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WALKING THE WILD

They remain the mountains of your imagination. Without knowing it, children draw Wyoming's Teton Range – a row of triangles, pasted to a flat horizon – whenever they pick up crayons or markers. Indeed, these mountains shoot up sheer from the valley floor, sharp and jagged as broken glass.

Old peaks, like the East Coast's Appalachians, show time's wear and tear in their low, humpy profiles, their ridges rounded like bent backs. The Tetons, though, sport razor edges. Ansel Adams captured them in one of his best-known photos, "Tetons and the Snake River." Three great peaks rise straight up from the plain in black and white, thunderheads brewing around the summits, while the Snake River curves in a ghostly silver S through the valley below.

The stark beauty of this picture beckoned to me for years, every time I came across it in a postcard rack or an art book. It whispered in my ear: come climb the mountains. Which is one reason why, on an August day in 2004, I found myself waiting in line for the Teton Village aerial tram. I couldn't see Ansel Adams' magnificent peaks, though -- just a beaded curtain of cold raindrops dripping from the brim of my baseball hat. I wished I could disappear, or at least beam myself to a spa with hot stone massages. Instead, I was about to ride the tram to the top of Rendezvous Mountain, and take the first steps of a six-day backpacking trip.

"Please put all backpacks in the overhead rack," announced the tram operator, as the line of tourists -- mostly day trippers taking a quick ride to the top, plus a few other backpackers -- shuffled forward. I knew my pack weighed 43 pounds. I'd checked it on the scale before I left, in my bathroom with the flushing toilet, running water, and heat, all things I'd be doing without for the next week. But when I tried to heave it over my head, it felt like I'd found a way to stuff in a dead

mule along with the gas stove and wool socks. Patrick, my husband, grabbed one end and we pushed it up together, grunting with the effort.

Backpacking the Tetons had sounded like such a good idea back in Washington, D.C., sitting on our cushy, queen-sized bed heaped with travel books and a sleeping cat. I'd flipped through a hiking guide to Grand Tetons National Park that we'd used on a trip ten years ago. On the table of contents, I'd crossed out "Teton Crest Trail" with a thick slash, and added a note: "backpack only – 35 miles."

A decade ago, I was reluctant to go backpacking. Now I was playing rookie to Patrick's wilderness veteran. He'd scaled California's highest mountain when he was only 15. He even looked like a park ranger – stick thin and with the metabolism of a whippet, he wore khaki shorts all winter long. In the coldest weather, he perched a knit wool hat over his brown eyes, the exact color and expressiveness of a collie's. I'd been backpacking only once, a long weekend I remembered as an endurance march through Tennessee's Great Smokies. It rained every day, and fog hid the mountaintop views that my guide book extolled as "magnificent."

I love wild places, but I also crave comfort. So I'd stuck to hiking trails short enough to finish in one day. Sunsets found me driving into town for pizza and a hot shower. I'd heard stories, though, of lying out under the stars, 50 miles from the nearest road, watching the Milky Way with only crickets and fireflies for company. I wondered what I was missing, heading back inside at the end of the day, the way I used to get called inside from playing hide and seek as a kid, sent indoors just when the sky was turning purple and the grass was cool and slippery under my bare feet. I wanted something more than day hiking, something wilder – a real backpacking trip.

I thought of a card that sits on my nightstand, printed with a Navajo prayer called the Beauty Way. The middle section reads: "With beauty before me may I walk, With beauty behind me may I walk, With beauty above me may I walk, With beauty all around me may I walk." Only when I'm hiking do I feel surrounded by beauty. I wanted to do more than gawk at the Tetons through a car windshield. I wanted to wrap the mountains around me like a quilt, so that all my senses could drink them in – smelling the rain on the pine trees, hearing the squeak of a duck's wing as it flies low overhead, feeling the smoothness of river pebbles underfoot in the creeks. I wanted to walk in beauty. I just wasn't sure my body could pay the price of admission. Even so, when Patrick asked if I was ready to go backpacking, I said yes.

Six months later, Patrick and I were standing at the edge of Jenny Lake, gazing up at the Tetons. They're the youngest range in the Rockies, although by a freak accident of geology, their bones hold some of the oldest rock on the planet. The Tetons started out as an ancient seabed. Volcanoes rose and erupted, spewing layer after layer of ash and lava over the old ocean floor. Like a bad paint job, the solidified lava split open along a 40-mile long crack, or fault. About six million years ago, the rock on the west side of this crack began to inch upwards, while the rock on the east side started to drop. Picture the kind of door you see in Old West saloons: two hinged shutters that swing independently when gunslingers and cowboys slam through them. Now picture the left side swinging out while the right side swings in, opening up a growing gap. This gap became the sheer drop between the valley and the mountain tops. At this point in their life, the Tetons were steep, but they were covered with soft, volcanic rock. Then came the ice.

About 30,000 years ago, more snow began to fall on the mountains each winter than could melt during the summer. The snow got denser by the year, until it formed an immense glacier so heavy that gravity began towing it downhill. This glacier scoured the mountains, scraping away the old lava flows, stripping off the limestone of the ancient seabed, and revealing the three-billion-year-old granite that lay beneath, a layer of deep gray rock, speckled with quartz crystals that wink in the sun. As they were leaving, the glaciers gouged out the lakes that wrap the base of the Tetons like a string of pearls, and reflect their peaks on sunny days. In their final act, the glaciers melted into streams and carried away all the good top soil in the valley, leaving behind a plain where nothing can grow except sagebrush. Thanks to the glaciers, the Teton Valley now smells like incense after every rain storm.

The next day, I stepped inside that tram car. We flew effortlessly over the pointed tops of lodgepole pines dotting Rendezvous Mountain. We zipped over boulder fields, meadows lush with purple lupines, and a black bear that loped away at the tram's silent approach. Six thousand feet up the mountain, the door slid open and a freezing wind slapped me in the face.

"Here at the top, it's always quite a bit colder," the tram operator chirped. "Today, the air temperature is 56, which is not unusual for August. I hope everyone brought their jackets."

I staggered away from the tram, and for the first time, tried to lift my pack onto my shoulders. I immediately pictured beetles lying on their backs, legs waving helplessly in the air. Leaning forward to counterbalance the pack's weight, I yanked the shoulder straps tight,

buckled the waist belt, and pulled my baseball cap down to block the rain. Then I turned around and followed Patrick into the knife-edged wind to start our hike. As we walked down the hill, the top edge of my pack occasionally thwacked the back of my head like a schoolyard bully. But I'd forgotten the trick for adjusting it, so I just kept going.

I tried to visualize our route in 3-D: 35 miles of trail over six days of hiking. Today we had to get down the switchbacks and walk 6.6 miles to the bowl of Marion Lake, represented by a miniscule patch of blue on our map. Tomorrow's map also looked fairly non-threatening: just a flat contour along the bench of Death Canyon Shelf. On Day Three, the line on our map's elevation diagram shot straight up, signaling an alarming climb of 2,000 feet up to Hurricane Pass. Then we'd foolishly give back all those uphill miles the next day, descending all the way to Cascade Creek. On Day Five, we'd grind straight uphill again, 3,000 feet to the top of Paintbrush Divide, topping out the hike at 10,700 feet. And after a last night spent camping among boulders and heather above the tree line, we'd wind down, past the cirque of Holly Lake, out of the high country and into the spruce forest, and eventually, back to our rental car sitting in the parking lot at Jenny Lake.

We walked downhill through the rain, slipping on wet grass the whole way. Not a lot happens, really, during a backpacking trip. You walk. You think. You stop to eat snacks. At the end of the day, you put up the tent, make dinner, and go to sleep. The next day, you get up and do it all over again. For a vacation, backpacking bears an eerie similarity to real life.

Around mile six, Patrick walked around a bend in the trail and screamed. I saw a female moose and a calf crashing through the underbrush, running away from the trail.

"Jesus!" Patrick held one hand against his chest, apparently to keep his heart from leaping out.

"I practically stepped on the mom. She was grazing on that bush, right there," he said, kicking a willow bordering the path. We'd been lucky. To defend her calf, the mother could have charged us instead of running away. Moose aren't very bright, but they make up for it with sheer belligerence. Because they're enormous – the males weigh up to 1,300 pounds – and have few predators, moose expect other animals to get out of their way. Moose get hit on the highway because they won't budge for speeding cars. When moose feel threatened, they simply stomp on whatever creature is bothering them. I'd never been this close to a moose before, but she didn't look mean as she trotted away with the calf for a shadow. She looked sweet, all long

nose and stilt-like legs, and like she just wanted a little peace and quiet.

Fueled by moose adrenaline, we slogged over the last ridge to Marion Lake, our first night's destination. Patrick pulled the tent out of his backpack, and we both stared at its incomprehensible, nylon mystery.

"I'm too tired to do this," I mumbled.

Patrick peered at me. "We need to eat something," he said.

We sat on a moldering log, splitting an emergency ration of M&Ms. A finger of sunlight fell across my boot as the chocolate melted on my tongue. Suddenly, the sun was slanting through the pine trees, and even the lake, steel-gray and pock-marked by rain a few minutes earlier, managed to sparkle weakly. Not only was it sunny, a galvanizing thought occurred to me: We were having dehydrated spaghetti and meatballs for dinner!

Later, in the last of the light, Patrick and I spotted another moose on top of the next mountain ridge. A young bull with a small rack of antlers, he was sitting in a patch of trampled grass, his long, sharp legs scissored beneath him like an origami animal. His chocolate brown coat was darkening in the drizzle that had started to fall again. He looked patient as he sat still, rain sliding off his antlers, apparently settled for the night in his grassy moose bed.

I awoke to the sound of Patrick throwing up. He crawled inside and collapsed on his sleeping bag.

"Migraine," he whispered, and closed his eyes.

I brewed some coffee as I mentally listed our choices. If he didn't get better, we could spend another night at the lake. But then we'd have to hike back to the tram tomorrow, since our camping permit didn't allow us to get behind schedule. This lake might be the end of our adventure.

One of the difficult things about hiking that both attracts and repels me, is that unlike the cross-trainer at the gym, you can't quit anytime you want. If you've hiked ten miles away from your car, the only way to get back is to hike ten more. You're forced to chew everything you bite off. And Patrick was currently incapable of hiking ten feet.

A black and white duck paddled around the shoreline, fixing me with one beady eye. I tried to memorize its markings. I wished I had a nature guide, but with all our gear and food, I'd only had room for one paperback novel. Washington already seemed a long way away. The coffee was ready, but three pine needles had magically materialized in

my cup.

Five hours later, Patrick woke up and announced a miracle: He felt completely recovered. The trip was back on – if we could make it four miles to the first possible campsite before dark.

We speed-hiked along Death Canyon Shelf under a darkening sky. One minute after we got the tent up, the sky splintered open, and we dove through the zippered door. It was like sitting inside a car wash. In between cracks of lightning, I could hear buckets of water hitting the roof.

“We’re extremely lucky to be dry.” Patrick pointed out. “I promise, we can make the beef stroganoff tomorrow.”

I sat on my sleeping bag, picking chocolate chips out of the trail mix, something I do only when I feel particularly sorry for myself. In this thunderstorm, we couldn’t light a match outside, much less cook dinner. It was cold. It was raining. The ground beneath me was studded with rocks, and I was having peanuts for dinner.

My glow-in-the-dark watch read 7 PM when we decided to call it a day. With all the food locked up tight in bear-proof Kevlar bags (made from the same material as bullet-proof vests), I didn’t want to wake up hungry. I also didn’t want to wake up needing to use the restroom: that would mean unzipping my sleeping bag, pulling on my boots, and stepping outside into the freezing dark. Zen-like, I tried to empty myself of all desire – for midnight snacks, for bathroom breaks – for these would only bring suffering. I wadded my jacket under my head for a pillow, pulled my down bag over my nose, and waited for sleep.

The next morning, I unzipped the tent and saw our surroundings for the first time. We were camped on the edge of a cliff. Clouds of mist boiled out of a green valley, rising into the air like steam from a soup pot. For the first time, I dug my 35 millimeter camera out from the bottom of the pack and loaded in a roll of film. I never put it away again.

Sometime around noon, I found myself wading through an immense meadow. Patrick was the only person I’d seen all day, and he had hiked ahead. As far as I could see, a mile in every direction, the ground was carpeted with flowers. Fuzzy purple lupines leaned against spark-red Indian paintbrush. Yellow monkey flowers waved in drifts, scattered with some pink blossoms I couldn’t identify. I realized that Patrick and I might be the only people who would see them all day.

I walked on through the flowers, feeling like a character in *The*

*Lord of the Rings*. Long before the movies came out, I was a childhood fan of the books. Now it struck me that when I would have sold my soul to travel to Middle Earth in fifth grade, this was what I really wanted: to walk through an otherworldly landscape, with no other goal but absorbing its wonders. I could feel the mountains scrubbing the gunk out of my soul. Every minute, a dreary cross-town bus ride or a two-hour meeting was erased from my psyche. Thinking about work made me realize that I had actually forgotten, for the past two days, that I even had a job. Focusing on walking another mile, getting out of the rain, putting the tent up and taking the tent down, had driven all those thoughts from my mind.

I caught up to Patrick in Alaska Basin, a sweeping green bowl dotted with ponds left by the glaciers. We were heading for our first big challenge -- Hurricane Pass, named for the gale force winds it generates.

Past the lakes, I knew the rising trail had hit 10,000 feet when the last stunted tree disappeared. Every mountain range has its own unique tree line – an elevation above which the soil is too thin and the weather too punishing for trees to survive. In this mountaintop world, only miniature tundra plants flower in the rocky soil. I'd read that at 10,000 feet, there's 25 percent more sunlight than at sea level, and now I believed it. The light looked blue this high up, and the earth looked raw, all its bones jumbled and exposed.

Looking uphill, I couldn't see anything but more granite boulders. The wind was picking up, though, and suddenly someone was pulling a black sheet across the sky. *Hurricane Pass is living up to its name*, I thought. Despite my fretting over moose attacks, it's lightning that kills most hikers. Above the tree line, a six-foot-tall person is six feet taller than anything else around. The absolute worst place to stand during a thunderstorm is the top of a peak -- or the top of a pass. Either spot acts like the roof of a building, positioning you to become a human lightning rod.

Patrick started jogging. My pack had gotten lighter, but after a minute of trotting at 10,000 feet, I could actually feel my lungs pushing my ribs apart, expanding like a bellows to suck the oxygen from the thin air. Thunder growled as we topped the ridge, and if I hadn't been out of breath already, my throat would have caught at the scene. Geography had been hiding the mountain tops from us for the last three days. Now, for the first time, the earth cracked open before us, and peaks layered on peaks soared into the black sky, craggy granite piercing the clouds over and over. A waterfall leapt from one canyon

wall and joined a whitewater stream running into the valley below. A glacier rested in a hollow of bare rock below us, the eerie blue of mouthwash. The wind roared in a deeper voice, and hail began lashing the back of my bare neck, as we slid down mounds of splintered rock flowing over the steep trail.

Running through the hail, pulled down the pass by gravity and the desire to keep living, we were off the ridge in 20 minutes. Schoolhouse Glacier loomed on our right like a stranded iceberg. The tundra plants reappeared, speckled with miniature purple flowers, then the willow bushes, the wildflowers, and the spruce trees. Walking fast through four thousand feet of elevation is a little like being a god or a giant, striding over the globe of the earth and spinning it through the seasons with each footstep. We climbed down from the eternal rock winter of 10,000 feet to the full summer of 6,000.

While Patrick set up the tent, I squatted by the river bank, pumping away at the water filter. I'd known that I would miss sleeping in a bed, but now I missed chairs. I'd never before realized how few places there are to sit down in the wilderness. Occasionally a fallen log reaches just the right height, but rocks are generally too pointy. I remembered a diorama of Primitive Man I'd seen in the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History – a hairy man in a loincloth squatting by a fire, poking it with a stick, and a hairy, bare-breasted woman squatting next to him, cutting up meat. It should have been titled: The Age Before Furniture. It was clear to me that I'd never fully appreciated upholstery while I had it.

"I found you an excellent sitting rock," Patrick said when I got back, pointing out a nearly flat one. A little avalanche boomed down the canyon, sounding a bass note. When Patrick handed me a coffee, it had four pine needles in it, chasing each other around the cup like Lucky Charms.

The following day, I fished the nail of my big toe out of my sock and tried to feel grateful. My feet may have felt like they were bleeding with each step, but I knew they weren't. (I'd already checked). And the trail was kind. We were walking down the green canyon of Cascade Creek. Sometime before the last ice age, this canyon would have been shaped like a V, steep as a paper cut. Now it was broad and sloping, gouged into a gentle U by 20,000 years of ice grinding down the canyon floor.

The creek gurgled as I limped along under a canopy of Douglas firs. A flicker of movement caught my eye, and I glanced over to see a

pine marten peering into my face. Its lithe weasel body wrapped around a tree trunk just level with my eyes, and it stared at me, cocking its head sideways to consider, then slipped around the trunk and dashed off, its tiny feet bounding silently over the pine needle carpet.

Patrick had agreed to quit if I wanted to. We were swinging past the halfway point in our hike, and a five-mile walk down a side trail would take us to a park visitor center. I weighed the advantages: a rest for my disintegrating feet, and cheeseburgers. But I also wanted to finish what I'd set out to do. Was quitting the same thing as failure?

*I could turn back, I thought. My toe seems to be turning purple. It's not wrong to be careful.* I practiced this speech as I walked toward Patrick, sitting on a log at the trail junction. I sat down and unlaced my boot, peeling back the sweat-soaked wool sock, ready to present my evidence. Twigs snapped behind us, and I turned my head to see a doe tip-toeing by, almost near enough to brush with my hand. I saw a fly land on her sun-dappled coat, and she shivered her skin to shoo it off. It was the closest I'd ever been to wild animal.

"We should keep going," I said, sticking on a new band-aid. We turned up the north fork of Cascade Creek, and the Teton peaks swung into view, behind us this time, propping up the sky like a stage backdrop.

As we got ready to hike the next morning, I pulled my pack on with one hand. The valley swept up to the horizon, green and sunny, and relentlessly uphill. We were facing the biggest challenge of the trip – the climb over Paintbrush Divide, a 10,700-foot pass that can be coated with ice as late as August.

I have two pictures from the top of that pass. One shows a small rock, covered with a message in black magic marker: "I asked the girl I love to marry me right here, and she said yes! 8-18-04." The message was two days old. I wondered how long the ink would last.

The other picture shows me and Patrick standing together, ringed by mountain peaks. We're both wearing winter coats over shorts. Patrick's chin is covered with beard stubble, and his grin cuts white lines through his sunburn. You can see a fierce wind flattening the grass at our feet, but my short hair stays put, plastered to my head by sweat and dirt. It looks like we're standing on top of the world, and even our eyes are smiling. Our faces are so relaxed, it's as if we've forgotten what worry is.

Hiking down from the pass, we waded through a calf-high snow bank, and the icy crystals soothed the scratches on my legs.

Patrick hit me with a snowball as hail began to fall from a blue sky. We ran down the trail, hail pinging off the stones around us, trying to dodge without success.

“We could have oatmeal for breakfast. Again,” Patrick said. “Or we could have... chocolate pudding!” We arranged our remaining dehydrated food pouches like criminals in a lineup. There was Beef Stroganoff, left over from the night it rained and we couldn’t cook. There was Chocolate Pudding, a dessert fugitive from the same evening. And there was a cup of the same instant oatmeal we’d been eating for the last five mornings in a row.

“Pudding it is!” I cried.

By ten o’clock, we both knew it -- pudding does not make a good breakfast. Either that, or our bodies were just worn out by six days of lugging 40-pound loads up and down mountain passes, sleeping on the ground, waking in the cold, pumping water out of streams, squatting on rocks, getting beaten by hail and scorched by the sun beaming through thin air. My body felt leaden, drained of energy like a car battery in sub-zero weather.

We stumbled downhill under a cloudy sky. The meadows disappeared, and the trees grew thicker with every mile. We passed a lone elk grazing on a hillside. I could feel the air getting warmer and more humid. The trail leveled out, and we crossed a marsh on a wooden boardwalk, the planks squeaking underfoot with every step. Just seeing a man-made object seemed amazing. A sign pointed the way to Jenny Lake, where we’d parked our car – Distance, it announced, 1 Mile.

Thunder roared through the sky – and the race was on. We jogged the last mile, racing the storm. With lightning flashing overhead, I dropped my pack at the edge of the parking lot and ran for the car, feeling weightless, running with a wind in my face and the first fat drops of rain soaking my skin.

We sat in the car, watching the thunderstorm roll down from the mountains. Why had I never noticed how luxuriously plush car seats are? It’s hard to believe, but true: after just six days of backpacking, the sensation of riding in a car, of moving forward with the scenery slipping smoothly by, but without moving a muscle, seemed miraculous.

We drove to Signal Mountain Lodge, windows open to catch the scent of rain-soaked sagebrush, and ordered lunch. We sat in our chairs, grimy, scratched, and sunburned, and stared at the scene around

us without talking. The TV was too bright, other people's conversations too loud. Then my cheeseburger arrived, a giant slab of sizzling meat. I hope I didn't growl while I chewed, the way my cat does when she gnaws on chicken skin.

When we checked into our cabin, lying down on the vast bed nearly made me weep. I spent an hour in the bathtub, scrubbing the skin of my arms and legs with a washcloth before all the dirt came off. Soon I was staring at my own bare toes silhouetted against the flames of the fireplace. They were both clean and dry. The overstuffed chair cradled every aching muscle, and the beer I sipped was so cold it misted the sides of the glass. It may be worth going backpacking, I thought, just to be able to feel the sheer physical pleasure of being comfortable when it's over. I remembered an old joke from grade school, possibly found in a Bazooka Joe bubble gum comic.

Q: Why are you hitting yourself in the head with that hammer?

A: Because it feels so good when I stop!

I closed my eyes to fall that night, but opened them to winter. When I stepped out of the cabin, the Tetons' granite peaks were white with fresh snow. Curious, we went to the ranger station to ask about the weather conditions at our last night's campsite.

"Report is a foot of snow on the ground up there," the gray-haired park ranger said, squinting out the window. "With two-foot drifts on the trail."

We'd just missed an adventure. I imagined getting up all night long, once an hour, to knock snow off the tent so it wouldn't collapse. I thought about making the first footprints in an ocean of sparkling white. Was I glad I missed that, or disappointed? I wasn't sure.

The Tetons are six million years old, and still growing faster than they're being worn away. This makes my footsteps across them as transient as a breeze rippling the lupines. The mountains remind me of how inconsequential I am, but they also give me a feeling that I belong: walking through, I'm as much a part of this world as the pine marten and the glaciers and the mist billowing out of the valleys in the morning. Like the moose sitting in the rain, I'm here now, and that's enough.