequence. I had missed the first room.

Richard Haag, who designed the Garden Sequence at the Bloedel Reserve, had long been attached to the Pacific Northwest, spending most of his professional life in Seattle. He designed landscapes in the region but also around the world, as well as founding the landscape architecture program at the University of Washington, before he was chosen to shape these acres of formerly logged land.

The Garden Sequence begins in what was once the Garden of Planes, adjacent to the Moss Garden, but the start of the sequence no longer exists, as I would find out at the end of my walk when I visited the first room last. Originally the Moss Garden was a bog overgrown with pink-flowered salmonberries, and the tiny rivulets of water forking through the moss are evidence today of that bog. Haag said this garden was "created by selective subtractions of the nuances of nature from the chaos of a tangled bog," reflecting a trademark of his design style. Here, as in another of his famous landscapes, Gas Works Park in Seattle, Haag liked to leave traces of the landscape's history. By leaving the enormous

downed logs, he recognized the history of logging in this place while contrasting it with the surrounding second-growth forest. By removing the undergrowth and leaving the trees and the ancient logs to be claimed by moss, Haag created a space that breaks free of any traditional landscape style.

The towering western hemlock trees, the bare roots tipped up vertically, the decay and decomposition, the damp earth, and the intimacy of the space make the garden feel primordial, as it's often described today. It's a walk back in time, where the ghosts of 700-year-old trees, gone for a hundred years, remain in the shapes under the moss.

Coming to the end of the Moss Garden, I stepped out of one room and into the most iconic place in the reserve, the Reflection Garden. In this room, set in grass, is a long, rectangular pool surrounded by a long, rectangular yew hedge. The room sits, almost impossibly, surrounded by towering trees, which are reflected in the smooth water. Linear, simple, obviously human made, it's the opposite of the Moss Garden. And yet it complements the previous room with its green hues and lofty trees. Haag designed the Garden Sequence this way intentionally; the four rooms alternate between the obviously crafted to the more natural, although still heavily cultivated, spaces. They complement one another and lead the visitor through a pattern of interpreting nature in different ways.

Leaving the Reflection Garden, I wandered aimlessly along a wooded path, and while the ground wasn't covered in moss, it still grew in thick patches along Douglas fir trunks and mixed in with licorice ferns. I crossed the road again and entered the lower portion of the Japanese Garden, not part of the Garden Sequence, where I found two ponds, one large and one small, split in half by a walkway. Along the undulating edges of the water, large boulders grew sweaters of moss and lichens, and a

wooden bench sprouted moss from its corners. The smaller pond, punctuated with traditionally pruned pines and Japanese maples, reflected the image of the guesthouse perched on the hill above. The building is beautiful, with wide glass windows and a glass roof supported by large wood timbers—a merging of Japanese and Pacific Northwest design styles. Walking farther, I ended up at a Japanese rock garden—what used to be the Garden of Planes—situated behind the guesthouse at the top of the Japanese Garden.

Echoing the form of the Reflection Garden, a long, rectangular rock garden dominates the space. Nestled in the raked sand are two clusters of boulders, and surrounding the garden is a checkerboard of alternating squares of concrete stepping-stones and grass. The rectangular garden was originally a swimming pool before Haag's redesign filled it with two pyramid shapes—one inverted and extending down into the former pool interior and the other rising up within that space right beside it. This was his Garden of Planes. Haag first envisioned the pyramids becoming slowly colonized by mosses. The surrounding checkerboard did not originally include grass, but moss squares alternating with the concrete stepping-stones.

Sadly, or perhaps ironically, the very year Haag won the prestigious President's Award of Excellence from the American Society of Landscape Architects for his Garden Sequence design, the Garden of Planes was replaced with the rock garden and his Garden Sequence forever broken. According to Haag in an interview in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, one reason, besides some internal politics, was because a fox had a den under a nearby stump and "every morning, the fox would come out and leave his morning offering right on top of the gravel pyramid."

As I wandered around the rock garden, I noticed that the concrete stepping-stones were slowly being consumed by moss. The large boulders

were similarly being enveloped by thick green clumps. After I had made my way through the reserve's gardens, one fact seemed clear: moss simply grows, mindless of the grand designs of any human.

Having spent time in Japan, Richard Haag likely took inspiration for the Bloedel Reserve's Anteroom from one of the world's best-known moss gardens: Saiho-ji, in Kyoto. While Saiho-ji was first built hundreds of years ago, it wasn't until after it fell into neglect and mosses claimed it that Buddhist monk Muso Soske embraced moss as part of the garden and experience. Today moss is a standard element in traditional Japanese garden design worldwide, including at the Seattle Japanese Garden.

I had been granted permission to visit the Seattle Japanese Garden during its annual winter closure, a time that allows the landscape crew to undertake major work. It wasn't my first visit, but it was my first winter visit. The morning I arrived, a couple of weeks after I had visited the Bloedel Reserve, the weather was cold and crisp, with frost lining the grass and the edges of fallen leaves. My guide for this visit was Pete Putnicki, senior gardener at the Seattle Japanese Garden. Although Pete had only been the head gardener for a couple of years, he is intimately knowledgeable about the garden and has a tremendous eye for detail.

As we walked through the back gate and into the garden, he explained that while the mosses may look effortless to maintain, they're really not. In autumn the crew must rake the leaves fallen from the garden's many Japanese maples and other trees to prevent the leaves from damaging the mosses. Metal rakes can pull the moss out of the ground, so the crew uses traditional Japanese bamboo rakes to sweep up leaves and other debris, a slow, delicate process.

Pete pointed to a patch of moss with a rusty tinge and told me that this moss is one of their favorites in the garden: Sugi moss. Also known as

Sugi-goke, meaning cryptomeria moss, it is popular in Japanese gardens. The name comes from the moss's resemblance to the Japanese cedar tree, *Cryptomeria japonica*. When pulled out from the dense mat, the individual plant looks uncannily like a miniature cedar tree. Part of the appeal of Sugi moss in the garden is its tolerance of the conditions in Seattle, where the groundcover withstands the wear from raking and changes colors during the year from bright green to red and green when the red-stemmed capsules sprout.

We squatted down to take a closer look at the Sugi moss, and as Pete talked about encouraging this particular moss to grow, he rubbed his hand over the red capsules, sending a cloud of spores into the cold morning air. It was easy to see how the moss spreads on its own, with spores so small and light.

Still, some of the garden's mosses were intentionally planted, and that winter break, the crew had been doing just that. They had shifted the main path slightly and added a rope barrier here and there, leaving behind bare patches of soil. They had collected moss from other parts of the garden, mostly areas out of view along the fence, and set the moss out in little clumps, right on the soil, like cookies set on a baking sheet. According to Pete, in only three years the moss will have spread enough to cover the bare soil and in only five years will look as if it has always been there.

Next we made our way up the stone stairway to the tea garden, a small fenced-off area open to the public only for weekly tea ceremonies. The tea garden was designed to feel as if it's set deep in the woods, and as we walked up the boulder-lined steps, Pete explained that there are no cut stones in this part of the garden—they are all natural. Pointing out the moss growing in thick mounds between the stone steps and up along their edges, he commented that although this garden was built in 1960, the moss adds a patina that makes it appear much older. At the top of the stairs we headed to the left, where a series of stepping-stones set in a sea

of moss leads to the teahouse. Slowly, I tiptoed from stone to stone, balancing carefully after each deliberate step so as not to tread on any moss. The uncomfortable placement of stones is intentional, serving to slow visitors down, encouraging mindfulness and focus as we pay more attention to our surroundings and the moment.

The moss sprouting up between the stones was a deliberate part of the garden, a desired urban patina. Some of it had been intentionally planted and gently managed, but moss is going to grow where it will. Maybe it's time we embrace it.

Tracking the Wild Snail

The first time I visited Dash Point State Park on Puget Sound I almost turned around and left because when I arrived on the beach at low tide, all I could see was sand. While that may be an ideal beach for sunbathers, my interests lie more with the denizens lacking backbones. I usually select beaches with rock formations that create tide pools, or at least beaches with large rocks that can be looked under for sea life. That's where the exciting organisms are, like sea stars, anemones, nudibranchs, and sea cucumbers. Or so I thought.

But the bald eagle ripping apart a crab, surrounded by dozens of crows, persuaded me to stay and explore. As I wandered along the beach, I noticed sunken divots in the sand holding small pools of water. In the center of each one was a hole, like a pencil had been pushed in and removed. It was the mark of a clam living under the surface, hidden from view. I found more signs of these bivalves—their shells—on the sand. I picked one up to examine it and found a hole. It was perfectly round, as if someone had taken a drill to the white shell, but I didn't know what had made it.

Farther along the beach I discovered an entire network of little mounds, each with a coil of sand on top. The mound and coil were a darker gray than the surrounding sand. As I watched, I was surprised to see something under the sand actually projecting one of those coils up right in front of me. What I was watching was a lugworm using its toilet.

Like clams, lugworms are rarely seen because they live in burrows under the sand, but their telltale fecal castings are easily found. And where you find one there may be many, as I discovered, because they can live in densities of as many as one thousand per square meter. Each worm stays in its J-shaped burrow filtering decaying matter out of the sand and depositing the rest back up on the surface. This it does constantly, and if you watch, you won't have to wait very long to see it in action as it's a process the lugworm repeats every thirty minutes.

Lugworms, clams, and other sand dwellers burrow and change the composition of the sand in a process known as bioturbation. In much the same way that worms work through the soils in our gardens, these burrowing animals mix up the sediment, distributing nutrients, creating homes for other wildlife, and increasing the water content of the sand. They are ecosystem engineers, creating habitat—much like beavers, albeit on a much smaller scale.

By exploring the shore's sandy underworld—a habitat I thought was devoid of interesting marine life—I discovered that there is much more going on beneath the sand than I expected. Most of the sand-dwelling marine life goes unseen by beach visitors, but there are always signs.

One early summer day I arrived at Seattle's Alki Beach a little before one of the lowest tides of the year. I wasn't alone: dozens and dozens of people were already spread out along the beach, some bent over with their hands to the ground and others wandering slowly, their eyes downward cast. From the wall where I stood overlooking the beach, I could hear the screams of excited kids discovering crabs and sea stars. Beach Naturalists from the Seattle Aquarium wandered around in red hats and brown vests looking under rocks, pointing out marine life to curious visitors and answering dozens of questions. I quickly made my way onto the beach to join them.

As I walked along the edge of the outgoing tide, I noticed a peculiar shape begin to take form on the sand. Protruding from the saltwater was a gray form resembling the blown top of Mount St. Helens. I splashed across the water in my insulated waterproof boots—the water of Puget Sound is cold even in summer—to look at it. As the tide pulled the water fully away from this part of the beach, I could finally see the peculiar structure more clearly, but it was just as mysterious uncovered. A circular ring, broken on one side and in the shape of a toilet plunger, but much larger, at least a foot in diameter, sat on the surface of the beach, the same exact shade of gray as the sand beneath it.

I picked up the ring and looked at it closely. It appeared to be made out of sand, but when I ran my fingers over the surface it felt smooth, almost rubbery, and not at all grainy as I had expected. More than one beach walker has picked up one of these strange items thinking it was trash left behind on the beach. It was left behind, but not by any person. This unusual object, I learned from the Beach Naturalists, was the egg collar of a Lewis' moon snail (*Neverita lewisii*), a very large marine snail found in the tidal zone. The collar is made of sand, as I suspected, but sandwiched in between the layers of sand are thousands of microscopic snail eggs. The peculiar circular shape is made as the eggs wrap around the female snail's shell as she lays them, smoothed over by jelly she produces. It's a process that takes her up to fourteen long hours and is done entirely beneath the sand's surface.

Although I saw dozens of egg collars scattered along the beach, the animals that left them were nowhere in sight. This snail is hard to find because it lives most of its life beneath the surface of the sand with the clams and lugworms. The beach on the south side of Alki Point is a matrix of sand alternating with cobbles and a series of rock formations that form long tide pools. Though my focus was at my feet, I also looked up periodically to the water, where cetaceans such as humpback whales, orcas,

and harbor porpoises may occasionally, and unexpectedly, surface at any moment.

To my right as I walked rose a towering concrete wall. During king tides—the highest tides of the year, occurring in winter—the waves rise so high they will splash over the top of this seawall and onto the cars parked on the street above. But during the low, minus tides of summer, the waves are measured in inches, not feet, and there is plenty of shore and sand to explore.

During my time exploring Puget Sound beaches, I began to learn which are the best for moon snails. Because signs of moon snails are easy to find once you know what to look for, it's not hard to figure out where they live. And once I began identifying those beaches, I began to see a pattern in the presence of sand.

Recognizing patterns is a key naturalist skill, as is being able to connect habitat types to what lives in them. The beaches around Puget Sound vary greatly. Some are cobbles as far as the eye can see, whereas others are mostly sand, and still others are a complex tapestry of both punctuated with differently sized boulders. The composition of a particular beach may be different in the high tide zone versus the low tide zone. On Alki Beach the sand isn't revealed until the lowest tides of the year. I had never considered the composition of the shoreline before; I just took the beach as a given. Of course it's not—shorelines are dynamic and always changing from the movement of the tide.

Puget Sound is a relatively young landscape, carved and shaped by glaciers that covered it until about 13,000 years ago. As the glaciers receded, they left behind 2,500 miles of shoreline, some as towering bluffs, some as sand and gravel beaches. Over the last hundred years, landowners built along much of those shorelines, laying down train tracks and house

foundations, and then armored those shores in an attempt to protect those structures. Today, about 700 miles of shoreline along Puget Sound contain hard armoring in the form of bulkheads, riprap, and seawalls. Put in perspective, that's more than the entire length of the Oregon and outer Washington Pacific coastline.

Along Washington's inner coastline of Puget Sound between the Seattle metropolitan area and the scenic Olympic Peninsula lies the Kitsap Peninsula. At the Kitsap's far north end is Foulweather Bluff, named by explorer George Vancouver for the rough weather he experienced there. During the summer, however, the skies can be blue with wispy clouds lounging up high and the water calm and gently lapping at the rocky shoreline, as on the day I visited. It didn't take long before I found my first sign of a moon snail: a large shell. I picked it up, poured the saltwater out, and held it nestled in the palm of my hand. It was so large that I couldn't curl my fingers completely around it.

Lewis' moon snail is the largest living snail species in the world, but intact shells can be hard to find. Most often I discovered just the central swirl peeking up out of the sand, or broken pieces on the beach. When I found this intact shell, it was like finding treasure. I looked inside the swirling opening and saw barnacles clustered together, closed up now that the tide had receded. The outside of the shell was layered in raised lines, almost like the growth rings on a tree, spiraling inward to the center point, which ended in a pink dot. I put the shell back down on the rocky beach, to be used as a shelter by the many creatures of the tidal zone, including nudibranchs and crabs.

The habitat of the moon snail that occupied that shell for as many as fourteen years is linked to the towering bluff behind me, the imposing presence of which I could feel, without even looking. The sheer wall was composed of light brown soil, and at the top, Pacific madrone trees leaned

out over the cliff, their red-barked trunks seeming to defy gravity. The bluff's unstable appearance made me nervous, even though logic told me it wasn't going to fall on me.

Puget Sound is lined with many cliffs like Foulweather Bluff, and although they're stable enough to not randomly collapse, they are, in another sense, inherently unstable. The glaciers crafted this land, but when they vanished, the landscape didn't become static, although humans have tried to make it so. Wind, waves, and rain are always altering this landscape, although not always visibly. The bluffs over the beaches erode regularly, albeit slowly for the most part, and are known as feeder bluffs for the sediments they provide to the waters below them.

In a way, glaciers are still actively changing the landscape of Puget Sound, since the bluffs are composed of materials deposited from the retreating glaciers, such as glacial till, a mishmash of unsorted sediment left behind by the scraping erosion caused by the thick ice. The sand and rocks the glaciers picked up and held were dropped as the ice melted, leaving behind glacial outwash layered with till. Other layers of the bluffs are made of silt and clay, which also erode over time.

The glacial sediments provided by feeder bluffs enter the water as the bluffs slowly erode and are moved about by wave action. Between the feeder bluffs, the endlessly moving water shifts the sediments up and down the beaches in a complex pattern, creating a series of "drift cells." Whereas rivers move in one general direction, aided by gravity, the waters along beaches are dynamic and multidirectional due to a combination of weather and changing tides, resulting in up to nine hundred individual drift cells in Puget Sound. A drift cell is a section of shoreline that has three components: a sediment source and transport and deposit areas. Cells can range from just a few hundred feet to forty miles in length. The drift cell that includes Alki Beach is one of the longer cells on the Sound,

extending from the Port of Seattle all the way south to Burien, about ten miles away.

Each year I block off the lowest tides of the year on my calendar so I can explore the intertidal zone. I had yet to see a live moon snail, so I decided to return to Alki Beach the summer after my first visit. As I wandered the familiar ground, once more surrounded by other curious beachgoers and Beach Naturalists, I noticed something I had encountered before, a clamshell with a hole in it. I picked it up and kept walking, then found another and another. Soon I noticed shells with holes in them everywhere, and like the first one I had seen at Dash Point, the holes were all in the same spot on the clams' shells: the umbro, the place where the two halves of the shell attach. The holes were countersunk and small, no more than a quarter inch in diameter. I asked a Beach Naturalist and finally had my answer as to what had made those holes. All of the clams had been preyed upon by moon snails.

These large snails hunt for clams, their favorite food, and when they detect one, the very slow chase is on. The moon snail burrows down using its powerful foot, which inflates up to an astonishing four times the volume of its shell. Like blowing up a balloon, the snail can inflate its foot quickly, shoving sand out of the way. Once the snail has the clam, it begins drilling into the shell with its tonguelike radula, a sharp-toothed structure, creating that perfect countersunk circle. It's not a fast process—drilling can take hours or even days until break-through. The radula is located at the end of a proboscis, and once the hole is made, the snail pushes its proboscis through the hole and begins eating the clam.

Despite the evidence of many clamshells with holes on the beach, moon snails aren't voracious predators. Studies have found that on average an individual snail consumes one clam every two weeks. In British Columbia

some commercial clam farms have needlessly removed moon snails from beaches in a mistaken attempt to protect clams and the clam harvest. One study found that not only do moon snails feed infrequently, they also avoid the commercial Manila clam species—greatly preferring native clams such as the Pacific littleneck clam, the butter clam, and softshell clams.

The exclusion of moon snails on the beach in that study instead led to adverse effects on the ecosystem. Without the bioturbation of the snails distributing nutrients and increasing the permeability of the sand, the intertidal communities were homogenized. Moon snails are important ecosystem engineers, making the beaches more habitable for a greater diversity of marine life.

Also, unfortunately the heavy armoring of beaches around Puget Sound has left moon snails with fewer sandy beaches where they can work their bioturbation magic. Concrete bulkheads at the bottom of feeder bluffs prevent erosional sediments from entering the drift cell network. Beaches usually become rockier, with much less sand and less habitat for moon snails, clams, sand dollars, and lugworms.

Beaches with concrete and other bulkheads lower down on the beach also suffer as waves deflect off the walls and scour the sand and gravel away from the shore. Bulkheads end up burying part of the beach, reducing the complexity of the substrate, and in an ironic twist, actually increasing erosion on nearby beaches. Heavily armored areas harbor less sand, and that sand tends to be coarser. Without beaches, there is nowhere for logs to rest and nowhere for vegetation to grow, decreasing tidal diversity.

The bulkhead at Alki Beach is far enough back to host a beach with a diverse substrate, and on the second day of my visit, I continued wandering the shoreline in search of a living moon snail. The day before, I had asked the Beach Naturalists if they'd seen any—and they had, a day earlier. Later in the day I heard another snail had been seen but on the opposite end of the beach that I was on.

Then, as I was walking, I noticed a large depression in the sand that sloped down on one end and was abrupt on the other. A Beach Naturalist told me this was another sign of the moon snail, left behind as the snail burrows down, pushing forward with its large, fleshy foot, leaving behind a shallow pool at low tide where shrimp or amphipods may shelter.

Back and forth I zigzagged across the sand as the tide receded. I ended up at some whelk-covered pillars supporting a condominium complex over the water. I turned to retrace my steps, only farther down the tide line. Then I spotted something white among the eelgrass, just under the water. I got closer and saw it was a moon snail shell, and as I stepped up next to it, I could see the snail's pink flesh, its mantle so large that it covered most of the outside of the shell.

Finally, here was my moon snail. It was fully extended out of its shell, the foot spread out across the sand. As the water lowered with each passing wave, the top of the shell began to protrude from the water. The shell's top was green with algae—it looked like a vegetated island in the water. Each time the tide pulled a wave out, thin green strands of eelgrass wrapped around the shell. I squatted down and ran a finger lightly along the snail's mantle and found it to be rather silky under the water.

I watched the snail begin to dig into the sand, a very slow race against the outgoing tide. Soon its shell was fully out of the water and I could see it move a little, then pause and move again. The motion was so slow that I wondered if I was imagining it, but the depression around it was proof that it was, in fact, digging.

Within twenty-five minutes the mantle had disappeared under the surface, and it looked like an empty shell resting on top of the sand. Forty minutes after I had first spotted it, three-quarters of the snail was under the sand and it appeared to have stopped moving. After watching it for nearly an hour, I left it alone in its patient wait for the return of the tide.

RAVEN'S WITNESS

ICE AND LAUGHTER

Richard never witnessed a conversation that did not, in due time, circle back to hunting. Every exchange, whether in the coffee shop or on the trail, drifted to the whereabouts of seals or caribou, the conditions of ice, the habits of dogs, or the proximity of bears. Preparing for the dangers of Arctic travel, the men shared nuanced knowledge about invisible currents and coming storms, whiteout conditions and emergency camps.

Richard came to see the men's single-minded focus as the engine of a brilliant, churning intellectual machine. A machine set in motion in the sod houses and ice shelters of their ancestors. A machine combining individual observations to produce insights unavailable to any single hunter.

In Madison, Richard's obsession with snakes and frogs was a private affair, tolerated but not shared by the adults in his life. In Wainwright, his fascination with the natural world found a home, moving from the shadows of a hobby to the full light of essential knowledge. Every aspect of his training as a hunter was rich with intriguing details that could be immediately applied, unlike his boring math classes and English lessons.

There was no end to an Iñupiaq education, no diploma declaring it was done. Nor was there a formal process to learn the intricate lessons of Arctic survival. Young men—Richard included—were expected to absorb through keen observation and careful listening. Lessons well learned were met with silent approval. Mistakes unleashed a barrage of ridicule.

Out hunting seals with Tagruk one day, Richard blundered onto an apron of young ice. Tagruk shouted a warning just as Richard felt the ice bend beneath his weight. The coffeehouse lessons paid off, and Richard resisted the urge to stop and turn around, a move that would have plunged

him into the sea. Instead, he kept moving, arcing back to thicker ice to rejoin Tagruk, who was doubled over with laughter.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Tagruk burst into giggles each time he recalled his neighbor's brush with death. And by the time Richard made it to the coffee shop that evening, the whole village was chuckling with the news.

> *Dear Ma and Pa,*
>
> *I have to admit, these Eskimos are really clever people, but I wouldn't ever tell them because they spend too much time telling me how stupid I am. Most of them are really great people, but they sure test my patience sometimes.*

The threat of frigid waters was tame compared to the pain of public humiliation. Richard never again ventured onto thin ice.

The teasing eased up a bit after Richard killed his first seal. He butchered the animal on the floor of his house. It was a small *natchiq*, or ringed seal, and it was black with no spots, an unusual coloration called a *magumnusiq*. With guidance from Anaqqaq, Richard slit the hide from throat to tail, then separated skin from blubber with long strokes of his ulu. An easy levity, born from the day's success, flowed through the room.

Richard had just finished skinning when Tagruk stopped by. Tagruk and Anaqqaq encouraged him to give away the meat. Richard related the experience in a recording to his folks:

> *The accepted procedure is for a hunter to save only a little bit of his first seal and to give the rest away, especially to the older people. The giving of my first seal was quite unexpected. I don't know that a white man has ever bothered to do this. They sure seem to like it an awful lot. Boy, they sure have talked a lot about my first seal and giving it away and all that.*

Once, on an overnight hunting trip, Taqalaq told Richard that near Christmas, people would gather for days of traditional games—the knuckle hop, the finger pull, and the high kick. "When we get back home, you say *'Anaktugniaqtugut,'* he said. "It means 'We're all are going to play together.'"

Richard repeated the phrase, and Taqalaq laughed, saying, "Yeah, that's perfect," and while mushing back to the village, he insisted that Richard keep practicing. So Richard shared the saying with everyone he met, all to great laughter.

Later, at the coffee shop, it was revealed that *anaktugniaqugut* did, indeed, mean let's play together. Richard, however, had mispronounced the first *k* as a *q*, which changed the opening syllable from *anak* ("games") to *anaq* ("shit"). Taqalaq had been encouraging him to proudly exclaim, "We're are all going to shit together."

For Richard, embarrassment was overshadowed by relief for his growing acceptance into the world of Arctic hunters. The learning of language went both ways, as many of the men wanted to improve their English. This two-way exchange gave birth to the phrase "Richard needs to work on his *utchucation*." Pronounced oo-choo-KAY-shun and derived from the Iñupiaq word *utchuk* ("vagina") and the English word *education*, this phrase became a steady piece of wall-tent humor.

The linguistic jousting continued when Richard tweaked a single syllable within a common church phrase. *Quyanagniagaadin*, used by the passionate faithful, figuratively translates to "Thank you from the bottom of my heart." Richard bastardized the phrase to *Quyagnaqniagaadin*, meaning "Screw you from the bottom of my heart." The men collapsed with laughter.

Mirth, as much as anything, bridged the cultural chasm between this midwestern man and his Arctic companions. While anthropology remained an abstract, suspicious activity to the villagers, they understood Richard's curiosity. They appreciated his linguistic skills and admired his athleticism. The blood on his hands from hunting allowed them to overlook his odd habit of scribbling in his journal.

SINCE ARRIVING IN THE VILLAGE, Richard had received logistical support from the Arctic Research Lab in Utqiagvik. The established protocol was for Richard to mail shopping lists to folks at the lab, who packaged food and other supplies and shipped them on the weekly plane into Wainwright. The system worked fine throughout the fall, but by January, Richard quit sending the lists. Imagining the young student languishing in the village, the lab people simply guessed about the twenty-two-year-old's needs and kept shipping boxes.

But Richard's tastes had begun to change. He fried up a few of the beefsteaks they sent him, decided that caribou was tastier, and tossed the remaining steaks to his dogs. He devoured the fig bars and made steady use of the bread and peanut butter, but much of the other food he jammed alongside the untouched cans of beans and boxes of noodles in his cabinets.

His dogs' diet, like his own, had a distinctly local flavor.

> *Around here you feed your dogs what they call "dog soup." You take a big pot and put in water, Friskies and cornmeal. Then you dress it up, add some sort of meat to it.*
>
> *Tonight was the most exotic soup I've made yet. It contains seal guts, a seal head, seal blood, some caribou meat and the oil that comes out of rotten walrus blubber when it thaws.*
>
> *The basic food, which is used more than dog soup, is walrus hide and blubber with some meat attached which is usually pretty rotten. Sometime you might throw in a sea gull or ptarmigan, any kind of meat really.*

As Richard adopted the local diet, the community around him relaxed. After a midwinter church service, Billy Patkotak leaned over and asked Richard if he had enough food for his dogs. Richard replied that he was, for now, doing okay. "Well, as soon you start running low, come over to my house," Billy said. "I got lots of extra walrus and want to give you some." He recounted Billy's generosity in a letter to his parents.

> *This is another example of how these folks can be the finest people you've ever known. Generally, I'm enjoying myself more and more and I'm realizing, more and more, that I am going to miss this place an awful lot when I'm gone.*

TEXTURED TUNDRA

Ikaaq had gladly traded his bola for a shotgun. Kusiq had given up his seal-oil lamp for a gas lantern. All the hunters would, in coming years, replace their dogs with snow machines. Richard, in contrast, was hungry to learn of the abandoned tools and fading techniques. His journal filled with schematics of seal-fat stoves and baleen fox traps. He quizzed Ikaaq and Kusiq about spearing swimming caribou from kayaks and netting seals through ice cracks.

For months, he'd admired a skinless kayak frame with broken ribs languishing on someone's meat rack. The owner was unwilling to sell the neglected boat, so Richard and Tagruk decided to build a new one. The boat slowly took shape, dominating Richard's tiny house.

When the last baleen rib was lashed to the wooden frame, Richard recruited Old Man Ikaaq to stretch sealskins over the skeleton.

> *The outstanding thing is the smell of my house. Which is absolutely beyond belief. I have these two ugruk skins in the house right now.*
>
> *What they do after they catch an ugruk is they peg the skin outside half the summer until it gets really rotten. And then they fold it all up and freeze it. What I had to do was get a couple of these frozen ugruk skins and bring them into my house to thaw them out.*
>
> *You hang them from the ceiling and you strip the hair which comes off with your fingers because they are so rotten. When the hair comes off is when they really start to stink. They are an oily mass. The grease just oozes out of them. The way they stink is just*

Wesley Ekak sews sealskin onto a newly constructed kayak in Richard's house. (Photo by Richard Nelson)

> *completely beyond description. The smell has permeated my clothes and my skin. You can't wash the smell off your hands, it just has to wear off. I'll have to burn my clothes at some point.*
>
> *Tomorrow Ikaaq is going to sew it on the kayak. The kayak then needs to hang in the house for a week while the skins dry. So I guess I shouldn't get too bothered with the smell because it's going to be with me for a while.*

While other men in the village had to balance their family obligations and home chores, Richard, living alone, was able not only to fill his house with an ungodly stench but also to spend more days searching for seals than any other hunter. As often as possible, he slipped into his caribou clothing, kicked the ice from around his door, and trudged onto the frozen sea.

Richard had read descriptions of killing seals with a harpoon as the animal surfaced at a breathing hole, or *allu*. Ikaaq and Kusiq could describe the hunting method, but even these old-timers now relied on the longer reach of rifles. Unable to find a mentor in Wainwright, Richard traveled to Utqiagvik to hunt with Pete Sovalik, an Iñupiaq man known to be well versed in the old practice.

Pete had killed a seal at an allu just days before Richard arrived and was happy to have the young *tanniq* ("white man") tag along on his next hunt. The two left Utqiagvik on foot, walking offshore a couple of miles before encountering the dome-shaped profile of a breathing hole. After situating two blocks of ice—one for a seat, the other for a footrest—upwind of the allu, Pete instructed Richard to walk around him in a wide circle to scare seals from any other holes in the area.

Pete didn't kill a seal that day, but Richard filled his journal with pages of detailed description and drawings.

Back in the village, he set up ice blocks downwind from promising-looking breathing holes. The seals never visited the allus where he sat vigil, yet hour after shivering hour, the animals swam through his imagination, careening through upended canyons of ice, chasing shadowy schools of fish.

While most memories become rounded by the relentless rub of time, the visions born in those hours of silent, expectant solitude condensed with frost-like clarity for Richard. A decade after leaving Wainwright, details tattooed in his mind allowed him to create this imagined account of an old Iñupiaq hunter waiting for a seal:

> *Young men said that breathing-hole hunting was too cold, that it involved too much waiting. The old men said only that people must eat. They had learned the art of enduring patience, as if they could merge their thoughts with the timeless physical world that surrounded them. . . .*
>
> *Sakiak was enveloped in still silence, interrupted only by the occasional buffeting of wind against his parka hood. His breath condensed on the ruff around his face and on his scraggly moustache, coating each hair with thick white frost. He could feel the immensity of the ice pack surrounding him, its quiet, latent power. . . .*
>
> *Sakiak drew his arms from the sleeves of his parka and held them against his body for warmth. He was shivering. Frost had collected on his eyelashes and brows. Occasionally he poked a bare hand up through the neck of his parka and held it against his cheek to warm the stiff, numb flesh. His toes felt large and icy cold. . . .*

A growing ache spread up Sakiak's legs and back, but he dared not move to relieve the discomfort. The seal might be near enough to hear any noise transmitted through the ice to the water below. . . .

He was shivering hard now, and he wondered if his shaking might jiggle the ice stool, making a noise that would scare away the seals. He smiled, thinking what a great joke that would be after such a long, cold wait!

But beneath him at that moment a seal torpedoed through the black-gray water, darting and arcing in pursuit of the fleeting silver of fishes. It dodged between the blue and emerald-green walls of ice protruding downward beneath the hummocks. Huge inverted ice mountains blocked its path, but it sensed them and turned away before striking invisible barriers deep in the blackness. . . .

For more than a minute the seal remained motionless, ignoring the fish that swam too near. It was in need of air and was listening. Then it suddenly whirled and shot upward toward a circle of white that glimmered faintly in the high distance. . . .

In the silence of the pack, after the long wait, the seal's approach was startling and exciting. Sakiak first heard, almost sensed without hearing, a pulsation of the water inside the allu. He then saw water flow through the opening and over the ice outside, where it instantly froze to a fresh glaze. This water was forced up ahead of the seal as it rose from below.

Sakiak heard scratching as the seal cleared away the newly formed ice at the tunnel's upper opening. He quickly slipped his arms into the sleeves of his parka, then remained perfectly still. The cold had vanished. Shivering ceased as warmth spread through from mind to muscle.

He fixed his eyes on the allu, consumed with intense concentration. His lips moved slightly, almost imperceptibly. "Come seal," he whispered, asking the animal to give itself to him. "Come. . . ." It was only a thought this time.

In a moment the seal obeyed Sakiak's will. It took a first short, hissing breath, smelling the air for signs of danger. He did not move. He expected the brief silence that followed, knowing the next breath would be a deep one.

Whoosh!

It was a long, drawn-out hiss that sent a misty spray from the opening. This noise was loud enough to drown out the sound of Sakiak's movement as he reached down and picked up his rifle from his legs. He was careful to spread his arms so his clothing would not scrape noisily, and he was still before the deep breath was finished.

Whoosh!

Again the animal breathed. Sakiak lifted his rifle and held it vertical, with the thumb of his upper hand against the trigger. Again he waited, as the second breath stopped.

Whoosh!

On the third breath he moved his rifle straight above the allu, its muzzle inches from the opening. His face was expressionless. His resolve was complete.

As winter opened further into spring and the light returned, Richard's time in the village dwindled. He spent longer days on the ice, staying up late into the night scratching out his field notes. Almost every letter home begins and ends with a declaration of how intensely busy and deeply tired he was by the self-imposed workload. The recorded letters, mostly made in the wee hours, reveal a voice tinged with fatigue, punctuated with yawns.

At the end of March, Richard began prepping for his return to Wisconsin.

It's getting warm, up to 30 degrees or thereabouts almost every day. And the days are really long now, with sunset around 9:00 pm or 9:15 pm. Everybody has suntan faces, but of course the rest is very white.

I am sending 3 or 4 boxes. There are fur things in them so please put them in a cool place. Some of it is sealskin, which really stinks, but it is in little plastic bags. At any rate, if it smells a little don't worry about it.

I am very ready to come home, although the thought of no more dog mushing and seal hunting is not a happy one.

Richard was scheduled to leave the village the same way he arrived; aboard the Cessna operated by the Arctic Research Lab in Utqiagvik.

Richard's newly constructed kayak is lashed to the sled pulled by his Wainwright dog team. (Photo by Richard Nelson)

He swept out his little house and hauled duffel bags of gear to the beach. When the plane failed to show, he hauled everything back up the bluff. After several rescheduled flights also never came, Richard decided a string of dogs fueled by a pile of seal meat was the more reliable way to travel.

David Bodfish was also interested in traveling the ninety miles to Utqiagvik, so the two men hitched their dogs (five of Richard's and six from David's team) to the same sled and left the village in the early hours of April 23, 1965.

It was –6 degrees the morning they left, cold for late April. Richard sat on the sled, and David stood on the runners. Unlike the line of spectators gathered to watch Richard's arrival, his departure drew little attention. There was, after all, nothing unusual about two men and a string of dogs leaving town. David lifted the snow hook, and the team, eager and fresh, took off at a brisk pace. The village soon disappeared behind a slight rise as the dogs settled into a steady trot.

Perched on the sledload of gear, Richard watched small groups of caribou milling and grazing on the tundra. When he'd first glimpsed caribou, eight months earlier, they seemed strange, exotic, running beneath the

plane's roar. Now he felt a comfortable intimacy with the graceful animals. He could, at a glance, distinguish the larger-bodied bulls from the smaller cows. He could recall the welcome heat as his frost-nipped fingers reached into a freshly killed caribou on a frigid day, steam rising tight and thick from its belly. The taste of heart tickled his tongue as he recalled steamy meals with the other hunters, smiles and laughter filling the tent. He carried the knowledge of how to skin the lower legs to preserve the hide for the making of tuttuliks, which he now wore on his own feet. As he bounced over the snow and ice, he appreciated the bulky fur parka that kept his body warm on this cold morning.

Months before, in the fall, Richard had told his parents how, over time, the vastness of the Arctic landscape fades from awareness.

> *It's such a great big monstrous area that you don't even think of it as wilderness. It just doesn't look wild. I think most people would be appalled by it. It takes a special person to be moved by this place. In its own flat, desolate way, it's really beautiful.*

The once-unremarkable tundra was now textured by stories, names, memory, and movement. As the sled slid east, Richard saw a pair of snowy owls hunkered on the banks of the Sinaruruk River, where he'd trapped foxes with Taqalaq. A few miles later, the sled tipped down the bank of the Kugrua River, followed by the Itinik and Tuvak Rivers.

Richard and David were constantly on the move, stopping only once for a snack of raw caribou and hot tea. They crossed hundreds of fox tracks, most going or coming from the sea, others trotting parallel to the coast. Tiny trails of lemmings skittered to and from small round holes in the snow.

David knew of an abandoned cabin on the north side of Peard Bay, which they reached by midevening. After staking and feeding the dogs, the two men spent an hour shoveling drifted snow and chipping ice from the floor of the rough shelter before they could rest for the night.

They arose early, fed the dogs in the dark, and broke camp just as the sky began to glow. When the sun rose, Richard turned on the sled, facing south to funnel the meager warmth into his parka hood.

As the dogs pulled him toward home, Richard didn't know memories of the teasing, smiling hunters would drift through his mind every day of his life. He could not fathom all the dogs he would come to own, all the trails he would come to travel. He could not imagine himself as an old man, an elder in his own community, awakening from dreams peppered with Iñupiaq words.

LUCK

Chief Henry was the oldest man in Huslia. He lived with his wife, Bessie, near the Attlas'. The first time Richard knocked on their cabin door, the old man waved him in. He wore black suspenders over a plaid shirt draped over his thin shoulders. His eyes, milky white with cataracts, peered out beneath unruly gray eyebrows. When asked his age, Chief Henry said, "Somewhere close to ninety, I think. Not too sure."

Richard sat beside Chief Henry on a bed that doubled as a couch in the simple log home. Bessie, a youngster of eighty, served tea. Chief Henry and Bessie spoke softly, with long pauses between their stories. They shared memories about visiting Yukon River villages long ago, by boat and dog team and recently again by plane. Bessie then lifted a framed wedding license from the wall, dated 1910. It was a prearranged marriage, she told Richard: "We only talk one, maybe two times before we got married. We got real lucky. Sixty-five years now. We've been happy the whole time."

Over a second cup of tea, Chief Henry and Bessie talked of the early trading posts and the first time they were handed a can and told it was food. "We just look at that thing," Chief Henry said, "and thought, 'How the heck we supposed to eat this?'"

"Nowadays," Bessie said, "we are lucky. Moose and caribou live around here."

"Used to be," Chief Henry added, "all we had was fish, ptarmigan, and rabbits. If it wasn't for those rabbits, we wouldn't be alive today."

The old couple related a particularly rough spring. The lakes had begun to thaw and the first ducks had arrived when a cold snap gripped the

region. Open water refroze, sending the waterfowl south again and locking muskrat and beaver beneath the ice. Hares were difficult to snare, because crusted snow freed them from established trails. Bigger game could easily hear the crunch of an approaching hunter.

"We got so weak," Chief Henry said, "we could do nothing but lie down. If one more day passed, then I would have to go to somebody's camp and ask for food. But that day I got lucky—caught a rabbit and a marten—lots of grub then. So we stayed on the trapline."

"We prayed a lot that spring," Bessie said. "We showed our respect for the animals. All we had was our luck."

Most every page of Richard's Huslia Journal explores the notion of luck. And Richard came to understand luck as "a tangible essence, an aura or condition" holding sway over every aspect of life, which he later explained this way:

> *People who lose their luck have clearly been punished by an offended spirit; people who possess luck are the beneficiaries of some force that creates it. Koyukon people express luck in the hunt by saying bik'uhnaatłonh—literally, "he had been taken care of."*

Everyone is born, Richard was told, with a certain amount of luck. The difficulty is not so much in getting luck as keeping it. In Wainwright, his journal had filled with stories of people hurt or killed by sudden shifts in sea ice. In Huslia, stories centered on sudden shifts in luck.

A man who spoke of his plans to trap many beaver didn't catch a single one all season. Another man who boasted about his bear-hunting skills was later attacked and hurt. Bragging about hunting an animal is hutłaanee because it shows disrespect, "like pointing or staring at a stranger." Their change in luck was attributed to their forbidden words.

In addition to respectful language, good luck required proper action. When skinning an animal, the animal's name must not be mentioned and pungent smells and metallic noises are avoided. Some people take the added precaution of wrapping an animal's head with a cloth and filling its nostrils with lard, to prevent any chance of offending the animal's spirit.

The bones of water animals (muskrat, mink, and beaver) are cast into a lake or river. The bones of large land animals are returned to a dry place,

well away from the village. The remains of small animals are hung in bushes or completely burned.

Only old people who no longer hunt can eat red-necked grebe, because the bird is awkward on land. Young people who consume the bird will become slow and clumsy. Pregnant women must not eat beaver meat, lest their children come to walk with inturned feet.

Objects, too, are imbued with luck. The first use of a new pair of snowshoes or a new sled should always be in a downstream direction, because this is the direction spirits go. Rifles are said to become "luckless" to the point of uselessness. Putting on another's mittens can take a person's luck or give yours away.

Trees and mountains have an awareness sensitive to offensive behavior—as does the weather. If a man brags that a storm or extreme cold could not stop him from doing something, it's said that "the weather will take care of him good."

Steven Attla mused to Richard about a luckless year trapping foxes. "I was using power tools while I had a fox in the house. Guess that's why . . . It's got really sensitive ears," he said. "When you get bad luck like this, you just have to let it wear off. There's nothing else you can do."

Richard came to see keeping luck as a state of grace—less about fortune, more about proper relationship with each animal and plant, every mountain, lake, or river slough, and all the shifting moods of weather.

Like smoke making wind visible, luck brought shape to the forces hovering just beyond the edge of sight. And there were a thousand ways to lose it. Once gone, no amount of skill could replace it. "In the absence of luck," he wrote, "there is no destiny except failure."

All fall, as Richard and Kathy listened to stories from the Distant Time, an army of workers fused sections of pipe, pointing toward Alaska's future. A few hundred miles east of Huslia, welders, crane operators, and engineers labored in the frigid cold beneath the bright glare of outdoor lights. In Fairbanks, hub of the construction boom, local businesses struggled to compete with the high-priced jobs. Brothel business was brisk. The local McDonald's served more hamburgers than any other outlet in the world.

Risk rewarded with riches—this has always been the pioneer's promise, the drive behind every race for land and every rush for gold. The pipeline was a new day for an old dream—never mind that the "last frontier" had

long been someone's home. On their days off, workers explored the endless wilderness. They zipped along rivers in shiny new boats and tested their marksmanship on the abundance of game.

Huslia hunters found moose carcasses along the banks of the Koyukuk River, missing only the head and a few choice cuts of meat. Such waste was an affront to the Koyukon belief that any creature should be carefully treated and fully used to avoid offending its protective spirit.

Increasing encounters with skinned bears and poorly butchered caribou stirred a growing animosity throughout the region. Town meetings swelled into rants against the influx of outside hunters. The older folks were concerned but calm. The younger folks called for militant resistance to all whites on the river.

When representatives from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) arrived in Huslia to discuss public easements across Native-owned lands, there was no ambiguity in the community's response. No outsiders would be welcome for any reason—no hiking, sightseeing, camping, or fishing. "Once they come in for anything," one resident said, "next thing they'll start killing our animals and spoiling the land."

When the BLM man reminded folks that the government had just deeded land to the community, a young man shouted, "You can't give us what we have always owned."

The bureaucrats fell silent.

Another man spoke sharply, "For us this land is a supermarket; for them it's a playground."

Richard slipped out the side door and made his way to the calm warmth of Chief Henry and Bessie's home. Bessie, as always, served tea. Chief Henry mused about the tension in town.

"Some of these young kids, they asked me if it would have been better if the white man never came around here in the first place. I just looked at those kids and said, 'Did you ever have to keep alive by eating ptarmigan droppings?'"

Chief Henry rubbed his whiskered cheek with a gnarled hand. He sipped his tea and, with a faraway look, said, "We went through some hard times all right, but I never saw anybody starve to death. This country always took care of us."

When Chief Henry began to nod off, Richard slipped into his coat, thanked Bessie for the tea, and said there would be plenty of time to talk later.

"Not for me," Chief Henry said. "Not much more time for me."

SKIPPING HEART

Kathy pinned a birch log to the sawhorse as Richard cut rounds. Both hands on the bow saw, he rocked back and forth with a steady rhythm. Each push and pull spit wood dust onto the snow. When a round dropped, Kathy nudged the log forward and Richard set the teeth, cut again. They worked without words, stepping through a well-rehearsed dance.

Warmed by the work, Richard shed his hat just as Catherine and Steven stepped through the trees. Catherine imitated the sound of steel teeth zipping through frozen wood. "I learn to make that noise so I can have that song in my mind whenever I want," she said. "The handsaw always makes me feel strong."

After helping stack rounds against the cabin, the Attlas invited Richard and Kathy on a trip to the graveyard. It was Thanksgiving. "The ancestors should always feast first," Catherine explained.

On a hillside scattered with fenced graves, Richard and Kathy watched their friends scrape snow from the base of a wooden cross. Catherine piled curled strips of birch bark on the frozen ground. Steven struck a match, sheltering it with a bare hand. Fingers of flames climbed through the dry bark. He added larger sticks. Smoke curled into the still air.

Catherine fed a chunk of meat and a piece of dried fish to the flames. They watched the meat sizzle and char before she spoke. "Grandmother, I just want to say that you told us so many things when you were living and you lived such a long and good life. These two people are good friends, and I wish you would help them to live a long life and have good luck."

They returned to town in the dim light of late afternoon. In the evening, the two couples shared a meal of roasted goose, potatoes, and wild

cranberries. After blueberry pie, Richard stacked the dishes and joined Catherine at the kitchen sink. Catherine washed; Richard dried. "You take such good care of us," he said. "You feel like our parents."

Catherine laughed. "Me and Steven was thinking the same thing."

TEMPERATURES DROPPED TO –45 DEGREES. Frost crystals condensed and fell from the clear, superchilled air like a dense, glittering fog. Each night, the fire burned out and Richard and Kathy awoke to iced-over water buckets and coffee cups frozen to the counter. Each day demanded another trip to the woodyard to satisfy the hungry stove, but their spirits remained high.

Their contract with the National Park Service required Richard and Kathy to submit monthly reports answering where and when Koyukon people harvested game. But personal interests pushed well beyond professional obligations. Apprenticed to Catherine and other Huslia women, Kathy learned to tan hides, cut fish, and sew furs. And, caught in the current of stories, Richard explored new pathways of perception.

One night, dinner over, dishes done, Catherine spoke to Richard about her first encounters with Christianity. "I was twenty-three when we got the first church," she said. "I couldn't read the Bible so I just listened to the preacher's stories. Pretty soon I got all mixed up. Didn't know what to believe. My grandfather told stories to bring the people good luck, keep them healthy, and make a good life. Preacher said the same thing. When my grandfather came to songs in the stories, he sang them like hymns.

"That preacher got real interested in my grandfather's stories. When I told him I didn't know what to believe that preacher told me, 'You have to carry both stories. Both are right. People were given power from God to heal one another.' I sure felt good after he told me that."

Catherine echoed these thoughts in Huslia's small church, where the local pastor shared the pulpit with community elders. That Sunday morning, she shared her conviction that prayers would be heard whether they were spoken in English or Koyukon. "I've thought about this a long time," she told the congregation. "No one has to choose the white man's way or the Indian's way. Christianity works for all people everywhere on Earth, including us. But the Indian way works too. We should be proud and follow our own ways, while also following those that have come from the Outside and seem useful."

Chief Henry spoke next. With a quiet voice, he talked of the need for religion to flow through the generations. He gestured to the gray-haired church members and asked, "Where are the kids?"

December 1, Richard's thirty-fourth birthday, dawned clear and cold. The low winter sun was too weak to warm the nighttime low of –35 by more than a few degrees. In the early evening, Steven and Catherine stopped by for a quick cup of tea and stayed until midnight. As the cabin logs creaked in the deepening cold, Steven talked of the loud cracking sounds made by lakes as the ice thickens. "When this happens," he explained, "the lake ice is asking for snow to come and protect it from the cold. Even the ice has a life in it."

Catherine talked about how her grandfather Olin had healed her from multiple sicknesses. He never used plants or potions—just water and song. Often, Grandfather Olin invoked K'onghabidza, the raven spirit, to "scare away the sickness in someone." He'd mimic the raven's melodious cawing, spread his arms like wings, and hop on both feet like the bird. The old shaman, she said, had cured Steven too. Richard was struck by the sudden loss of traditional medicine.

> *Today there are no medicine men, the tradition is entirely lost. Steven and Catherine have seen and experienced it; their children will never see it, but can only be told. So close and yet so far. It could never be revived, and so we can watch it fade and be forever lost.*

Early Christmas morning, Richard's heart literally skipped a beat. Then another. Then another. Richard stared into the dark, Kathy asleep by his side. For more than three decades, Richard had never thought about his faithfully thumping heart. But miss a beat, and he could think of nothing else.

He woke Kathy.

Ear on his chest, she listened, eyes wide in shared fear.

In a city, Kathy would have warmed the car and driven Richard to the emergency room to be scrutinized by the blink and beep of a cardiologist's machines. In earlier times, they might have sent for Grandfather Olin and watched as the old shaman waved feathers and chanted to steady the rhythm of Richard's heart.

With limited options, they bundled up and knocked on the door of the village health aide. Still in her nightgown, she listened through her stethoscope, then hailed the nearest doctor (130 miles away) on the VHF radio. "Sounds like stress," said the doctor. "Relax. Take it easy. Merry Christmas."

Huslia was caught between worlds. Shamans gone, doctors not yet there. Animals respected by locals, poorly butchered by distant hunters. The old stories fading in the minds of elders, the new stories not yet formed. It's hard to relax when a life-sustaining rhythm stutters. Richard spent Christmas evening at home, waiting for the next missed beat.

By the evening of the twenty-sixth, things had improved—just a few skips each hour—but Richard vowed to make some changes.

> *I have to learn to worry less about the project, stop working all the time. With fieldwork you don't quit at 4:30 PM and go home to watch T.V. Twenty-four hours a day, it's easy to find work to do—pay a visit, take notes, have an interview, or any of the thousands of daily chores. It's hard to believe we can create pressure in such a peaceful setting, but we bring our Protestant Ethic to the village with us. Much as I despise the Protestant Ethic, I am inclined to become its victim. But the body has sounded a warning. I will slow down.*

In the New Year, temperatures dipped to –40 degrees. Kathy, having nearly frozen her feet during an earlier outing, decided to stay indoors when Richard proposed a run with the dogs. He ran the team north of town, threading through thick willows and spruce. The sun was just beginning to set as the team emerged from the trees and loped along the frozen expanse of an open slough. At the far end, Richard slowed Shungnak to a stop. He set the snow hook and looked back over the flat expanse.

Breath from the dogs had condensed into a snakelike cloud stretching for more than a mile over the snow. Iridescent in the twilight of sunset, the fog gently contorted into misty peaks and spirals. As the sun dropped, the sinuous cloud flamed orange against a background of dark trees. A single raven, like a black spot on a white page, flew over, the rhythmic rush of air through feathers loud in the silence. The bird tucked its wings, twisted into a brief free fall, called once, and disappeared between the tops of spruce.

That evening, Richard turned to his journal.

I remember, when I was a boy, walking alone into a huge, beautiful, darkened cathedral. My entire body was alive with a sensation of being watched—by the walls and windows, the pews and pulpit, by the air itself. Now I have felt it again, but this time when I was traveling alone in the forest. It is hard to imagine a more profound peace.

RISING

CHAPTER 8

ONE HUNDRED TRIPS

JANE REMAINS AT CAMP ONE to organize loads while Dan, Dr. Bob and I move up to Camp Two for our first rotation in support. I am encouraged by the ease with which we are all moving, and we reach the cache by late morning on this cloudless calm day. Well rested and eager to see new ground, we take less than an hour to reach the camp. We stand looking at the four tents pitched in a shallow dip beneath a massive rock buttress at the tip of the spur. A circle of stamped-down snow surrounds the camp, marking a perimeter where the boys have probed for crevasses. Shovelfuls of snow shoot out from a hole at the edge of the circle. We can just see the back of Dwayne's head, and a leash that trails up out of the hole to a stake driven into the snow.

Dan shouts, "Hey, Dwayne, you trying to make that crevasse bigger?"

Dwayne hasn't seen us yet, and anyone else would have startled, but not him. "Sort of," he says in a muffled voice. "I'm digging a shitter. Just thought I'd make myself useful until the guys get back down today."

I edge toward the lip of the crevasse where he has been digging. Dwayne stands a metre and a half lower on a sunken snow bridge that blocks the section of the hole he is standing in like a cork. When I peer down, I feel the rope come tight on my harness as Dan backs up to keep it taut between us. The vertical walls on either side of the snow

bridge disappear into a deep black cavern big enough to swallow our camp whole. An involuntary shiver ripples through me as I look into that icy maw. It takes an instant to replay the first and only time I'd fallen into a crevasse. I was nineteen years old and on my second summer of guiding when I slid down a mountain face into a bergshrund with Marni and her rope team of three students. We were lucky on two counts. The bergshrund didn't pinch closed and compress us between the walls, and we landed on a stopper much like what Dwayne is standing on now. And our otherwise hard landing was slowed by the drag of my own team, who remained above. The unlucky part of it was we didn't have crampons and were ten metres down inside the hole with sheer smooth ice walls flanking us on either side. The dripping meltwater soaked us within minutes. With no one above knowing how to rescue us, it wouldn't have taken long for us to turn hypothermic and die trapped in that hole. Yes, I felt like the idiot responsible for getting us into this predicament and not having the self-rescue equipment to climb out. But left with no choice but to act fast, I fashioned foot stirrups and attached them to the only two old, dull and bent ice screws we had, and proceeded to aid climb my way out. Splayed against the ice with the cold seeping into my chest, I remember best the intense infusion of purpose and sense of calm that came over me. Strangely, this experience was one of the most formative in my climbing career in terms of the confidence I gained in knowing I could perform when a situation went sideways. The near miss was a hard lesson learned, and a mistake I wouldn't make again.

Why Dwayne is so comfortable working inside that hole *alone* today, I can't understand. I say to him, "Good thing you've got a leash on there, boy scout, but really—."

Dwayne climbs up the steps he has carved, pulls the surgical mask he wears to protect his lips from sunburn off his face and snaps it on his forehead. He ambles over to where we stand by the tents and unclips his leash, which was tethered to a snow stake. He's got a new beard since

I've last seen him, as well as the usual high-altitude hack from working in the thin, dry air. I spin him around for examination, keeping a gentle grip on his arm. "I see you're on that high-altitude weight loss program again, eh?" I say, noting his stick-like legs. On Makalu, our expedition doctor ran some tests to measure our fat-to-muscle ratio. Dwayne started at 9 percent fat, and after three months of living between 5,800 and 7,900 metres, he was down to 4 percent.

He taps his sunburned lips and says, "I'm looking forward to getting out of this tanning booth and low enough to get a few good sleeps."

I realize that I still have my hand on his arm. I treasure my freedom to be tender in a way men aren't allowed to be with their own kind.

Dwayne was one of the first of the crew I met when I started work at the Yamnuska Mountain School in the summer of 1976, but it takes time for two quiet and reserved people to get to know one another. In 1979, we lived together in the mountains for five weeks while teaching a climbing course, and still, after all this time, I don't know him as well as some of the other men on our trip. But I feel comfort in his presence where others might feel unsettled by his silence. He observes more than he speaks, and when he does say something, people listen.

Our original work teams are permanently scrambled, and it's difficult to keep track of who's coming and who's going from what camp. Kevin, Barry, James, Dave and Chris spend the day pushing to set up Camp Three for the next team to move into. Tomorrow, I will join Albi, Dave and Chris in carrying loads to Camp Three. In preparation, I file the ten downward-pointing and the two frontward-pointing spikes on my crampons, which I'll need on my feet any time I'm above this camp. I remember that Dwayne said the ice was bulletproof, and I always sleep better when I am as prepared as I can be for the next day.

For my first trip, I pack a couple of sleeping bags, a water bottle, food and extra layers of clothing. Once we've loaded our packs, Albi hefts

and holds one in each hand like an old-fashioned scale. "Good boys and girls," he says. "Not too heavy. We're here for a long time, not a good time. Just a hundred more loads like this and we'll be ready to take a crack at the summit, eh?"

We set off together and it takes us less than five minutes to walk to the headwall, which starts around the corner of the rock buttress above our camp. The first rope runs up a steep ice slope to a rock outcrop about thirty metres above us. Then, ropes continue upward, weaving through patches of ice and fractured rock. To give myself a chance to find my breath and my feet on my first time up, I hang back to let the boys get ahead. I clip an ascender to my harness. Once the last man clears the first rope, I clamp my ascender onto it, slide it up the rope and fall into line. Whenever possible, I flex my ankles to weight all my downward-pointing spikes and sidestep up the ice. On higher angle snow and ice, I will kick my two front-points into the ice, which is faster but more strenuous because all my weight is levered off my toes. I will alternate one foot sideways and one toe in to climb most of the headwall. On each step upward, I push one hand against the face of the mountain for balance. With my other hand, I grip my ascender and tug just enough to unweight my lower foot and place it above the other foot.

Although Dwayne has told us we will want two ascenders on this section, I am determined to use only one to ensure I count on balance more than strength to make the thousands of steps to Camp Three. But after a couple of rope lengths of scraping, wobbling and yanking on my single ascender, I clamp the other one onto the rope. An hour later I pull over the headwall onto a small balcony on the spur where Dave, Albi and Chris sit with their backs to the wind.

"How's it going, Woody?" Dave asks. He holds out the hood of his jacket to keep it from flapping over his face.

I lurch forward to counter a gust and say, "Like a kite in this wind, and without feet yet."

"I felt like that too at first," he says, "but that headwall got easier by the day as I became better acclimatized."

I shuck my pack and join them to look at the new view. The glacier below tapers into a tongue of ice whose tip laps at our Basecamp. Three kilometres beyond, the Himalayas end abruptly, turning to brown hills on the Tibetan Plateau. Across from us are the two mountains that towered above us when we were in the valley carrying between Camp One and the cache. "Looks like we're a good ways up Lingtren already," I say. "What is it, 7,000 metres or so? Hopefully we'll be looking down on it from Camp Four within a week's time."

"Yep, we should be looking almost straight across at the summit of Changtse by then," says Chris through a surgical mask. "It's about 7,500 metres, I think."

Albi points up at the face above us. "So Woody, see where the spur we're on runs into that rock band? Camp Three is at the base of it."

I notice a bank of clouds billowing on the western horizon. "It looks like some weather is coming in," I say.

"Nay, lass," Albi says, "that's far enough away to be in India. It won't be here anytime soon. Days away, if it reaches us at all."

We get up to continue our ascent. "Come on, Woody," says Dave, "file in. We're not going any faster than you."

Albi rocks up to a stand. He slides one ascender and then the other up the rope and slips into a rhythm. When a gust of wind catches him mid-step, he regains his balance with ease. The climbing is by no means exciting or difficult for experienced alpinists—we have spent years on ground like this where we mastered the practice of minimal output for maximum gain. All we need in order to endure all the trips ahead of us is to acclimatize.

Now that I am above the headwall, I can relax my focus. And for the first time, it seems, I realize I am climbing on the spur of Everest, which inspires a new sense of the terrain. I witness rather than measure the results of this miracle where tectonic plates have shifted, collided,

buckled, folded and thrust upward to make the Himalayas. My mind wanders from the miraculous creation of the Himalayas to the abstract geology lessons I suffered through in high school, and then to how liberated I felt when that school door closed behind me for the final time. At the time, I was righteous about my decision to leave school, hell-bent on a better life beyond its doors. Yet despite no one knowing, in my own mind I lived with the stigma attached to "high school dropout" as if I was lazy, dimwitted, a loser. That branding drove me to prove myself to myself and in part, that shame has put me here on higher ground than most humans will ever reach.

In the last hour that day, the wind's strength increases and mine flags. I wait at an anchor to let Dave pass me. If I want to make it to Camp Three, my only chance is to think smarter rather than fight harder. The crosswind blows the ropes sideways in sweeping arcs between spans. After Dave goes by, I switch to the windward side of the rope and discover that the wind presses my body into the rope and up toward the next anchor, harnessing the force like a sailboat to the midpoint of the span.

I see the boys disappear inside a crevasse a short distance above me. Soon after, I watch shovelfuls of snow spurt from that hole and disperse into spray. As I draw closer, Albi appears on a ledge cut into the slope and the downhill side of the crevasse they have been tunnelling into. He stands, legs spread wide to brace himself against the buffeting wind, and shouts, "Welcome to your future palace, Woody!"

When I climb up onto the ledge, Dave reaches out from where he and Chris are sitting in the cave and takes my pack so I can crawl in beside them. I look around in amazement at the extent of the work they have done. There is room for all four of us, as well as a tent. It is so quiet and calm compared to outside.

"The only problem with this place," Dave says, "is that it keeps filling up with spindrift and we have to dig it out every time."

"Seems a small price to pay for a bombproof shelter over our heads," Albi says.

Dave and Chris have a pot on the stove. After a few sips of tea and a short rest, my pounding head urges me to descend. "We'll see you down there," Albi says as I am leaving. "We're going to dig out a little more to make it fit for a princess."

Back out in the wind on the ledge, I thread the rope through my figure-eight device, which will help brake the speed of my descent, and clip it into my harness. I lean back and out over seven hundred metres of space to fully weight my harness, and then with one hand above the brake and one hand below, I turn sideways and run down the ice. As I reach each anchor, I remain clipped in with a backup leash while I transfer my brake device from the upper rope to the lower one, and then transfer the backup leash to it as well. I reach the bottom of the lines in a fraction of the four hours it took to climb up.

I carry another load up to Camp Three the next day, and when Dave and Chris rotate into a rest the following day, Albi and I move up for our first night at Camp Three.

Halfway up, the temperature plunges and Albi's storm in India blows in. Even though it is so cold that bare skin will freeze in seconds, I stay warm. I generate heat as long as I keep moving. Blessed with good circulation, I rarely need more than boiled-wool gloves on my hands and a few layers on my body to keep me comfortable. A balaclava covers my face, but I have forgotten my goggles and my sunglasses soon become useless. Ice cakes my eyelashes and all but freezes my eyes shut. I climb the rest of the way up the ropes more by feel than by sight.

The only way I can tell we have arrived at Camp Three is that the rope ends here. Just as Dave said, snow has drifted into the opening of the cave, and it takes us hours to reclaim it and re-pitch the tent, which we find collapsed inside. When we finish, I shuck my outer boots and

crawl inside the tent to join Albi. He hands me a steaming brew, and I lean back and smile at this old friend of mine.

I met Albi for the first time nine years ago on a bitter minus-thirty-degree day. He was meant to be leading me up one of my first waterfall ice climbs, Louise Falls, though my initial impression of him didn't inspire confidence. His craggy face was flaked with sleep and frost, and he looked as though he'd slept in his clothes. Feathers puffed out of the holes of his duct tape–patched down jacket. His dented helmet barely fit over a boiled-wool balaclava that partially covered one eye, which forced him to tilt his head back and sideways to see. And when he upturned the contents of his pack onto the ground, a frozen clump of rope, ice screws, slings and a harness dropped out, which he untangled while cursing and muttering like a madman. Yet tied around his neck, just so, as if he were a proper English gentleman, was a silk cravat—a nod to his British roots. This man was the epitome of dishevelment, but as soon as he ticked his first tool into the ice, he underwent a transformation. Where I had seen others bludgeon their way up, he picked his way upward with elegance and light, precise taps.

Now, propped up on one elbow, Albi looks across the tent at me and says, "There's the happy woman I've come to know and love."

"I'm happy to be climbing—finally."

"The harder and the nastier it gets, the more you like it." He sighs. "You're a strange bird, Woody."

"I know." Despite the storm that is raging just a few metres away, I feel secure in the little sanctuary we have worked long and hard for. "This way of life is so refreshingly simple, you know?"

"I do, I suppose," he says. "But I'm not sure simplicity is an issue for me." Albi bats his eyelashes. "You need to learn how to be shallow and vacuous like me." He unzips the door and reaches out to scoop up some more snow to top up the pot on the stove. "You see, Woody, you think too much. You're plagued with existential angst and your only respite

is when you're up to your eyeballs in some life-and-death tussle. That's why you love it, and hence you're good at it."

"Thank you, Doctor. I bet you don't talk this way to all your friends."

"No," he says, "they'd probably hit me. But this is what you like to talk about."

"That's why I love you."

Albi looks at his watch. "My my, how time flies with oxygen-deprived brains and muscles engaged in little tasks. It's time for our 7 p.m. chat." He pulls the radio out of his jacket. "Hello to all you campers out there! This is Albi and Woody at Camp Three, checking in."

The radio crackles to life. "This is Jim at Basecamp. Anyone on yet?"

"Hi, Jim, this is Albi and Woody at Camp Three," Albi answers.

"What are you still doing there?" Jim says. "I thought we had decided to abandon the mountain at the first sign of a storm."

Albi replies, "It was hard to tell how hard it was snowing. Seems like this storm has more blow than snow."

"It doesn't matter how much it's snowed!" Jim says. "What matters is we all decided to clear out when the first storm hit—like right now! Hello Camp Two, are you on?" All we can hear is radio static for a minute or so and then Jim saying, "Good to hear you made it up there today, Laurie. Can you tell how hard it's snowing?"

We can only pick up the words: "Hard to—wind."

Albi says, "Camp Two, Camp Three here. We're reading you one by five. How much snow did you get at Camp Two? Jim, will you please relay for us?"

"Sounds like reception depends on line of sight tonight. Standby, Camp Two, while I relay your message to Camp Three," says Jim. "Laurie said there's a lot of drifting snow and they can't really tell how hard it's snowing. Nevertheless, I repeat, it's a storm so what the fuck are you doing there?"

I take the radio from Albi. "Hi, Jim. We didn't realize how bad it is. We pretty much just climbed into the tent to have a cup of tea after spending

all this time digging it out. We didn't know how much time it had taken until just a few minutes ago. What would you do if you were us?"

"Well," Jim says, "at this stage, it's probably safer to sit tight than to try getting back down."

We agree that if it is still storming in the morning, we'll get out of here.

"Nice one, Woody," Albi says after the call. "You hit that one back into his court."

The flame on the stove has been slowly turning from blue to green and now starts to flicker. "Seems we're competing for the same oxygen," says Albi. "Better shut down for the night after we fill our bottles."

Albi begins to snore soon after we turn the stove off. I envy the way he can sleep anywhere and through anything. The wind keeps me awake; protected as we are in the cave, it still reaches us, drawing back and sucking in the tent walls. Sometimes the wind exhales with a deep sigh right away and other times it pauses at the top of the intake, as if holding its breath. The longer the pause, the more thunderous the return.

I toss in my sleeping bag, cycling my hot water bottle from my feet to the small of my back to my stomach, recalling a time when Albi and I were in a similar situation two years ago. We were less than fifty kilometres away, perched on a small platform we had cut out at 7,300 metres on the West Ridge of Makalu. Within a few steps to either side, the ridge plunged 1,500 metres to the valley floor. We had just set the tent up and were enjoying an intimate view of the Himalayas on that calm afternoon.

Albi had nodded his head toward Everest and said, "You should think about coming with us in '86. Look what we just pulled off here. Three days of hard labour, climbing and fixing through mixed ground above 7,000 metres. After this, you'll have more experience than most of the members already on the team. You were as strong as me if not stronger. You'll pass muster. You must know that by now."

Oh, I knew I had the ability to dig deep, work hard and endure. I turned twenty-one with him on the Nose Route, made wide-eyed by the 900-metre-high airy sweep of vertical granite on El Capitan

in Yosemite. I fell leading on the first day of that three-day climb and grabbed a fixed rope with my bare hands, which I didn't let go of until I smelled burning flesh. Instead of giving up, I slathered my burnt hands with ointment and gloved them with tape for the duration of the climb. I turned twenty-five on the Cassin Ridge on Denali, where my partner and I were stuck cowering from a storm under a boulder at 5,800 metres for thirty-six hours before we could top out. And I would turn twenty-seven there on Makalu. Despite that experience and the years of climbing and guiding in the Rockies, I knew it wasn't enough. Nor was I enough for the Everest Light team to invite me to join them.

As if Albi knew what I was thinking, he said, "Two years, Woody. You've got two years to get the experience you need for a ticket to Everest."

At that moment, I had glanced over at Everest. Tendrils of cloud curled around the summit like sinister fingers where none had been moments before, and a breeze rustled the tent. I leapt up to drive in the tent stakes and tighten the guylines. Minutes later, we were both in the tent, our backs pressed hard against the windward wall as the poles splintered, the stakes popped and the floor ripped under our heels. The wind died nearly as fast as it came that day, and the next morning we sped back down the ropes, rattled by the power of Himalayan storms.

Now I lie awake, rattled by the force of another storm as Albi snores beside me inside a hole on the side of Everest. But I'm here, thanks in part to him. The tempest outside diminishes in sound only as it buries our tent. Finally I take a sleeping pill—to put my thoughts to bed.

When I wake, Albi is crammed against me and I can feel the roof of the tent just centimetres from my face.

"Albi, wake up!" He snorts and bolts upright, hitting his head against the ceiling. Then he starts punching at the walls of the tent to get more space, but just the frost lining of condensation from our breath sprinkles down on us.

"Bloody hell," he says. "How hard can this snow be packed in here?" He draws his arm back and punches the wall closest to the cave opening. A crack of light appears. "Ah! And then there was light!" And he lies back down. "Your turn, Woody."

I wriggle around to unzip the door of the tent, which opens to a solid wall of snow. My gut lurches and my throat constricts. "Oh god. Have I ever told you how much I hate snow caves?"

Albi rests a hand on my shoulder. "This isn't the first time this cave has filled in overnight. The only difference is we're in it this time," he says. He points to the crack of light on the side of the tent. "Air isn't far away. There's a hole. In fact, do you remember what a palace this was yesterday? It can be that way again, and soon."

I start scraping at the wall of snow with the pot. With nowhere to put the snow but inside the tent, Albi scoops it into a pile that fills most of what little space remains. I never imagined I'd feel such relief when a blast of spindrift hits my face. We zip the door back up and pull on our insulated suits. Then I worm out of the tunnel and into the raging storm, and start digging out our tent. Every few minutes I fold myself over the shovel and gasp for breath.

"Enough," Albi yells. "I've got enough room to get the stove going now." While we wait for the snow to turn to water, we call Jim. He says it is pretty windy at Camp Two and the boys have a lot of digging out to do as well. They are pretty antsy to get out of there—as are we.

A short time later we step out onto the ledge to begin our descent toward Laurie and Dan at Camp Two. I can see little beyond my feet in the storm. When we start down, we find the ice blown clean except for a few sections where we have to stop and wrench the ropes free from densely packed snowdrifts. It is the snow-loaded slopes looming

six hundred metres above our heads that worry us, and we quicken our pace. I breathe easier when we drop off the spur into the lee of the headwall.

At the bottom of the fixed ropes, Laurie gives me a rib-crushing hug and Dan hands Albi and me each a loop from their rope to clip into. He says, "We've told Jim you're down. Let's get outta here!"

Although Dr. Bob and Chris walked out just a few hours earlier, there is no sign of their tracks. Dan takes the lead, breaking trail through drifts of knee-deep snow. As I hurdle from step to step to keep pace, I feel a part of it now—a part of the team and the one hundred trips we'll make.

CHAPTER 9

PROVING GROUNDS

MOST OF US STAY AT CAMP ONE and carry loads to the cache over the next three days while waiting out the storm. By now we have passed over that ground enough times to start naming the features. There is a round frozen lake amidst the jumbled penitentes, which we call the Montreal Forum after the boys skate around on their boots there one day, pretending to be famous hockey players. We name the five-storey-high ice tower that leans precariously over our route the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and place bets on when it will fall over. The Bowling Alley is a hundred-metre-long icy gauntlet lined with boulders marooned atop rows of melting-out ice pinnacles. We always quicken our pace when we walk past those last two features.

The storm that forced us off the mountain allows us to regroup into our original teams. Laurie, Dan and I cycle into another rest. The first courier is due any day, which inspires me to make a trip to Basecamp for the mail.

Liberated from my heavy boots, I wear my light trekking shoes, which have me flying down the trail. Before I have time to recognize the red-and-blue fleece jacket and pants that a sponsor provided for the Makalu expedition, I run into Carlos. I slow to a walk to discourage conversation. But he waits. I've been dreading this encounter, the first

time we will be alone together since he showed up at my house without notice and told me he was coming to Everest.

That night I was determined to get out of my car and walk right past him and into my house. I hadn't seen him since he'd left me four months earlier, after not coming home one night. I'd then discovered that the woman he'd been with that night wasn't the first over the four-year span of our relationship. "Outta my way," I said, but he barred my way to the door.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

I pushed past him to open the door. "Not happening."

In a reedy voice, he pleaded, "Just give me five minutes."

"For what?"

"For your permission."

He craned his head to catch my eye, which I refused to meet. I felt his hand on my arm and twisted away. "Get on with it, Carlos."

"I want to go back to Everest." He had climbed a new route on Everest, the East Face, in '83.

"Go ahead. I don't care what you do now."

I watched his foot push and arrange the snow in ridges and mounds. "The trip is this spring, on the north side. We'll be at the same Basecamp."

"No!" My head dropped to my chest. I heard myself whine, "Why? You were supposed to go to K2 next spring."

"Well, I'm not now. I want to climb Everest without oxygen instead. An American team is going and this is my chance."

I turned for the door. "Well, do it any other time but when I'm there."

"It would be better for both of us if I had your permission."

My fingers gripped the doorknob. "No, Carlos. You mean it will be better for you. Not for me."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to go anyway."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" It was all I could do not to slam the door in his face. Instead I pressed it shut behind me and listened to the snow crunching underfoot as he walked away. I hadn't

realized I was holding my breath until I let out a gasp and slid down the wall to the floor.

A few days later I found out that Carlos had rekindled an old romance with Annie over the winter. Annie was his introduction to that team.

Now Carlos stands on the trail between me and Basecamp. He looks gaunt; his pack, jacket and pants hang limply from his shoulders. He shoots me a smile as I approach. "Hi, want to walk down to Basecamp together?"

"Why would we do that?" I say.

He coos, "Come on, I'd like to be friends."

"Friends?" I keep my voice steady. "You betrayed me, lied to me and then you show up here. Why now?"

"Because I want to climb Everest without oxygen."

"That's not what I heard," I say. A few weeks back, when Laurie ran into Carlos in Lhasa and asked him why he was in China, Carlos answered, "To put the first American woman on top of Everest." But I want to hear those words from Carlos, not Laurie. "There are plenty of expeditions every year, and with your resume, you could join most any of them. So, I ask again, why now, when I'm here?"

He looks older than his thirty-three years. More than anyone I know, Carlos wears his strain on the outside. Dark hammocks hang below his bloodshot eyes and a crease cleaves his brow. Anxiety gripped him at the start of every trip we shared. Sometimes he couldn't touch or talk to me for days. Now, another woman's problem—not mine.

He stops, turns and reaches out to touch my arm. I recoil. He replies, "I didn't know when I'd get another chance if I didn't come now."

"No, that's my story because, unlike you, this *is* my only chance and it looks to me as though you're doing your best to spoil it."

"I've been honest with you," he says. "And I respected you enough to ask your permission, didn't I?"

The skin on my arms prickles and an ache throbs at the back of my throat. *No,* I think, *don't lose it, not here.* I say, "I hate you for doing this

to me. I'd rather not hate you, but apparently you've got nothing to say to change that. So, fuck off." I break into a hard run, not so much to get away from Carlos as to give rein to my fury.

Why is he here now? My footfalls landing hard on the *now*. I know that I don't want to be the same woman that I was when I was with Carlos, but still he has a hold on me.

In late summer of 1982, all the senior Yamnuska mountain instructors except for me left to climb Everest. Without warning, our boss hired Carlos, who had never worked with us before, to co-lead a five-week mountaineering course with me. I was furious. We had opposing approaches to teaching and argued daily. Even so, and to the puzzlement of many, including me, we fell in love and went on our first climbing trip together that fall, to Yosemite Valley in California. It would be the first of many.

Last April, we had set off for two months in the Peruvian Andes. Carlos and I had loved and fought in equal measures. He was my best friend, my lover, my climbing partner and my captor. By then, I was sure we would spend the rest of our lives together. It would be an adventure and it would be hell—and I couldn't imagine life without him. Carlos had climbed there several times, and it felt like home to him. We spent our first week hiking out of Huaraz, starting on potholed streets that narrowed to cobbled roads and trailed off through open hills to the mountains. I brimmed with love for this companion-cum–tour guide at my side.

But over breakfast one morning, at the end of that first week, and just after Carlos had been musing about us getting married, he caught himself. "Why did I have to fall in love with a climber? Why can't you just be a normal girlfriend? Right now, I'd be looking forward to some simple time together, some nice hikes and a bit of sightseeing. But instead I'm stressing over how we'll climb together and dreading it." My eyes stung and my heart plummeted. It wasn't the first time I had heard this lament from him. Yet still, I rose and fell every time.

Over the next month we made a few multi-day trips up side valleys into the Cordillera Blanca with burros and camp guard in tow. But due to an unseasonable amount of snow that rendered the avalanche hazard high and the mountains out of condition, we didn't get up anything, which left us lost for who we were when we weren't climbing. This problem resolved itself for me in the second month. While Carlos was busy leading a trek, I climbed with my future Everest teammates: with Dave on Cerro Artesonraju and with Albi on Cerro Huandoy.

Carlos asked me to come with him the second month while he guided a client in the mountains above the Ishinca Valley; more than he wanted me to come with him, he didn't want me to climb without him. So, I found myself plodding up the trail behind Carlos and his client, three burros, a burro driver–cum-cook and two chickens. When we rounded the final bend at the head of the valley, I saw the 6,000-metre-high Cerro Tocllaraju leaning into the sky. There and then, my plan to be a submissive girlfriend unwound as fast as an anchor line off a ship's deck.

I took in the glass-like polished ice face: six hundred metres high and an average angle of fifty degrees. I scoped the crux: halfway up, the route narrowed into a vertical section like the waist of an hourglass to pass through rock bands. The ice on the crux was shades darker than the ice above and below it, indicating that it might be too thin for crampons to bite. I heard myself say, "I can retreat if I can't climb it." The final hundred metres tapered into a steep pyramid, with its third side a lower-angled ridge and an easy way off.

The valley we had been following ended abruptly a half kilometre ahead at a terminal moraine. The glacier had receded over the centuries to where it now lay, three hundred metres above the valley floor. Traces of footpaths led up through spine-backed lateral moraines to a ramp that led onto to glacier. A fresh snowfall draped the gaping crevasses and seracs I would wend my way through to get to the West Face of Tocllaraju. Compelled by an urge to respond, I would go—*now*. I bolted for where our group was unloading our gear to set up Basecamp,

packed up and was on my way. I was not sure what Carlos thought of my sudden change of plans. It wasn't that I didn't care. More telling was the strength of the draw.

Late that afternoon, I encountered a straggle of climbers unroping at the glacier's edge. Behind them, their track, like an erratic graph line, jagged, spiked and paralleled the crevasses in search of snow bridges to cross them. The team was Czech and spoke little English. In a patchy exchange, they pointed at the low-angled ridge leading to the summit of Tocllaraju and told me they had climbed it. Or was that just what I wanted to hear? I could climb the face but not descend it. Their track would be mine, and the only route off the mountain.

I followed their trough, ploughed knee-deep through heavy wet snow, until I came to a hard stop where one of their feet had broken through a snow bridge spanning a cavern below. Crossing the glacier in the peak of the day's heat when the snow strength was weakest was a poor decision—unnecessary. I could turn around now and camp on the edge of the moraine to wait out the night and cross the glacier in the morning once the snow had frozen and strengthened. But even a single step back could break the spell. I might lose my resolve and return to Basecamp. I asked myself, *Am I motivated by Everest and the identity of an alpinist it promises*? Or was it absolute passion, the irresistible pull, the delight at the sight of every new puzzle to solve?

Yes, I wanted to be here now—pure and simple.

I put on my harness and crampons. Then I tied a long leash to my pack and heaved it onto the middle of the snow bridge, where it landed with a soft thud and stayed put. Then I got down on all fours, splaying my body across as wide a surface area as possible and wallowed across.

An hour later, I veered off the Czechs' track, dropped my pack and climbed a short ways up the face to mark the best bridge over the bergschrund for the next morning, when it would be dark. I was back down on the glacier by sunset, where I stomped out a platform to settle in for the night. Then I lay in my bivouac sack, propped up against my

pack, watching the mountain disintegrate into darkness, with the hiss of my stove the only sound beneath the star-studded ceiling.

By 2 a.m. my mind was on its feet: would I cave and turn back, or rise to an all-consuming focus that I yearned for? *Just begin. Believe and begin.*

I was walking by 3:30 a.m., carrying a light pack with a litre of water, some granola bars, a bag of nuts, an extra jacket, a short length of rope and a couple of ice screws and pitons. The light of my headlamp confined my world to a ten-metre radius. On each out breath, to calm my trepidation, I chanted in cadence with my step: *just begin, just begin*. The hard freeze overnight made the snow firm enough to walk atop. Within a few minutes my world tipped steeply upward. The beam of my headlamp now spotlighted a metre-wide circle on the face in front of me.

I felt the transition from snow to ice underfoot. My crampon points and picks of my axes sank in as easily as darts into a corkboard. I settled into a new cadence of *axe, axe, foot, foot,* rest, *perfect balance, axe, axe, foot, foot,* rest, *perfect balance* where all hesitation was consumed by will—simple.

I felt entranced—as if I was floating. More space opened beneath my feet, demanding a precision in balance and economy of effort. My senses flared for the slightest change in feel, look and the sound of my points penetrating the ice. I had sought this place of certainty before—a state of mind that channelled adrenaline into focus. Once elevated to this state, it was harder to go back than to move forward—toward more. The only fear became failure, which threatened a backward slide to what I was, rather than to what I could be.

First light revealed a dim view of the crux just above me. The day before I had scoped this narrow vertical passage from below and planned to turn around here if I couldn't find enough rock to drive a piton or ice to thread an ice screw into. But turning back was not an option. I could see veins of ice thick enough for my front points and axes, and features to stand on. After a few body lengths of delicate

climbing where no more than a centimetre of my picks pricked the thin ice, I found myself above the crux.

The sky was awash in lavender and pink by the time I reached the steep and bulbous snow formations capping the top of the face. The vertical snow bulges defied gravity and me. I attempted to burrow up through the hip-deep unconsolidated snow by gouging a trench and pressing my feet and body against the sidewalls, but they collapsed and it felt too insecure. I backed down and tentatively traversed below the obstacles in search of higher-density snow and an easier route to the top. When I reached the edge of the West Face, I was relieved to find a lower-angle ramp that led to the top. When I punched my right foot into the new slope, it felt denser.

All it took was one kick to disturb that layer of new snow, which clung to the ramp just beyond the angle of repose. A crack appeared, and in the time it took me to jerk back onto my left foot, it ripped across the slope. I heard a swishing sound as the snowfield disintegrated into fragments then vanished over the edge. It was over in an instant. *Was I delirious, was I seeing things?* Then as if in answer, a rumbling cloud roiled up from below.

My heart pounded in my ears. The near miss sent me scuttling back across the West Face to my abandoned trench, where I bolted upward, gasping on fumes of adrenaline. In order to gain any traction I had to spread my weight over the largest surface area possible. I swam with my arms and legs to propel my body upward until I reached the top.

I stepped out of the shadow of the face and into a fiery orange wash of alpenglow. Dread doused my relief when I couldn't see any footprints *anywhere*. I raced across the top for a look over the other side in hope of finding the Czechs' track back down, but saw nothing. Hope kept me plunging down the knee-deep snow slope—looking, praying—until I reached the breakover, where the slope dropped away so steeply I couldn't see the ground below it.

I thumbed through the pages of my memory for everything I had learned about snow stability and stopped at the winter of 1979. I was with a group of ski industry professionals, enduring a lecture on slope configuration from snow hazards expert Chris Stethem, the best in the business. I had rolled my eyes as he stood at the front of the meeting room, pointing at a giant image of a woman's breast he was using to illustrate weaker and stronger terrain features. He slowly traced his pointer from the upper swell, drawing it down to the nipple and then horizontally across the curve, where he let it rest. "Right here at the breakover," he explained, "where angle tips, is where the tension is greatest." I was one of two women in the room, and he shot me a sly smile. *Asshole.*

But he was effective. As I shot back up my tracks, I puzzled over something that the Czechs had tried to convey the day before. Had they said "avalancha"? Did they stop before the summit because of avalanche hazard?

Back on the summit, I ran across to look over one side and then the other. "Shit, shit, shit, shit! What am I going to do?" I howled. "Stop it! Calm down. Sit! Eat something. Think." And I plopped down on my pack. I felt the faint warmth of the sunrise on my back. I watched the shadow line of this peak creep down the mountainside across the valley. A light breeze came up as if caused by the movement of the earth turning toward the sun. I was a part of the ride that morning and viewing it from the top of the planet.

I looked down at our Basecamp and thought, *I could still be asleep or just rousing, sipping a cup of tea and later seeing Carlos and his client off on an acclimatization hike.* Then I'd wander off somewhere just to kill time. I could be safe. Either way, killing time, or killing myself, I'd be dead. Instead, I'm here, inside this body vibrating to the thudding beat of my heart. I had never felt more alive.

I soon packed up, said a prayer and started descending the way I had come up—the way I'd thought I couldn't. *Axe, axe, foot, foot,*

slide, repeat. I made good time until I reached the ice. Unlike climbing up, where my focus was right in front of my face, every step down forced me to look through my feet at the glacier far below.

Two hours later, I arrived at the crux, where the next five metres dropped out of sight over the edge. My calves burned from fatigue. The equatorial sun blazed down. Rivulets of sweat trickled down my face and the sides of my ribs. It was difficult to see my feet past the bulk of my jacket, and I was soaked in sweat. I shrugged one arm out of a pack strap and sleeve, slipped it back through the pack strap, and then did the same with the other arm and eased my jacket out from between my back and the pack and let it go. I envied the ease with which it floated and seesawed through the air and glided to a stop on my track far below.

With much improved comfort and now able to see my feet, I slotted my front-points back into the tiny holes I had made in the thin veneer of ice and the fissures in the rock on my way up this section. I concentrated all of my will and focus into each step downward and each axe placement at a time.

Below the crux now, my calves screamed for respite, and I stopped and chopped out a ledge to get my feet sideways and my weight on my heels. I looked back up at the section I had just climbed down and shook my head in wonder. A few hours ago, I hadn't thought it possible to reverse the moves I made to climb up this section. Where was the line between what I could and couldn't do? This question would bring me back to the edge again and again.

It was noon by the time the slope's angle eased and there was snow instead of ice beneath my feet. Knowing that a fall wouldn't kill me now, I ran down the rest of the slope whooping and hollering, "I'm down. I'm down! Thank the gods!" I snatched up my jacket, and an hour later, I stepped off the glacier onto the moraine and kissed the ground.

A few hours before, at the top of the mountain, I had said my vows and prayers: *If I make it off this mountain, I will be satisfied and never need to do this again. I will appreciate everything and every day of life I have from this day on.* Once I was safely down, I thought of what Laurie once said in a presentation I attended: "Climbing shows us that we are more than we know. We purposely climb ourselves into trouble—to a place where the only way out is through. It's then, in the fight, that we discover more in ourselves."

I now felt like I was more than I knew. But how long would that last before I needed to remind myself again? Not long, I discovered: I would solo the North Face of Ranrapalca two days later and then Carlos and I would do our last climb together and a new route on the Northeast Face of Huascarán Sur. I arrived home to a formal invitation to join the Everest Light team.

THE ROAD TO SAN DONATO

CHAPTER 7

> Everyone in their life has his own particular way of expressing life's purpose—the lawyer his eloquence, the painter his palette, and the man of letters his pen from which the quick words of his story flow. I have my bicycle.
>
> —Gino Bartali

When I was growing up, a bicycle represented absolute freedom to me. From as early as I can remember, my buddies and I cruised around our neighborhood like a rowdy pack of stray dogs. We pedaled up into the woods by the old water tower, where we could find empty beer bottles to chuck against the rocks. Or sometimes, if we were really lucky, we'd come across an old waterlogged nudie magazine. My oh my, what joys these two wheels could bring a curious kid!

We were totally reckless. Helmets were for "losahs." We screamed down steep hills in my neighborhood, egging each other on not to touch our brakes, as we raced toward busy intersections to beat a red light. One time, my buddy Dooley blasted right through oncoming traffic while chasing me and my best friend, Wally. In my memory two cars spun out like in the movies as Dooley miraculously threaded the needle. We didn't even stop. We kept on pedaling, laughing hysterically and buzzing with that same intoxicating adrenaline we got from pelting a police car with a snowball.

We obsessed about our bikes, squirrelling away money from raking leaves and shoveling snow to buy shocks, disk brakes, mag-rim wheels, clipless pedals, and (if we were really going for broke) a full-suspension frame.

When it came to bikes, the major difference between me and my friends was that when I went home, the obsession didn't end—my father stoked it. Dad gave me my first fixed-gear bicycle after I graduated college. Gleaming black and yellow, the aluminum-framed Schwinn was a thing of beauty. Dad had his mechanic switch out its traditional drop handlebars to a pair of bullhorns wrapped in camo tape. He had the back brake stripped off, so the rear wheel slid through the frame freely.

"But you have to keep the front brake," he told me.

"Why? You don't have a front brake."

"Your mother would kill me," he said. "Plus, you got more to protect up there." He tapped his head.

"Fine, but I'm not going to use it."

He smirked. "We'll see about that."

Dad took me on fixie rides through the city. We'd rip up tight alleys, jockey through traffic, and chase down every cyclist we saw. From the first pedal stroke, I fell madly in love with the raw torque of a fixed gear. The bike came alive, forcing my feet to spin faster and faster. If I tried to coast, the pedals launched my knees violently into my chest. The all-or-nothingness of the fixed gear drew me into its devoted tribe.

Drafting off my Dad's back wheel, I marveled at how easy he made pedaling a fixie look. Every one of his pedal strokes had a purpose. Like a boxer throwing jabs, hooks, and uppercuts, he pedaled combinations of force to move methodically. He read the traffic, calling out cars that were about to stop or turn into our lanes before their signals blinked. His hands pointed out potholes, sand, glass, and other tire-popping perils. I had always assumed he was reckless on his bike, but here I witnessed just how much control he had.

I came to appreciate the invigorating allure of bicycling through city traffic, which delivered the same adrenaline rush I imagine people get running with the bulls. Your focus needed to be cranked to the max as you anticipated drivers' erratic behavior, swerving around fenders, blocking out car horns, and darting past pedestrians. When shooting through the tight gap between a city bus and a dump truck to catch a traffic light that was flicking yellow to red, it was hard not to feel like something of a superhero.

All your senses, your instincts, your brute physicality were firing off in unison for the sole purpose of keeping you alive—and *Holy shit, did you feel alive!* Of course, just as with running with the bulls, even if you did everything perfectly, you could still get gored. My father had tangled with those chrome horns of city traffic more times than he'd like to admit.

AFTER SUCKING DOWN ENOUGH free coffee to stop the heart of a baby rhino, Dad and I pocketed a handful of pastries, packed up our tiny backpacks, and checked out of the hostel after two days. Wearing our cycling kits beneath our street clothes, we set out to find the bike shop. After much debate, we'd decided the best option was to simply rent bikes in Florence, as opposed to shipping our own overseas. A cycling guide had suggested we rent from Florence by Bike, a hole-in-the-wall shop on the outskirts of the historic city. From what I could see on their website, their road bikes appeared high-end and not the cumbersome cruisers I feared would be our only option.

Entering the shop, I had one main concern. "Whatever you do," I said under my breath, "don't tell them where we're going."

"Why not?"

"Honestly I didn't read the rental agreement," I said. "I have no idea if we can even take these bikes out of the city."

"Oh, I'm sure it's fine."

"Yeah, but mum's the word." This was one of my errant tendencies. If something fell outside the plan I had in mind, or didn't fit the story I was telling myself, I simply denied its very existence. Rather than quickly checking to see whether we could take the rental bikes outside of the city, I preferred to avoid the possibility of bad news. As it was throughout my life, when I feared the truth, I instinctively opted for ignorance. It was a trait I inherited from my father.

One of the mechanics peered at us suspiciously from his closet-sized workshop where he tinkered with the gears on a road bike. He wore surgical gloves so as not to get grease on his fingers as he worked the gears. As Dad and I waited for one of the other mechanics to set us up with our rental bikes, we pretended to peruse the various jerseys for sale. The mechanic stared.

I often forget what a curious sight my father and I make together. I looked like a replica of him, if you subtracted thirty years and added sixty pounds, seven inches of height, and a few more layers of hair. Our shaggy blond mops fall to our shoulders in a surfer-dude style that I fear make us impossible to take seriously. The hair was definitely what got people. After high school, I decided to grow my hair out a bit while studying abroad in Europe. Dad loved the idea. He'd been rocking a golden mane since the 1970s and was more than encouraging to see me break out of my "boy's regular" routine. When I returned to the States and went into his shop for a haircut, he refused to give me anything more than a trim. "It looks dynamite," he'd say. "Why do you want to look like everyone else?" I'd concede, with my hair looking longer than when I arrived. A decade later, I was still negotiating with him to cut it back whenever I landed in his chair, but he always succeeded in talking me out of it.

The hair made us look more Scandinavian or Australian than American. We certainly didn't look Italian. "Yeah, my family is from Southeast Italy," I'd often explain. "Which I guess has a lot of blond people." Of course, that was a bunch of bull. Up until booking our plane tickets to Florence, I had absolutely no idea where exactly my great-grandfather was from, let alone what its residents' physical characteristics were. That's why we were here.

"Alo," a man called out, waving us to the back.

"Yo . . . Dad," I said, nodding.

We followed the mechanic through a beaded door and into the back of the shop where rows of bikes hung like slabs of beef in a meat locker. He eyed us from the waist down, mentally sizing us to a bike, then disappeared into the sea of wheels and frames. The man emerged a minute later with two shining red beauties.

"Provalo," he said, motioning for me to get on.

I threw my leg over the bike. The mechanic took hold of the front wheel and gestured for me to sit and clip into the pedals. All the components gleamed like polished pearls. The wires to the brakes and gear shifters on the handlebars slipped into portals along the glossy red frame and out of sight. The handlebar tape was plush as an old leather pocketbook. The man gestured for me to pedal backward. The chain purred as it passed silkily

over the big ring, through the derailleur, and into the small cassette. It was beautiful. "Can't believe they rent these bikes out," I said to Dad.

He nodded approvingly, watching the mechanic fine-tune the components and fit the frame to me like a classic Italian tailor. My father was a sucker for a good bike mechanic. Back home he'd probably put his local bike mechanic's kid through college with all the business he'd given him over the years. He dreamed of someday having a shop of his own. "With coffee," he'd add.

With my rental dialed in, the mechanic motioned for my father to step onto his bike. The two bicycles looked nearly identical, except for one minor detail that my father was quick to point out. "This thing has a granny gear," he said.

"A what?" I said. The bike mechanic looked up quizzically.

"A granny gear . . . look at the front cassette. That small gear ring—that's for old ladies."

I laughed, but he was serious. "Who cares," I shrugged. "Just don't use it, if you don't want." But I knew it wasn't that easy. For a pure-bred fixie-rider like my father, a granny gear was the equivalent of strapping on a pair of training wheels. We might as well add a pair of streamers to the handlebars and a baseball card in between the spokes while we were at it. For a guy who wanted his tombstone's epitaph to read "Lived Life in the Big Ring," looking down to a granny gear between his legs was akin to being neutered.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm going to do," Dad said defiantly. "I'm not using it."

The average person might not see the logic in my father's thinking. Why not just use the small gear and make the ride easier? After all, this wasn't a competition. No one was watching us or keeping our times. Pedaling nearly a hundred miles a day was a feat no matter what gear you were in. This ride was entirely about survival.

But when it came to physical tests, my father never wanted to have an unfair advantage. If anything, he looked for ways to make them more challenging. A few years ago, he had his bike mechanic increase the size of the big gear on his fixie. This made climbing hills, coming to a stop, and even just getting started significantly more difficult. The bigger ring

made pedaling the equivalent of climbing up fifty flights of stairs, bounding two at a time, while wearing eight-pound ankle weights. For the first two months with the bigger gear, Dad was forced to walk his bike up the hill leading to his house. He'd get about a quarter of the way up, grinding down on the pedals with every bit of strength in his sixty-plus-year-old legs, until he just couldn't turn them anymore. But still he refused to downsize the gear. Instead, the big ring forced him to get stronger, until he could grit his way all the way to the top.

We wheeled the bikes up to the front desk to check out. "Do you need a map?" the woman at the desk asked.

"No, I think we're just—"

"Yeah, let's take a map," Dad said.

We're about to pedal halfway down the boot of Italy, I thought. *What good was a map of Florence going to do us?* I plucked one from the desk and handed it back to him.

"If something happens to the bikes," the shop clerk continued, "you must contact us immediately." I nodded emphatically. "Immediately," she repeated, staring at me over her glasses.

"I got it," I said.

WE SLIPPED OFF OUR street clothes in the bathroom and stuffed them into our backpacks. I attached the twenty-pound saddle bag to the seat post, cinched on my backpack, and wheeled outside. Dad rolled out behind me and did a long, lazy circle down the street. I always appreciated how perfectly he fit on a bike. At 5'6", 140 pounds, his svelte body draped effortlessly on the frame. He had that light, compact physique of legendary climbers such as Alberto Contador and Marco Pantani. He rode with his hands almost exclusively in the lower part of the handlebars—what were known as "the drops"—like a throwback to the classic days when cyclists carried spare tires across their chests.

Meanwhile, I was an awkward sight on a bike. My stubby legs and long torso made me look clumsy and unathletic, which at this moment I was. I threw my leg over the frame and caught a reflection of myself in the window of a parked car. Several extra pounds of winter weight hung from my

gut, making me look like an overstuffed tube of toothpaste in my cycling kit.

"Alright, Dad, let's get out of eyeshot of the bike shop and get our bearings."

"Sounds good," he said cheerfully. He was happy to be back on a bike. The familiarity of gliding on two wheels again brought his foreign surroundings into terms he could handle.

We rolled down the narrow street until it culminated in a roundabout. I checked oncoming traffic and pedaled across to the center of the circle. The chaos of morning traffic was ramping up. Cars, motor bikes, and trucks swarmed around us in a cloud of fumes. Now was the moment of truth: time to lead. I pulled out my iPhone and connected it to my handlebars using a plastic mount I'd bought back in the States. Activating the Strava navigation app, I punched in the route for Siena, our first stop on this five-hundred-mile adventure.

The Strava route from Florence to Rome was given to me by Andy Levine, the founder of Duvine Cycling and Adventure Company. Based in Boston, Andy's guide service led high-end cycling tours in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. When I told him that I was looking for a Florence-to-Rome route, Andy tried to talk me out of it. "That's a hell of a lot of climbing," he said. "Sure you guys are up for that? I mean, how old is your dad?" After I waved off offers for routes through Sicily and Capri, Andy kindly connected me with his lead guide in Tuscany, who shared a four-day route for Dad and me to follow on my phone.

Part of me hated the fact that I was relying on my cell phone to navigate from place to place. It felt like cheating. We should have been unfurling a map on the cobblestones and stitching a route together with compass in hand. I desperately wanted to use this trip as an excuse to rip myself from my addiction to the glowing screen, but I feared that with all the potential pitfalls of this journey, relying on my nonexistent map skills was foolhardy. If left to my own sense of direction, we'd undoubtedly end up wildly off-trail. Back home, I'd become completely reliant on GPS to get just about anywhere. Even when driving to places I knew by heart, I developed a pathetic habit of punching the address into my map app to see if there was

a quicker way. I'd cling to those automated directions like they were the instructions in a ransom note.

During a road trip through Colorado, for instance, my GPS rerouted me from what was supposed to be an eighty-five-mile route to a five-mile route. I should have realized something was amiss when the GPS indicated that covering those five miles would take two and a half hours. Only after fording two rivers and sputtering halfway up a steep logging road did I realize the GPS had routed me directly over the Rocky Mountains. I made a twenty-seven-point turn on a narrow cliff band and backtracked—all the while my phone screaming: "Rerouting! Rerouting!"

I had no clue how the Strava app was supposed to work. I foolishly hadn't taken the time to try it out before this trip and was hoping it would magically start calling out directions *Knight Rider*–style as we pedaled. "Alright, ready?" I asked Dad, zooming into the route.

"You know where we're going?"

"Think so. Just follow me." I sensed that he was itching to break out that map he'd pocketed at the bike shop to get his bearings. He'd never relied on GPS to get anywhere. Like ATMs and smartphones, GPS was a futuristic quagmire he refused to wade into.

"So that thing is going to get us to Sienna?" he asked.

"Should," I said.

He fastened the strap of his helmet and clipped into his right pedal. In addition to his suspicion of technology, Dad was completely unaccustomed to following anyone else's lead. There was a reason why he never joined a big cycling group back home. As in life, my father beat his own path on a bike. He wanted full control over where he went, but now I took that away from him.

"Lead the way, Magellan," he said.

I clipped my right foot into the pedal, made one big stroke, and rolled onto the shoulder of traffic. Vespas swarmed around us like angry hornets. I stared down at my phone, waiting to see what the Strava app would do. No directions were being called out. I pressed the volume on my phone, but it didn't make a peep. Instead, there was just a blinking dot—*me!*—and a glowing blue line laid over the map to follow. I clipped in my left foot and

pedaled gingerly, watching how the blue dot ate the glowing line like Pac-Man. *Keep the dot on the line is the name of the game.*

"I think I got it," I said, peeking back over my shoulder.

"Keep your eyes on the road," Dad yelled.

We pedaled a few blocks until we reached the Arno River, then hung a left along the four-lane Lungarno della Zecca Vecchia. *As long as I keep the blinking blue dot over the glowing white line, we should be fine*, I reasoned in my head. Crossing the Ponte San Niccolò, we picked our way through a congested intersection and began climbing the Viale Michelangiolo. The residential boulevard was draped in trees. Sunlight scattered along the pavement as leaves rustled overhead. My eyes continually darted from the route, to the road, to Dad, and back again. With so many moving parts, I struggled to breathe with any cadence. The hill steepened and began to wind up big, long circles. I clicked into an easier gear. They switched one to the next with snappy, mechanical precision. Sweat beaded under my helmet, sticking my hair to my forehead. I reached desperately for my water bottle.

Up and up we climbed until the boulevard culminated in the Piazzale Michelangelo, a sprawling parking lot of sorts that offered a sweeping view of the city below. I knew it would irk my father to pull over, since we'd only just started riding, but we needed to take in this view of Florence. I led us past T-shirt stands and plein air painters, by yet another replica of Michelangelo's *David*, bronze this time, and out to the railing overlooking the Arno, which meandered between the red stucco rooftops, church spires, and domes.

"Dad, you remember this from the book?" I asked.

"Which book?"

"The Gino Bartali book," I said. "This is where he would ride with his friends when they were kids." According to *Road to Valor*, Bartali would blow by them up the hill we had just ascended. He'd stop here to catch his breath and wait for his friends.

"Oh, that's right."

"Pretty cool, huh?" I said, grabbing my water bottle again. It was enchanting to think that this was the same view Gino Bartali gazed upon all those years ago.

"Yep." My father still had one foot clipped into the pedal. He lifted the front end of his bike and spun his wheel, then ran his hand over the tire to remove any gravel or shards of glass. With all the stopping and starting, Dad just wanted to get on with it. He didn't share in my enthusiasm for this site of living history. I placed my water bottle back into its cage. "Alright, let's do it."

We passed around the vendors, through the tourists, and by the parked tour busses, then returned to the main street. I checked for cars, turned right out of the Piazzale Michelangelo, and began pedaling slightly uphill. I clicked into an easier gear. The air felt cool and refreshing whipping across my face as I gathered speed, the wheels purring as they spun along the smooth pavement beneath my legs. This was definitely the nicest bike I'd ever ridden. Every component, from the brakes to the gears, was tuned like a concert piano. Rustling trees canopied the road, creating a tunnel of green punctuated by ancient stone buildings that blurred in my periphery. *We were off!*

I turned my head back to find my father zipping right behind me. "Pretty awesome, huh?"

"Keep your eyes on the road," he yelled.

"Yeah, yeah. I got it."

I gazed gleefully down the road. *This is unreal*, I thought. *Here we are. Cycling in Italy. Just Dad and me. Surrounded by history. Tracking our roots. Two guys off the grid. On a mission to find our village. Papa's village! Here we are. Here. We. Are.*

Where are we exactly? I looked down to the GPS, where—*shit!*—the glowing white line had disappeared. *Where was the line?* The blue dot tumbled into digital oblivion. I thumbed the map, zooming out to get my bearings. *CRACK!* My front wheel hit a pothole.

"Holy hell," I called out, throwing my free hand back to the handlebar to save myself from crashing.

"What's up?" Dad said, catching up.

"I think we're . . . " I eased on the brake. "I think we're off track."

"Already? This looks right to me," he said. "I'm sure it leads out to where we're supposed to go."

"Yeah, hold on." I zoomed out, trying to locate the glowing line that was our course. *How pathetic was this?* I thought. Standing on the side of the road, only a few miles from where we started, already off track. How far we'd strayed from navigating by the stars. "Found it," I said. "Yeah, we missed a turn just back there."

"You sure?"

"That's what it says."

Dad looked back up from where we'd just come and down the hill again. The steep pavement was begging to be coasted down. "Really?"

"Yeah, unfortunately."

He repositioned his bike, picking up the frame next to his seat. "Well, if that's what it says."

"Yeah, that's what it says. Just up there." I checked for traffic, made one pedal stroke across the street, and turned back uphill. I struggled to get my other cleat back in the pedal. *C'mon. C'mon, you bastard. Get in there. There, it's in.* I pushed down on the pedal, but the cleat popped out, sending my groin directly into the cross bar. Pain shot up into my stomach. I sucked down two deep breaths as cramps seized my gut. *This is going to be a long day.*

We grinded a quarter mile back uphill until the blinking dot was reunited with the glowing blue line on my phone, to my deep satisfaction. "Here we go, Dad. This is it—Torre del Gallo." We turned up what looked to be a one-way side road. A wall of meticulous stone slate was to our left, while the right side was dense trees swaying in the light breeze. I clicked into an easier gear. After a mile or so, the narrow street gave way to the countryside. Red stucco villas emerged on the rolling horizon, their distance marked by lines of cypress trees. Billowing white clouds gave scale to the cornflower blue sky. The scene looked peeled off the side of a jar of tomato sauce. Dad drew close behind me.

If Papa could only see us now, I thought. *Dad and I plotting our course through the back roads of Florence.* When my grandfather visited here, he was stuck in the confines of a tour bus, at the mercy of a guide and his fellow passengers. He would have loved the freedom Dad and I now felt as we glided down streets too narrow for a bus. How different our realities were

in this moment. I pictured Papa at home stuck in his chair, watching golf, wishing he had the strength to clear the snow off the front porch. Meanwhile, Dad and I felt strong, moving fast through a foreign world.

The thought filled me with guilt. *Should we even be doing this? Shouldn't we be back home with him? Keeping him company and filling whatever time we had left together with meaningful memories?* Yet here we were on some vacation dressed up as a mission to find meaning in our family history. *Wasn't that meaning found at home with him?* I looked out upon the dreamy landscape, where there wasn't an answer to be found. I looked back down at my GPS, where . . . we were lost again.

CHAPTER 8

> The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.
>
> —Saint Augustine

"There. Route 22 takes us right into Siena," Dad said, running his sweaty finger down the map that he pocketed thirty-five miles earlier at the bike shop. "It's a straight shot." Somewhere during the last climb, I'd taken us off course—again. In my growing fatigue, I had stopped looking at the route on my phone again and now we were lost again. But by God, I wasn't about to admit that to my father *again*.

"I see that," I said, "but let me just . . . " I frantically thumbed the map on my phone trying to find the glowing line again. "Let me just see if I can . . . figure out . . . where exactly . . . the . . . "

Dad laid his bike down and took a seat on the curb. We were on the side of a country road on the outskirts of a no-name village forty miles outside of Florence. Both our water bottles were just about dry. Heat radiated off the pavement. My pulse surged in my skull in thick, anxious waves. We'd just slogged up a thirty-five-minute climb—the fourth big hill of the day. *Please tell me we don't have to backtrack,* I prayed, scanning the map. *Please, please tell me we don't need to backtrack. Anything but that. Where in the hell is that goddamn glowing line?*

"Look," Dad repeated. "Route 22. Straight into Siena."

"Yeah, I see *that*, Dad, but Route 22 could be a highway. Did you come all the way here to ride on a highway for thirty miles?"

"I want to get where we're going," he shot back. We were beaten down. Our jerseys were soaked in sweat. The backs of my legs had been scorched red by the sun. A festering stew of frustration boiled in my brain.

"Dad, obviously I do too. But my route has us going 408 and connecting with 22 right before Siena."

He scanned his map. "That's going to add . . . like . . . another twenty miles to the day," he said. "What are you taking us on . . . the scenic route?"

"That's exactly what I'm doing," I muttered. *Wasn't that the whole point of this?* I thought. *To take the scenic route? To seek out the places that we couldn't find on a postcard? To understand where our ancestors came from, where Papa came from, where we came from? To see it all from a bike seat. Wasn't that the whole point?* Dad was clinging to his commuting mentality. He wanted to get from A to B in the fastest way possible. But this trip wasn't about the final destination. It was about seeing as much as we possibly could before we got there. *Didn't he get that, goddamnit?*

I wanted nothing more than to get off this godforsaken bike. Andy Levine was right: the climbing was brutal. These hills weren't like the hills back home. They went on and on, switchbacking tightly around jackknife turns. Over the course of the day, I peeked over my shoulder a few times to find my father's face contorted in excruciating pain. *He's not drinking enough water*, I thought, *and I haven't seen him eat a bite of food.* Here he was: sixty-four years old, four stents in his heart, screw in his ankle—not to mention countless screws loose elsewhere. Any one of these ascents could kill him—*literally* kill him. I pictured his old heart like a leathered coin purse stuffed with pennies until it burst at the seams. *How would I get his body back to the States?* I thought morbidly as we climbed. *How much does an urn cost in Italy, anyway? Would they take a credit card?*

And I was right there with him—teetering on what felt like the brink of death. This sucked. Maybe it was the jet lag—*please be the jet lag*—but we weren't prepared for this ride at all. Not. At. All. I sure as shit wasn't. This wasn't even fun. My head was on a constant swivel from my phone, to the road, to my father, and back again. Over and over. Apart from a few sights at Piazzale Michelangelo earlier in the day, I couldn't recall seeing anything but the pavement beneath my legs. Frustration growing, the

steady drumbeat beat of anxiety was mounting. Dad took the last drag out of his water bottle and jammed it back into its cage.

He's about to freak out, I thought. *I just know it.* On day one of the ride, not even halfway through it, we were going to have our first blowout. I waited, counting the seconds for Dad to snap. *Come on blue line, where the hell are you?*

I INSTINCTIVELY FEARED MY father's hair-trigger temper. The fear stemmed back to my childhood. The slightest misstep or transgression would ignite a disproportionate amount of fury. His outbursts were completely illogical and outrageous, marked by screaming, swearing, and occasionally hysterical crying. We all walked on eggshells whenever he was around. Outside of the privacy of our home, his anger made him something of a liability. Even at an indoor climbing gym.

Dad introduced me to rock climbing as a young kid, and before I entered high school, we went to the indoor climbing gym together a few days a week. Most of the time, I cherished being climbing partners and spending that much father-son time together. But being on the other end of his rope wasn't always fun. After falling on a climb, he'd unleash his frustration at the wall while I held him suspended in the air. Everyone in the gym would stop and stare at this 140-pound Tasmanian devil kicking, spitting, and screaming at a slab of plywood.

The sad irony was that the source of my father's most suffocating tantrums stemmed from how much he loved us. He worried about our family constantly, but not in a cute, doting way. His worry brewed unhealthy, irrational fears that viscerally consumed his thoughts. If my mother was late after grocery shopping, he assumed that she had been in a car wreck and was bleeding out in the street. He'd pace the house in a growing storm of despair. When she walked in the door, his anguish gave way to screaming.

So it was for my brother, Mark, and me. We were given strict curfews. Even when I was a senior in high school, Dad expected me home at 9 p.m. on the dot. If I came home fifteen minutes late, he was at the door waiting. Thirty minutes late, he was standing in the front yard. If I was an hour late, he came out looking for me. One summer night, I was hanging out with friends

down the street. I didn't think anything of being past my curfew because my house was well within eyeshot. Suddenly my father screeched up in his beat-up junker, broke into the crowd, and screamed at me in front of my friends. I ran home, absolutely mortified.

Years later my brother pointed out just how absurd it was that Dad should get so riled up over our safety. After all, we weren't the ones routinely getting hit by cars like he was. We weren't limping in with our skin torn to ribbons. We weren't calling him for a ride from the hospital after getting a CT scan because we landed on our heads in traffic. And yet to question any of his choices would only provoke his anger.

Long stretches of my childhood were painted with a brush of anxiety. I remember my mother huddling around my brother and me after one of my father's particularly nerve-wracking fits. Whether he was wrong or right, my mother always played the role of peacekeeper. "Remember, you've inherited this temper—it's *in* you," she'd tell me over and over. "Don't let it control you. You can choose not to be angry like him."

This idea of inheriting my father's temper existed in my mind like a benign tumor. I thought I had to keep it in check, keep monitoring it, or else it might fester and rot and turn malignant. I didn't want rage to consume me. I didn't want to live with that lack of control or wield that level of anxiety over others. But I overcompensated and suppressed my anger until it exploded from me uncontrollably. My fits of rage, although exceedingly rare, were blinding, escalating to a point where I'd bark guttural expletives that made me feel ashamed of myself once I calmed down. In those quiet moments of reflection, I saw that despite my best efforts, my father's anger had found its way into me. I had more work to do. I eventually started seeing a therapist who helped me manage my emotions and weather recurring bouts of depression. I didn't attribute my depression to my father's temper—I didn't know what the cause was—but I wondered whether I'd inherited it, on a biological level, from him.

Going off to college was a turning point. When I returned home for winter break my freshman year, I observed with fresh eyes just how bizarre my father's behavior was. I couldn't understand why he was so pissed off all the time. On one occasion, he was in a huff because the vacuum cleaner had

a sock stuck in its tube. I couldn't take it anymore. "Jesus Christ, would you give it a rest already?" I said.

He shot me a look, slightly taken aback. "Forget it, I'm out of here," he snapped before shoving the vacuum cleaner to the floor. "I'm done with this. I don't fucking need this." He slammed the closet door and stormed out of the kitchen. I couldn't remember a time before that when I stood up to him. Right then and there I decided to not let him get away with terrorizing us anymore.

Life went on while I was away for college. Dad took it upon himself to work on his anger management. He gave up swearing, started meditating, and made a concerted effort to control himself. Days went by without a blowout and then weeks. Like a giant freighter changes course through a million undetectable pivots, Dad slowly emerged as a completely different person than the man I'd known when I was younger. By the time I graduated, he'd become Zen-like and contemplative. His idiosyncrasies—the tattoos, sleeping on the floor, getting hit by cars—didn't ratchet down at all, but his rage was mostly in check. He was no longer a slave to it.

The change dramatically improved the climate in our household. When new people entered my life, like my girlfriend, Jenny, they couldn't believe the stories I had told them about my father. How could this super mellow guy be capable of rip-roaring rage? The two versions of him were completely incompatible. Yet for me and Mark, the memories of those early years were never too far from our minds.

EVEN NOW, AT THE age of thirty-one, a grown man in my own right, sitting on a curb, lost in the Italian countryside, I still feared my father's wrath. Sensing his frustration transported me back to my childhood. I no longer felt like a strong, independent adult. I became an anxious adolescent doing everything I could not to make my dad mad. *He's about to explode*, I thought, trying to hide behind my phone. *Any second now . . . I just know it.*

"Alright, well, we should get going, don't you think?" Dad said finally. He stood up from the curb and calmly folded up the map and slipped it into the back pocket of his jersey. "It's going to get dark soon."

I looked up from my phone, genuinely surprised. He wasn't going to freak. He had walked himself back and made a choice to be calm. My pulsing anxiety settled.

"How beautiful is this?" he said, taking in the quaint village. "Absolutely incredible. So where to?"

I gathered myself, calming my nerves. "Yeah, so I think if we just cruise back down this hill, we'll reconnect with the route. It shouldn't add too much to the day."

"Cool, sounds great," he said. "Lead the way." He threw his leg over his bike and flashed me a smile that completely cleared the air. He was loosening the grip on control he'd tried to maintain over my entire life. He was letting go. Embracing the adventure. And putting his entire faith in me—no matter how lost we got along the way.

CHAPTER 9

The human body has limitations. The human spirit is limitless.

—Dean Karnazes

Nobody could suffer quite like my father. He took perverse pride in his capacity to find his physical limits and live there for hours on end. "It's like fasting," he once told me. "There's the physical challenge, but it's really a mental challenge. The body would love to just sit and do nothing, but the mind keeps you going." Every summer, he set out on a 130-mile ride by himself in ungodly hot temperatures. Last year, he slogged through the whole ride in horizontal rain. As if to raise the bar, he'd endured the ten-hour gauntlet subsisting only on a couple of bananas and two bottles of water.

Dad was notoriously bad at bike nutrition. No matter the distance, he rarely ate on a ride. Maybe he was afraid of upsetting his stomach, but he would burn through thousands of calories without ever replenishing them. Same went for water. He seemed to drink only when his mouth went dry. There was never a strategy to fueling his body to perform and endure. Instead, he was a master of suffering. He seemed to possess a mutant physiology that could burn through more calories than he consumed, all while powering him forward mile after mile. At the end of each long ride, he'd drag himself into the house as dehydrated and emaciated as a tumbleweed—but euphorically happy. Of all the physical tests I'd witnessed my father submit himself to over the years, I'd never seen him crack—until this moment.

"Yo! Hold up! Hold up!" he yelled to me.

I whipped my head back to find him on the side of the road. He was limping around a ditch of tall grass, leaning his bike up against a stone wall. I looped back around and rolled downhill toward him. "What's up?" I asked. "Your stomach?"

"No . . . stomach is fine," he said, catching his breath. "I've never been so hungry in my life."

According to my GPS, we were forty-three miles and some five thousand vertical feet into our first day of the ride. After getting us lost for an hour or so, I had put us back on track, but the route had been grueling. The hills ascended for miles—two, four, sometimes more than five miles seemingly *straight up*. Pain pulsed from the pads of my feet to the palms of my hands and everywhere in between. As much as they were a physical test, the climbs were mentally exhausting. It took every shred of will that I had not to unclip and get off the bike. We still had another six miles until we reached Siena, where we'd be spending the night. My father knew that we only had six miles left, and yet he chose to stop and get off his bike. This worried me.

"I'm starving," he gasped, reaching into his jersey's back pocket and pulling out an energy gel.

"This is our last hill," I said. "Then it's all flats to Siena."

He nodded and desperately tore open the packet with his teeth and squeezed the paste into his mouth. He chewed through his exhaustion with his eyes closed. His face was ghostly white and he looked afraid. He didn't have the energy to talk. He was broken. I'd never witnessed him so defeated. Even when he was laid up in that hospital bed waiting to get his shattered ankle drilled back together, he possessed an air of indestructibility. He raised a perpetual middle finger to anyone who claimed he was too old to be testing his body day in and day out. But now he looked like a meek old man who was second-guessing himself for the first time.

"Have you been drinking water?" I asked.

He glanced down to his water bottles. One of them was half full. The other was bone dry.

"Take a second, Dad. There's no rush. We're in the home stretch here. Sun's not going down for a few more hours."

"No, I'm good. Let's just get this done." He hobbled back on his bike and winced. He closed his eyes and nodded up the hill: "Let's go."

He didn't say much for the rest of the ride. I could tell that he was deep inside his pain cave. He didn't want to exert even the slightest bit of energy to talk. Instead, he hung over his handlebars like a wet towel. I clicked to an easier gear and set a slow methodical pace, checking on him every few minutes.

It was cold and dark when we arrived in Siena. Just as I feared, I instantly got us lost when we entered the confines of the city. Siena was constructed like a beehive, with narrow stone streets intertwined and meandering in mind-numbing complexity—especially in my fatigue. I frantically searched for the hotel on my phone. "Alright, I think I got it this time," I said, before leading us down a series of rights and lefts that delivered us back to the same exact spot where we started. I looked up at my father, anxious that he was going to erupt, but he was too shell-shocked to be angry. He had a distant look in his eyes. He was running on instinct.

When we finally found the hotel on Villa Piccola, I quickly checked us in. I forced the door open to our room, which was dimly lit and painted lime green, and Dad collapsed onto the bed—wearing everything except his helmet. He threw his arms over his head. The pattern on the chintzy duvet swirled around him. He kept his eyes closed for a few minutes. "That was . . . that was brutal," he finally said.

"Yeah," I said, sliding down the wall into a heap on the floor. "I'm freaking worked . . . and starving." Dad lay in silence. He was never one to admit defeat or back down from challenge, but he was bewildered.

"Robbie," he said solemnly, "that was . . . probably . . . the most physically challenging day of my life." He didn't dole out statements like that regularly. After all, he had a resume of athletic suffering unlike anyone I'd ever known. More than twenty marathons. Thousands of miles riding in scorching heat and soul-crushing cold. But I could tell by the weariness in his voice that he meant it. "Fifty-four miles taking us over six hours . . . you know, that's . . . that's a grind," he said. "What's tomorrow look like?"

"More of the same," I said. "Just a little longer and a few more hills." The reality was that today was one of the easier days of the trip. From here

the hills only got steeper, the mileage longer. But I didn't want to freak him out. He'd learn the truth soon enough. "I'm going to hop into the shower," I said. "Then we'll grab some grub."

I entered the tiny bathroom and peeled off my cycling kit like it was a layer of sunburned skin. I put my hands on the side of the sink and looked into the mirror. My face was caked in dried sweat and sunblock. *Well, you're in it now, kid.*

When I came out of the shower a few minutes later, Dad was sitting at the edge of his bed still fully zipped up in his cycling clothes. He was watching a television program about deep sea fishing, all in Italian. "What's up?" I asked. "We eating?"

"Yeah," he said, pulling himself out of his daze. "I'm going to rinse real quick. Why don't you figure out a place for us to go?"

I walked out of the hotel, and the crisp evening air cooled my wet hair. My legs felt rubbery, and my feet, lower back, and tailbone ached. But the pain felt good. I had *fully* exerted myself today, expended every bit of energy—how rare that was. I took a seat on a bench and pulled out my phone to call Jenny. Siena was slathered in warm yellow from the streetlights. There was a pizzeria connected to the hotel. *Pizza will work fine for dinner*, I thought, as I listened to the phone ring.

"Hello?" Jenny answered.

"Hey, it's me."

"Oh, hey! I had no idea who this was. Phone number was like seventeen numbers." I was calling through Skype. "How's everything going? What time is it there?"

I looked down at my watch, but there was just a band of white skin on my wrist surrounded by a sunburn. "Not sure. I took my watch off in the shower. It's dark here."

"How are you guys doing? How's your dad?"

I sighed. "Umm, I mean, it's a lot," I said. "A lot."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It's harder than I thought it was going to be. Lots of hills. Lots of climbing. Dad crashed pretty hard today."

"He fell?"

"Oh no, he just bonked out, like he lost his energy. We were almost done with the day and he just started falling apart." Frankly, I was worried about the rest of the trip. Jenny asked how we were getting along. "Good for the most part. We had a few tense moments this afternoon. I got us lost a couple times. But we kept it together."

"And how are you doing?"

"I feel alright," I said. I was definitely not in the best shape to do this, I told her, but I figured I'd get stronger as the trip went on. The hardest aspect would be keeping track of everything. Looking down to the route, then back at my Dad, making sure he hadn't been hit by a car. "It's just a lot," I said. "I need to make sure he's drinking enough water and eating. You know, a lot."

"Well, that's what you were looking for right?" she teased. "A full-on adventure?"

"Guess so." Dad came limping out of the hotel wearing his only outfit and his ninja shoes. "Oh, babe, my dad's here. We're going to grab some food."

"Sounds good," she said. "Be careful, okay? And tell him I said hi."

"I will." It was comforting to hear her voice. I relayed Jenny's greeting to my father.

"You called her long distance?" he gasped. "Isn't it like fifteen dollars a minute?"

"I actually called her using this service online. So it was free." He was surprised to hear that—he loved *free*—and asked if we could ring my mother at some point.

"Yes, of course. We can call after dinner if you want. Shower felt good, huh?"

Our stomachs groaned audibly as we entered the restaurant, which was completely empty. A waitress with thick, meaty arms was sweeping around the bar. "Ciao . . . Non apriamo per dieci minuti," she said, pointing to the clock. It was ten minutes to six.

I nodded toward one of the tables in the back and asked if we could sit and wait. She leaned her broom against the bar, tucked two menus under her arm, and waved for us to follow her.

"Could I have a coffee?" my father asked the woman when she returned to fill our water glasses.

"Un caffé americano?" I translated. That much Italian I knew. She nodded. My father could drink coffee at any hour, day or night. He pulled out his readers and studied the menu. We scanned for dishes that we could identify, although we knew that we'd end up ordering pizza. The waitress returned with Dad's coffee. It was a dainty shot of espresso.

"Oh, not what I was expecting, but I'll drink it," he said gamely.

We closed our menus. It felt good to sit and just stare off into space. With my eyes fixed on a series of black-and-white photos of farmers riding an ox-drawn carriage, I asked my father how he was feeling about the day to come.

He took a slow sip of his espresso. "We'll see," he said. "Just have to take it piece by piece."

"How's the bike riding?"

"Rides like a dream—nicer than any of my bikes at home."

"And you have that extra gear too."

He put down his coffee. "Yeah, I haven't touched that gear . . . " I shot him an exasperated glare. "I told you I wasn't going to use it," he continued. "I'm not using that granny gear."

A few hours ago, my father was a walking corpse on the side of the road, yet still his pride was preventing him from using the one tool he had available to make things easier. "You gotta be kidding me!" I said. "Who gives a shit if you're riding in the granny gear? No one's watching. What do you have to prove?" He chuckled to himself and reopened the menu, hoping to snuff out the topic.

"Honestly, Dad, why do you always want to make things more challenging for yourself?"

"I don't want you to suffer any more than me," he said. "I want to suffer as much as you."

"Dad, this isn't about suffering—this is about *surviving*," I said. "Jesus, just use the extra gear. We need to get out of here alive."

He tried changing the subject to the extra bag I was hauling off my seat post, which I knew he thought was another imbalance in our suffering scale,

but I doubled down on my plea. "Really, we've got to be on the same page here, Dad. There's no reason to make this ride any harder than it already is."

He knocked back the rest of his coffee. "I know . . . I just have this voice in my head. And you have it too, this voice that never wants to take a shortcut."

I chose not to remind him that six hours earlier he was pushing for us to take a shortcut, but I knew what he meant. I asked him where he got that mentality, as it was clearly a trait I'd inherited.

"It's just part of my DNA, you know?" He pondered the question. "I've always had that in me. You're just determined to push on. I always want to be able to get the absolute most out of myself. I never want to settle or take the easier of two paths." He explained that his inner voice was constantly challenging him, pushing him harder and faster. "I argue with it all the time," he said. "It's that voice that says, 'Don't be such a wimp. Push yourself.'"

I told him that using the extra gear wouldn't make him a wimp; it made him sane.

He laughed and shared an anecdote to illustrate the point. Years ago, during the dead of winter, when the temperature dropped below zero and Mass Ave. turned to ice, my mother pleaded with him to simply drive to work. She didn't understand why he felt compelled to bike through such god-awful conditions.

"I guess the reason is," he concluded, "if I don't ride my bike, I'll just be like everybody else."

The Starship and the Canoe

4

Flying Squirrels

George Dyson lives ninety-five feet above the ground in a Douglas fir in British Columbia. His tree stands on land leased by friends from the provincial government. It is the last tree before the water, and the front window of his tree house looks down into Indian Arm of the Strait of Georgia. The tree is the biggest around, and its foliage is dense. Through his seaward windows George can look out unseen at the traffic on the strait. Through his landward windows he can study anyone approaching from that direction. At night the city of Vancouver glows on the horizon.

George built his house in 1972, the year his father lectured on comets and the hospitality of interstellar space.

George's stairs are the tree's branches. They make a spiral staircase, leading him round and round the trunk as he ascends. The first branches begin some distance above the ground, so at the foot of the tree George has nailed a ladder. Climbing from the top rung to the first branch is difficult, and George intended it that way. He likes his privacy. The hands of any visitor are covered with pitch by the time he reaches George's door, but George knows where to put his own hands, and they stay clean. For visitors, even those young and nimble, the first few climbs up to the tree house are scary, but George runs up as if his Douglas fir lay horizontal on the ground. He has climbed it drunk and he has climbed it in winter storms. He could climb it in his sleep. All the motions—swinging around this branch, reaching for that one, pulling up—have been burned by repetition into his autonomic nervous system. He hauls up his firewood by rope. When he wants to descend he rappels.

The house is lashed to the tree, not nailed, for the treetop sways in the wind and the attachment must be flexible to endure. George has

confidence in the lashings. In 1975 the worst storm in many years hit British Columbia, and George, who at the time had been living elsewhere, moved back into his tree to see how a big storm felt. The storm did its best; the tree whipped wildly about; George fell asleep.

The house is shingled, inside and out, with red-cedar shakes. The outside shakes have weathered as dark as the tree trunk, fine camouflage. The inside shakes, protected from the weather, look fresh split, retaining the warm red-blond of the heart of the log they came from. The house has a single tiny room. The ship-tight, red-blond interior is free-form, for George built to include fourteen branches as structural members. His ingenuity does not call attention to itself, and the number of incorporated branches is a surprise when you total it up. The door's hinges are screwed into the main trunk. Above the hinges, the biggest of the inner limbs forks from the trunk, thick as a man's thigh, passes over George's bed and exits through the wall. In the morning, George's eyes open wide and green on living bark, and he can pull himself out of bed on the limb's solidness.

The bed is Procrustean. George is six feet tall, and the house is two or three inches narrower than that, so he must sleep slightly bent. The bed's hard planks are softened somewhat by a mattress of two blankets, thin and nondescript, which are covered by a Persian rug, thick and beautiful. At the head is a handmade leather cushion that George uses as a pillow. Like most of the things he has owned for a while, the cushion has begun to have the look of a talisman. It is round, shallow, and worn. It might be a Kwakiutl or Haida artifact that he stole from a museum. On the wall above the bed a barometer is nailed, and next to it hangs a pair of binoculars in a leather case that George made himself. An octagonal window with leaded panes is inset in the wall beside the bed, and an identical octagonal window is inset at the foot. George can lie in bed and watch, through his binoculars and his leaded panes, any boats moving on the inlet. He has three rectangular windows, too. No point of the compass is hidden to him.

Across from the bed is a small, cast-iron, wood-burning stove. Stamped on the front is NEW ALBION STOVE WKS, and beneath that is the raised emblem of a fish, and beneath that is VICTORIA.

Against the seaward wall is a tiny desk. On the desk are candles, a kerosene lamp, a small jar of flowers, another jar full of pens, a vial of washable blue ink, and a wooden letter seal. The seal was carved by a friend of George's. It is titled LING COD and shows a cod swimming among the stalks of a kelp forest. On the wall above the desk hangs a silver letter-opener with Arabian designs on the scabbard and handle. Stored beneath the desk are a big jar of nuts, a few pots and utensils, and a coffee mug. The mug is thick, white, and plain. It came from an Alaska ferry. It is the kind of mug, says George, that a man on watch can take out on deck. It is the kind of mug that, on the bridge of a seiner, a man can set down heavily and satisfactorily, then return his attention to the helm.

On the landward wall hangs a frying pan and a whiskbroom and a toothbrush.

When I visited, two books lay under the bed. One was the *U.S. Coast Pilot for the Pacific Coast*, tenth edition, 1968. The other was the *Bering Sea and Strait Pilot*, first edition, 1920. George is especially fond of the old 1920 volume. He chooses old books over new ones when he can. The old guides, assembled in the days of sailing ships, have better information on the winds—"Wait for SE wind and stay close-hauled on the port tack"—and they tell George where, in 1913, the Indians rendezvoused in their canoes.

Inside the old pilot book was a sketch of a canoe rudder George was planning. In the margin of the sketch was a note I have puzzled over, and have never been able to decipher. It said,

DAWN TREADER

DAWN TREADER

THIRD PLANET

MARIEM

I would take this for a list of possible names for a canoe, except for the odd placement on the page. The note looks more like a crude map. Are these sailing instructions to some obscure region? *Dawn Treader* is the ship

in C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* books, but is "Mariem" a misspelling of the Latin *marem*? I don't know. When I asked George the meaning of the note, he claimed to have forgotten.

Outside the door, on the landward side of the house, hang two buckets for rainwater. They are brimful through most of the year, for maritime British Columbia is a rainy country. On a seaward branch is a birdhouse.

Henry Thoreau was proud of building a grounded house at Walden for $28.12½. George built higher, and for $20.00 less. He split all his shakes from a single drift log he found at sea and towed to shore. His two octagonal windows, his three rectangular windows, and most of his other materials are gifts or salvage. He spent $2.00 on a stovepipe and $6.00 on the string for his lashings.

Sometimes George *looks* alarmingly like Thoreau, even in the style of his beard and the cut of his hair. From the old daguerreotypes it is impossible to tell the color of Thoreau's eyes, but his gaze in black and white is as wide and arresting as the Dyson gaze. George, like Thoreau, suffers and enjoys a heightened sense of solitude. George has the same rawboned ego, inflated to fill the solitude. His personality, like Thoreau's, is sharp with edges that companionship has not had opportunity to wear away. If George is Henry reincarnate, then their soul has made some progress since 1845, but entirely in matters of economy.

Like Thoreau, George is a bean-eater. When George's body is entirely finished with the beans he has eaten, or the brown rice or fish or sprouts, he rappels down the tree and disappears briefly in the forest. In nature he answers nature's call. Sometimes, when it's raining hard, or when he just doesn't feel like making the trip to earth, he selects a red-cedar shingle, uses it, then sails it like a Frisbee out over the canopy of trees.

In the autumn George has trouble with flying squirrels. In that season they besiege him like paratroopers. When he is home, there's no problem, for on hearing them bang into his windows or land on his doorsill, he shouts, and they jump off to glide elsewhere. But when he is gone, they enter and burglarize his place. In British Columbia, 1974 was a bad year for flying squirrels.

"They were driving me crazy," George told me afterward. "They were flying down from the hill into my tree and messing up my house."

"Eating your food?"

"Yes. That I could tolerate. They shit all over my floors, and I could take that. But then they began taking the insulation from my walls to make their *own* nests. They began taking the insulation from my *sleeping bags*. That was too much. I was seriously thinking of getting a shotgun."

This, from George Dyson, is a powerful admission. George is a pacifist who first came to Canada at the height of the Vietnam War. The squirrels were testing his creed. They were bending his essential nature. He never got the shotgun, but he began practicing with a slingshot and became, in a purely theoretical way, deadly with it. He honed his skill down very fine, continually postponing the day of the massacre. Then came an idea for a new sort of trap.

Conventional rattraps don't work with flying squirrels, according to George, because the squirrels know how to set them off harmlessly. Had he proceeded conventionally, he says, bomb squads of squirrels would have eased into his house, defused his devices, then whistled an all-clear. George believes that living in trees boosts intelligence, and that squirrels are smart, like primates. Arboreal life had sharpened George's wits too, of course. He designed a cage with a door like a guillotine blade, a mousetrap for a trigger, and power supplied by rubber bands. He trapped three squirrels, transported them thirty miles, and released them. They were the ringleaders, apparently, for he had no more trouble that year.

Raccoons sometimes bother George in his tree. Most of his trouble is with the juveniles. "They're bad then. It's their teen-age period or something. They challenge each other to go up my tree. 'I dare you to go up to George's house.' One night they wouldn't let me in until four in the morning. There were five of them, all from the same litter. I threw rocks at them and everything."

"Did you hit them?" I asked.

"Yes. But they're tough. They wouldn't move. I don't know where they are now. I guess they broke up."

Winter is George's favorite time in the tree house. In that season, fogs roll in from the cold strait and obliterate everything but the Douglas fir. George is perfectly alone then, his tree rising from the immaculateness. He sits high and detached, like a Moslem in his minaret, or an astronaut orbiting a planet of clouds.

On being fired up, the small stove warms his small space instantly. He passes stormy winter days reading, thinking, and swaying slightly in the wind. At night, high in the dark, wet motion of the Canadian fir forest, his hidden fire burns.

27

Starship

"Freeman's last lecture, toward the end of his stay, was a marvelous thing," Brian Dunne remembers of the older Dyson's final days on the Orion Project. "He decided to take Orion to the ultimate. It was funnier than hell. First I didn't believe it. Then I did. Then I didn't. It was just so outlandish, beyond anything we had ever envisioned before. He was going to have a pusher plate that was, I think, a mile in diameter. It was going to be made out of Mylar. He would send H-bombs down the central tube. They would go out several miles and be set off. This *very* high-temperature cloud would be caught by this *giant* pusher plate. It would send us to Alpha Centauri, which is about 4.33 light-years away."

Dunne laughed, then remembered another detail, and laughed harder.

"And he was going to recycle everything. He was going to use the feces of the astronauts as propellant!"

This, then, would have been the shitstorm. Freeman wanted to elevate it from the figurative. He was going to engineer a real, atomic one.

"Was he serious?" I asked.

"No," said Dunne. Then he stopped laughing. His face went thoughtful. "Well, you never know. You can't tell with Freeman. You have to be cautious."

Dunne ruminated for a moment.

"I think in Freeman there's some kind of deep-seated sense of the future," he said. "The basic tragedy of the man is that he's just too bright for his own good. He sees into the future and he'd rather not. I think he may be looking into World War III, or seeing other things we don't. Those eyes of his—that stare."

I told Dunne that Freeman's son George had the same eyes.

"If the son's eyes are the same, that's good," Dunne said. "They say the eyes are windows of the soul. I only hope he has the same brain."

28

Some Kind of a Gifted Person

"While traveling in my canoe," the son had written, before leaving for Alaska,

> particularly in the inspiring periods spent offshore in the open Pacific, I was analyzing the behavior of my craft and what would be involved in scaling it up in size. To double the length would mean increasing cross-sectional area and hull surface by a factor of about eight, but the concept remained well within the realm of possibility. Twelve manholes could be staggered on both sides, leaving the center of the deck free to accommodate an uninterrupted deck beam, to give the necessary greatly increased longitudinal strength. With a length of sixty-two feet, paddling speed would increase to about ten knots, and sailing speed could easily reach twice that, when lightly loaded in favorable conditions. Three sails of a total area of about two hundred and fifty square feet would be fitted and easily adjusted to any situation. This craft could carry up to twelve people and several tons of cargo or equipment in safety and a high degree of comfort through all waters, and give these people the contact with themselves and their surroundings which I had experienced in my recent travels.

George had decided to build the *Queen Mary* of kayaks. A superbaidarka. He applied for a grant from the Canadian government, and the government sent back a form.

Give any personal data, such as educational background and experience, which you feel may be pertinent to your application.
I have lived on the coast of British Columbia since the age of seventeen, at which time I began my experience in boatbuilding by assisting in the construction of an auxiliary sailing vessel of twenty-one tons. I spent two years on this boat engaged in chartering and trade and so acquired my first knowledge of the British Columbia coast and its inhabitants. Since then I have worked on and operated vessels of many types in these waters. I am educated in my knowledge of marine design, boatbuilding, and coastal navigation through a combination of study, experience, and experiment.

Give a brief outline of any work closely related to your project which has been done by others.
The past inhabitants of this coast developed the art and skills of seagoing canoe travel to a degree unmatched anywhere in the world. Using the readily available virgin cedar and generations of woodworking experience, they built large dugout craft of sophisticated design, which when combined with these peoples' strength and seamanship enabled swift and reliable travel throughout the Pacific coast. I know of no work other than my own which seeks to adapt this once widespread manner of life and travel to presently available skills and materials.

George was asked to attach letters of appraisal (*Lettres d'Appreciation*). He did so. One was from Bob Hunter, a columnist with the *Vancouver Sun*. "I think," wrote Hunter, "that George is some kind of a gifted person, whose method of expression is different in kind from the usual type of artist, but which is essentially artistic. He may be a genius. Certainly, he deserves my support."

George was not quite certain why this sixty-foot kayak was necessary. Sometimes he thought he would outfit the big canoe with hydrophones

and charter it to his friend Paul Spong and to other students of whales. Dr. Spong and the other cetologists would be able to approach their whales rapidly and silently, yet with a lot of electronic listening equipment. Other times George thought he would make a living by selling plans of the canoe. Sometimes the canoe's purpose was to allow him to start a family. (His thirty-foot baidarka was too small for a woman to set up housekeeping in, and so was his tree house.) Other times the canoe was to take him to the Queen Charlottes, where he would find out about that Haida girl who swims two miles every day in the Pacific. Sometimes it was to take him to Hawaii or the Marquesas.

In his application, George settled upon a purpose that was large and socially significant. He was going to revive canoe travel in British Columbia. He saw a future in which great, cheap, seagoing canoes carried passengers and freight around the coast, as they had two hundred years before. His vision was, of course, crazy.

Freeman Dyson has expressed some thoughts on craziness. In a *Scientific American* article called "Innovation in Physics," he began by quoting Niels Bohr. Bohr had been in attendance at a lecture in which Wolfgang Pauli proposed a new theory of elementary particles. Pauli came under heavy criticism, which Bohr summed up for him: "We are all agreed that your theory is crazy. The question which divides us is whether it is crazy enough to have a chance of being correct. My own feeling is that it is not crazy enough." To that Freeman added: "When the great innovation appears, it will almost certainly be in a muddled, incomplete, and confusing form. To the discoverer himself it will be only half-understood; to everybody else it will be a mystery. For any speculation which does not at first glance look crazy, there is no hope."

WALKING TO THE END OF THE WORLD

THE SAGGING MIDDLE

We woke the next morning to a sound we hadn't heard yet in France: heavy rain. Sure, we'd walked through drizzle and slogged through mud from overnight showers, but this was different. This was the kind of rain that was so thick you couldn't see the end of the block.

Reluctantly, we got up and geared up. Most European pilgrims we met assumed "the more rain gear, the better." They had waterproof boots, rain pants, and ponchos with deep hoods. At the first drop they disappeared under a pile of Gore-Tex.

Eric and I had a different approach, probably because in Seattle, rain is our daily companion nine months of the year. We had rain jackets, but to keep our packs light and our bodies mobile, we both opted for "quick-dry" instead of waterproof. When it rained, we just rolled up our pants and lived with being wet. We lined the inside of our packs with plastic trash bags, hid water-sensitive papers and gear deep in the middle, and then wrapped the rain fly over the whole mess and hoped for the best.

We all ate a subdued breakfast, glancing often out the window, while Claire clattered around us and told us how to put jam on bread. With the rain as a distracting backdrop, our parting from the Grims was anticlimactic. They pulled on their jackets

and disappeared into the rain fifteen minutes before us without saying goodbye, and we never saw them again.

Splashing through the rain was almost fun at first, even though the water soaked my pants and turned my shoes into swamps. We dodged mud puddles and sang nursery rhyme songs from childhood, changing the lyrics to make them dirty.

We came upon Jan, plodding at "Jan pace" under a giant poncho and hat. We slowed to chat about where he'd camped the night before, and how heavy his waterlogged tent was. We made sure he had enough food for a long day. But the rain made it hard to talk, so we kept moving.

GR65 that day mostly avoided towns and followed dirt trails that wound through and behind farms. On a good day it was probably lovely. On that day the unpaved paths turned to flowing streams. I tried to skirt the overgrown edges, cursing my "breathable" shoes and snagging my clothes and skin on thorn bushes. It was slow, painful, and ultimately pointless. I was drenched and mud-covered no matter what I did, so I eventually just gave up and slogged through water up to my ankles.

After two hours my body asked for its midmorning break. But there was no shelter, and nowhere to rest that wasn't just as wet and muddy as we were. We walked on. The rain never let up, and the mud got deeper. We stopped singing. Lunchtime came and went.

Finally, after five long hours on our feet, we came to a cafe—well, a garage filled with picnic tables in the yard of an entrepreneurial family. The sign out front promised hot soup. Nothing ever sounded so good.

There were a dozen pilgrims like us already inside, seeking shelter. We all shivered in the unheated space, but at least we had dry seats. We draped raincoats and gear around the edges of the room, dug out dry socks, and commiserated about the lousy weather. We consumed gallons of soup, coffee, quiche, and anything warm the family offered us.

After an hour, feeling fortified for the final ten kilometers, Eric and I squished our feet back into soaked shoes, slid into clammy raincoats, and set off.

The rain never let up. It was still coming down, light but steady, when we limped into Figeac at 4:00 in the afternoon and

discovered that compared to everywhere we'd stayed since Le Puy, this was a major metropolis. Ten thousand inhabitants filled a warren of streets, and we had no map, no reservation, and no idea where the gîtes were. And there was certainly no one lingering outside in this mess who we could ask.

But when you need it most, the Camino provides. We abandoned the red and white markings and crossed an unmarked bridge into the heart of town, and a block away we saw a red sign: GÎTE DE PÈLERIN.

The young owners of Le Coquelicot were from Morocco. They welcomed us despite our mud and offered us a double room with a private bathroom. We couldn't give them our money fast enough.

We took long, blessedly hot showers, rinsed as much mud from our clothes as we could, and curled up in the stone common room, probably another centuries-old cow barn, with other tired, rain-shocked pilgrims to journal and wait for dinner.

We didn't know any of the other pilgrims there that night, but the rain bound us together. At 7:00 we gathered to eat spicy Mediterranean chicken, couscous, and vegetables. The warm flavors and bright colors made it feel like spring again.

As we lingered over one last glass of wine, our host came over. He spoke no English, but through pantomime and simple French, he commiserated over how difficult the language barrier could be. He'd emigrated here as an adult without knowing a word of French, he said, and it took him two lonely years to become fluent.

I went to sleep that night feeling like an adventurer who was conquering great obstacles.

At home I make my living helping writers develop their ideas into books. One of the places where many storytellers struggle is what editors like me call the "sagging middle." Writers start with a great idea and plenty of drama. And then, at the end of the book, there's a resolution: the murderer is caught, the couple discovers true love, the main character sets out on a new life. But between those Big Events, things can get flat. The writing is often still good, but chapters slide by and nothing significant changes. People in the "sagging middle" follow established routines, marking time until it's time to introduce some new tangle.

As we walked out of Figeac the day after the epic rain, we entered the sagging middle of France. Our friends were gone, and after almost two weeks of walking fifteen to thirty kilometers a day, we were tired. The novelty of springing out of bed before dawn, donning the same clothes, and putting one foot in front of the other for hours had worn off. The days started blending together into what Angela and Duffy Ballard, in their book *A Blistered Kind of Love*, called "the spectacular monotony."

More rolling hills, medieval roadside chapels, and picturesque fields of French cows? Sure, whatever.

It didn't help that The Princesses were still in full revolt. Every day would start okay, but after two or three hours my feet would swell and throb. I'd already blown through the bottle of ibuprofen we brought from home, and I was spending a small fortune at French pharmacies to restock. We tried taking a half-day off after Figeac, walking a scant five kilometers, but it didn't help. Different socks, looser laces, and end-of-day ice baths brought temporary relief that never lasted.

I needed a real rest day, the kind where I didn't have to put on a backpack at all. Eric was willing to take a break if it would help me, but it was up to me to make it happen, and I couldn't find the right place to linger. The communal gîtes, like the one in Cajarc, were inexpensive and efficient, but allowed people to stay only one night. The private gîtes where we stayed in Cassagnole and Varraire were full of thoughtful details and kind hosts, but I deemed both too remote to linger for a full day.

I knew how to walk in France but not how to stop.

I waffled and complained for days, testing Eric's patience. We got testy with each other more often. But without a better plan, we kept moving forward, day after day.

There weren't many other pilgrims on the road; we often had gîte dorms to ourselves and rarely saw others on the trail. We continued to walk at our own paces, which is the nice way of saying that Eric sped off out of sight and then stopped every couple of hours to wait for me to catch up.

We got braver about ordering food in restaurants when demi-pension was not available and occasionally attempted to buy groceries and cook for ourselves. (Lessons learned after trial and

plenty of errors: a half kilogram of chicken is not comparable to a half pound, and is way too much for two people. Also, it's not appropriate to pick up your own produce in most markets; a person at the counter wants to put that apple in a bag for you.)

The weather was kind, and we enjoyed a week of bright sun and spring temperatures. We were outside from dawn to dusk, every day. My skin grew tan, and despite all the French food and wine, my pants became so loose I needed a belt to keep them up.

The landscape, too, was changing. The hills softened from "vertical" to "rolling." Dew-covered green fields, dotted with postcard-perfect shepherds' huts shaped like beehives, more often gave way to commercial and light industrial areas. Pastures gave way to factory farms, and we passed windowless barns that smelled so bad outside that I couldn't think about what happened within. The first time I saw a dusty, smelly lot filled with miserable, fat, open-beaked geese, panting in the sun and unable to stand, I swore off foie gras.

We stopped in every open church so that Eric could sign the guest books and I could study the memorials to *"l'Enfants"* of the Great War. Every village had one, inscribed with the names of the hometown sons who'd died in trenches and hospitals. As an American, it was hard to imagine the impact of an entire lost generation. But when I looked at the empty houses and crumbling towns, I saw the farmers and schoolteachers, bankers and doctors, who would never have a family or grow old there.

Even in the sagging middle, there were surprises. None were as memorable as the cows that chased us.

Eric and I were walking along a single-lane farm road early one morning. The light and the temperature were just about perfect, and we were moving along smoothly when Eric pointed out that a cow was on the wrong side of the pasture fence just ahead of us. A dozen or so black-and-white heifers were inside the fence, but one brave explorer had somehow gotten out to graze on the taller grass by the roadside.

Clearly, I said, he'd heard the cliché.

Before Eric could respond, the rest of the cows noticed our approach and started to trot toward us, sending up a chorus of

discontent. The escapee ignored the excitement and continued to enjoy the feast spread before him.

There are a lot of *vaches* in this part of France, but these black-and-white milk cows seemed smaller than average. I assumed they were the bovine equivalent of teenagers and that they were now tattling on the defector. Their concern gave me the giggles, and I stopped to take pictures of the scene.

Eric did not share my amusement. He moved to the far side of the road, away from the pasture, and told me to do the same. "Keep walking and don't make eye contact."

Well, okay. We reached the edge of the pasture where the cows inside the fence were waiting for us. When we passed without stopping, they turned and followed us down the fence line, still complaining.

Our noisy parade reached the escapee cow, and his herd instinct kicked in. He lifted his head and started strolling with his companions, albeit on our side of the fence. This made Eric even jumpier, but I thought the cows were adorable.

When we got to the far corner of the pasture, the road split. GR65's red and white stripes pointed to the left. To the right, I could see a farmhouse, presumably belonging to the cows' owners. I considered going to their door to tell them they had a cow loose. But did I know how to say, "Your cow is outside the fence" in French?

While I was mentally conjugating verbs, the cows in the pasture got to the corner. In the place where their fences should meet, a single piece of rope hung across an opening that served as the gate. Cows, I remembered reading somewhere, are so domesticated that a single line of string can keep them contained.

Well, most cows. This rope gate was strung for taller animals, and our new teenage friends could walk right under it, which probably explained how the loose cow got out in the first place. Now, three more followed his lead, their eyes on us.

We had four cows outside the pasture, ambling our direction and blocking my path to the farmhouse.

"This is not good," Eric said more than once.

I abandoned my plan to report the escapees, but I couldn't get over my giggles.

"Keep walking," Eric urged. "Cows are big." And then, "Don't look back. But know where they are. A cow could head butt you and trample you."

Really? Trampling heifers?

Two of the cows were distracted by the roadside grass and stopped. The other two, including the initial intrepid explorer, followed us down the road as we walked briskly away.

We walked faster, which was a bad idea. Our new mini-herd started to trot. Eric sped up again, and told me at least three times not to look back. Just as often, I suggested that we turn around and lead the cows back to their farm, but Eric refused, because we'd have to double back past them, increasing the risk of head butting and trampling.

We kept walking. The cows kept following us. I kept laughing. This all continued for about half a kilometer. We passed a few houses, but the gates were all closed and the heavy metal shutters drawn.

Finally, we saw an open driveway and a sign for a *chambre d'hote*—essentially a French bed and breakfast. It seemed to be open.

"I'm going to ask for help," I announced, both to Eric and our cows.

Eric nodded. "I'll stay out here and distract them."

Not sure what he thought he would distract them from but pretty sure it involved the word "stampede," I turned up the driveway. Our bovine friends let out a chorus of discontent. They were confused by our separation, not sure who to follow.

An older, frowning woman opened the door when I knocked. "Do you speak English?" I asked, too rattled to ask the question in French.

"Oui. A little," she said.

I explained the situation with the cows.

"They are not my cows," she said.

I told her I understood. "But they are not our cows, either. They belong to your neighbor. We have no phone, and we do not know who to call. Can you help us?"

She reluctantly agreed to call someone and closed the door in my face. Assuming that meant I was dismissed, I retreated to

the road to find out if Eric had been head butted and trampled in my absence. Instead, I found the cows ignoring him and happily munching grass in what they must have considered their new pasture. When we tiptoed away, they didn't even look up.

I spent the next couple of hours relentlessly teasing my brave, strong husband. How had it taken fourteen years of marriage for me to discover that he was afraid of cows?

When I finally wound down, we talked it out and concluded that although Eric had never spent time around farm animals, he had spent those summers in the Canadian wilderness near another bulky, hoofed animal: moose.

A moose *will* charge a person, head butt them, and trample them. It was a valid point, but one that I chose to forget many times over the next few weeks, as I watched Eric stride off ahead of me and knew I couldn't keep up.

I may be slow, I'd think, but at least I wasn't afraid of a cow.

Day after day, we continued to follow the Chemin du Puy as it wound toward Cahors, a town that has guarded a strategic bend of the Lot River since Celtic times. Cahors is famous for its wine, especially a rich Malbec so dark it's called black wine, and for its ahead-of-its-time medieval policy of allowing lenders to charge interest, an affront against church rules that earned it a comparison to Sodom in Dante's *Inferno*.

Despite all its history, the modern city of Cahors was remote, and reaching it meant we had to cover a punishing thirty kilometers in a day. Most of the walk was relatively flat, along an old Roman road that bisected a thick, muddy forest. But in the early afternoon we started to climb the series of rocky hills that surrounded the city.

It was here that we found Jan sitting on a rock by the side of the path. We hadn't seen our strange Dutch friend since the rainy walk to Figeac, but even as we said hello, I could see something was wrong. Jan seemed to droop, and his voice was flat even for him.

"This is a long way, and there aren't any fountains," he said. "I am out of water. I am sitting here because my brother called. His wife died." He said it all in a rush, and while I was still sorting out

the implications, Eric unstrapped his pack, handed over his water bottle, and sat down next to our friend.

See why I married him?

We knew from previous conversations that Jan had intended to walk the Chemin du Puy with his brother, but a few weeks before they left, the other Dutchman (I always imagined him as Jan's opposite, six feet tall and rail thin) stayed home because his wife was sick. I hadn't realized how sick she was. Maybe Jan hadn't known.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"My brother says to keep walking." His eyes were distant. "I would not get home in time for the funeral. So I will continue."

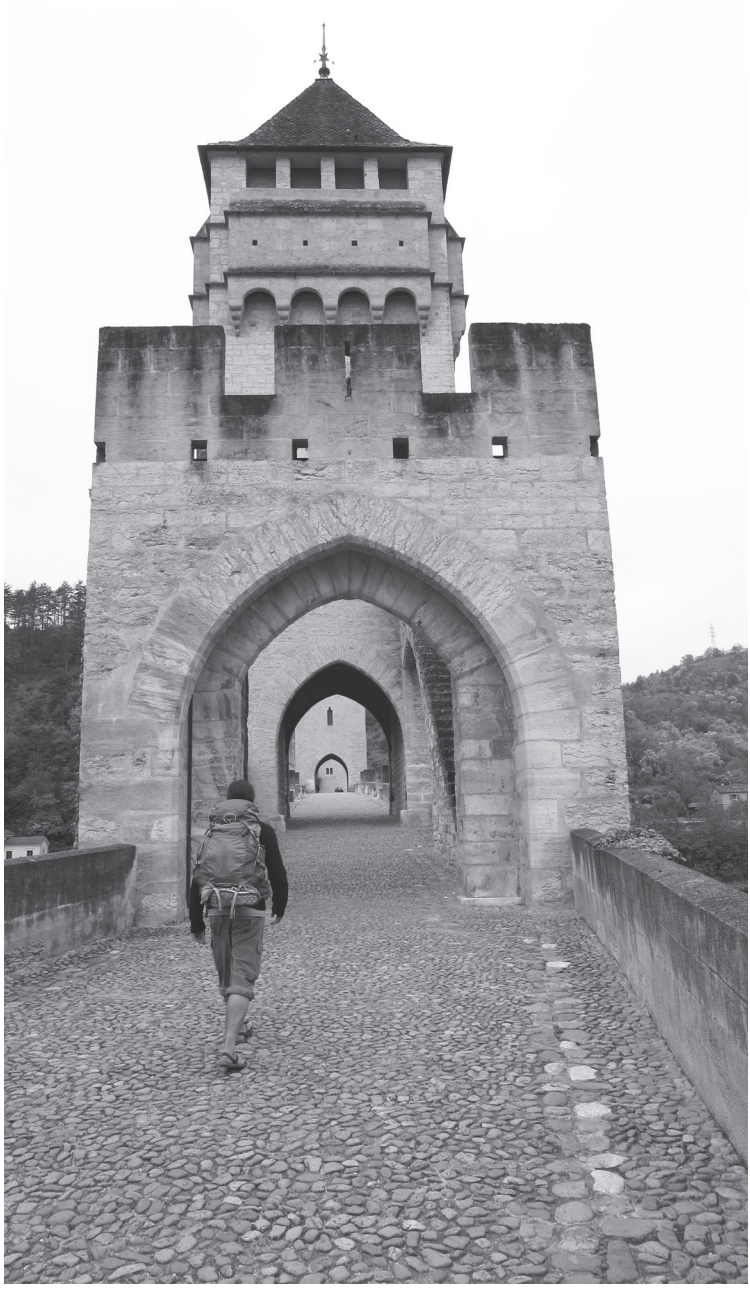
We sat with Jan for a while longer, gave him as much of our water as he would take, and tried to guess how much farther it was to Cahors. His tent was once again soaked from a midnight rain, and he was low on other supplies. We encouraged him to get to town and splurge on a gîte, a warm meal, and a shower. We told him the name of the place where we had reservations, Le Papillon Vert.

Eventually, we got up together and set out. Jan waved us ahead, knowing that his pace didn't match ours. We reminded him again to come and find us at the Green Butterfly.

That last stretch to Cahors wasn't short, and it wasn't easy. We wove through remote hills for hours, without a city in sight. It was late afternoon by the time Eric and I finally crested the last hill and descended back into civilization. We'd given up on Jan by then, sure that our plodding friend would still be in the woods when the sun went down.

Dazed by the sudden appearance of people and cars, we crossed a traffic-filled bridge and stopped at a welcome center to get directions. The women there plied us with cookies and sirop while they stamped our credentials and gave us directions to our gîte.

Le Papillon Vert stretched five stories tall and just a single room wide, in the middle of a street no wider than an alley, just two blocks from the cathedral. Our hostess was a tiny woman with a halo of frizzy blonde hair and a breathy, whispery voice. If Luna Lovegood, from the Harry Potter books, had grown up, this was who she would have become.



Crossing the Pont Valentre of Cahors

Luna-the-Elder welcomed us in English and offered us poetry to read as she stamped, and then meticulously hand-colored, our credentials. As she led us up four flights of narrow stairs, she mentioned that the building was nine hundred years old, so we should watch our heads.

Eventually we found ourselves all the way in the attic, in a low dormer room under the eaves with just enough room for a twin bed and a cot. I leaned out the window and soaked in enough of the view to fuel my energy for the trip back down two flights to the bathroom.

After a long day I was in no shape to explore the town, so I lingered in our attic hideout until twilight descended and the restaurants started opening. Le Papillon Vert was too small to serve dinner, so Eric and I were on our own.

We'd just reached the end of our block when we saw Jan, flanked by two of the volunteers from the welcome center. They had that same dazed, politely appalled look that I remembered from the volunteer in Conques.

"Elizabeth! Eric! I have arrived!" Jan bellowed in greeting. "They want to take me somewhere else, but I said no, I must go to the *PAPPY ON VERT*." We found out later that he'd stopped "for salad and beer" at the edge of town. I suspected the beers outnumbered the salad, but again, with Jan it was sometimes hard to tell.

We were delighted to see him. The volunteers seemed delighted to leave him in our care. It was only when we got Jan back to our home for the night that I realized what a terrible idea this was. The Green Butterfly, and its ethereal hostess, were narrow, thin, quiet, and delicate. Jan was solidly connected to the earth, especially after several days of sleeping in a tent without showering. He swayed under his heavy bag and filled the small space with his booming voice. He was a bull in a china shop, and there was nothing to do but sit back and watch. Eric couldn't stop grinning.

An awkward hour later, Luna had colored Jan's stamp and settled him in the last available dorm bed, and Jan had cleaned himself up. We ventured out again, Jan in tow, to find dinner at a noisy, inexpensive Italian restaurant. The next two hours were full of local wine and pasta and laughter.

The Camino really is all about the people.

Our walk the next day was going to be shorter, only twenty kilometers, so Eric and I lingered in Cahors for a few hours, exploring the cathedral of Saint Etienne. At 9:00 in the morning on a Tuesday, the twelfth-century church was practically deserted, and we circled it slowly, taking in the details of gargoyles along the eaves and intricate but time-worn carvings in the quiet cloister.

We lingered again on the Pont Valentre, with its three distinctive towers, on our way out of town. Built at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the bridge was a defensive structure against river invasions.

Construction took seventy years and was plagued with delays. There's a legend that the frustrated master builder made a deal with the devil: if the devil would help in every way the builder needed, the builder would give him his soul when the bridge was complete. As the end of construction neared, the man reconsidered his eternal prospect. So he told the devil to bring water to make the mortar to place the last stone and handed him a sieve to carry it in. Not even the devil could transport water in a sieve, so the final stone was never laid and the master builder kept his soul.

When the bridge was restored in 1879, the architect added a small sculpture of the devil at the summit of the central tower, where the stone was still missing. We waved to him as we passed under his watchful glare.

After the first tough climb out of the valley, we expected an easy walk to Lascabanes. By 3:00 that afternoon the sun was bright and hot, and I was footsore and tired. We took a break in a chapel in a town called L'Hospitalet, where the air was cool and the light shone through stained-glass windows under high Gothic arches. It felt peaceful, and we emerged refreshed.

And then we realized L'Hospitalet wasn't on the Chemin du Puy.

France's many Grande Randonnée walking trails sometimes overlap and cross, and they're all, confusingly, marked with identical red and white stripes. At some point that morning we'd accidentally started to follow GR6. We pulled out our maps, studied our options, and realized that our beds were still ten kilometers away.

The next two hours weren't pretty. Eric was frustrated by our mistake and eager to make up for the lost time. I was exhausted and couldn't walk fast enough. As we entered town at the end of our second thirty-kilometer day, I had vague impressions of a beautiful European village set in a green valley, with tall church steeples and whitewashed cottages.

Our gîte de pèlerin was in the lovely former rectory of the parish church. I vaguely registered a group of pilgrims outside, clean and refreshed. They'd probably been there for hours and were gossiping about why it took the Americans so long to walk twenty kilometers.

I was too miserable to talk to anyone. I left Eric to do whatever chores he thought were necessary and limped off to find my bunk and have a cry. My feet hurt. My body hurt. I couldn't imagine another seven hundred miles of this. It was my lowest point of the Camino.

But it was also when things started to turn around.

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