



PULP TRAVEL SERIES

WANDERING



Wandering

By

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This book describes the author's experiences while traveling and reflects his opinion relating to those experiences. Some names, trail names, and identifying details of individuals mentioned in the book have been changed to protect their privacy. Many of the characters have been combined from a variety of people to simplify the overall narrative.

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The Pulp Travel Series is to Travel Literature what Pulp Magazines were to Literary Fiction. The series is loosely based on the now long-forgotten zine format. A small circulation, self-published collection of writing where profit is not the primary intent of publication. Each addition to the series will focus on one part of the low budget traveling lifestyle from a personal perspective. Either a short adventure that begins by thumbing a ride to an unknown city, being dropped off at a trailhead for a long hike or riding a cheap bicycle down forgotten roads.

Although zines were mostly photocopied, this series of short travel-related adventures is an evolution of that model of creation and distribution as demanded by the logistical limitations of being homeless and without an income while living on the road.

As such the Pulp Travel Series often involves the use of foul language, adult situations, imaginative use of sentence structure and has a general lack of copy editing. Please do not buy this book/zine if that is going to be a problem for your personal enjoyment.

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Also Available

About the Author

Chapter 1

Mile 335.64 of the PCT.

I felt lost.

And it had nothing to do with being dropped off at Cajon Pass on I-15 by my ride out of Las Vegas, Nevada.

A place I'd never been and about which I knew almost nothing.

Despite hating most fast food I felt the need for something familiar, and a burger and fries at the iconic McDonald's seemed like the right choice.

It was considered iconic only because I'd seen it in so many Instagram and Facebook pictures from other long-distance hikers passing through on the Pacific Crest Trail that stopping felt like an obligation. These were hikers who were able to hike during the peak season, hikers able to do what I only dreamt about.

Unfortunately, I was extremely early in the hiking season, so much so that I was mentally prepared for a lot of the trail not being available due to snow and ice. But this was my opportunity to hike, and I didn't know if I would get the chance ever again.

The burger and fries cost \$3.45, the only money I'd spent that day, putting me well under my \$10 a day hiking budget. The less I spent the longer I could hike.

I hiked down to the PCT and considered my options. North or south to camp on the trail? Either way would probably mean a 16 degree Fahrenheit (-9 C) overnight the closer I got to either Big Bear Lake to the south or Wrightwood to the north.

I didn't have a plan, I just wanted to get away. From everything.

For whatever reason, I chose south, maybe the fact that it was still just the very beginning of February had some sway. It was way too early to be out hiking, but I didn't have much of a choice.

I was excited about taking my first steps on the Pacific Crest Trail. A trail that had been my elusive dream to hike for the last three years. I was so excited to be back on a long-distance trail that I forgot to go to the bathroom before leaving the McDonald's.

For only the third time in the last five years, I was forced to dig a hole and go to the bathroom in the hilly desert terrain. I felt like I had failed. I hadn't listened to my body, I'd just wanted to be hiking.

Why was it that the recommended six to eight inches never looked deep enough, I wondered as I easily dug a foot down into the sandy soil. Why was I in such a hurry to run away from everything? Was this was some kind of omen for the rest of the hike?

I wasn't sure what to expect, the trail was far more hilly than I'd anticipated. Still, it felt good to be outside again. With the weight on my back but none on my heart. And there was no one out for as far as I could see.

No cell signal either, but I set up my tent, and for the first time in a while I felt isolated from the rest of humanity. Far from the hustle and bustle of Las Vegas I watched the sun drop

below the mountain horizon to the west and the cold crept in fast. I could feel it in my fingers and toes, and it was only just after 5pm.

I put on my long johns, ate a leftover macaroon fudge brownie and waited for it to get dark.

Chapter 2

I wasn't trying to outdo or even replicate Trauma and Pepper, two thru-hikers that had done a winter traverse of the PCT the year before. I was just early.

I simply had nowhere else to go.

For almost a year I'd been living out of my backpack after what I called X-Day. A date which I'd tattooed on my leg as a reminder never to go back to the type of life I'd been living. Working to pay bills and drinking way too much to avoid the depression I felt. On X-Day, I'd given up and moved out of my apartment even though I'd had another half month of rent already paid. I'd given my notice at work to go sleep in the trees on the side of the interstate highway.

I hadn't had a plan then either, that was something I was still working out.

My first night on the PCT was the coldest I had ever had with that sleep system. The 40 degree Fahrenheit summer bag wouldn't have been enough, luckily I not only added a fleece panel to the top of the sleeping bag before I came out west, but I also had a silk Cocoon liner, a bivy and an All-Weather Blanket/Tarp that I always carried. I needed every last piece of that just to get through the night.

All in all, it wasn't too bad. Not fun, but I managed to sleep. My water bottle had frozen solid, with black chunks of mold from the soda nozzles at McDonald's in Cajon Pass that I hadn't noticed the night before. The black chunks meant that the nozzles on the soda machine hadn't been cleaned in a while. That was one of my pet peeves as a manager of both movie theaters and restaurants.

But that life was far behind me.

I had frost on the inside of my tent and my toes were beyond numb, so I decided against hiking towards higher elevations, despite the slight warming trend my weather app was claiming. I'd hike the trail north, which would get me closer to San Bernardino, then hike to the Metrolink station the next day.

The other option was to hitchhike out 318 to 18 to 247, I thought... Any missed connection though and I'd be stuck up near Big Bear Lake, pretty much what I was trying to avoid in the first place.

Great views, good hiking, and I could feel it in my legs when I got up in the morning. I let my mind wander like I always do on the trail. Dreaming of a Hiker Lunch: The McOcalypse I called it, a burger for the end of the world, or hikers who just need a lot of calories.

To create a McOcalypse, which isn't on the menu, one would order a McDouble, (*Extra onions, no pickles, being my personal preference*) and a Sausage McMuffin, now available all day on the Value Menu. Or the same from the 2 for \$2 menu.

When your order is up ask the McDonald's employee for a couple of packets of mayonnaise and a few pats of butter. The McDonald's at Cajon Pass seemed to carry only light mayonnaise, which was odd for a location with a regular supply of calorie hungry hikers.

Add the sausage patty from the Sausage Biscuit to the McDouble and add a packet or two of mayonnaise. Add butter to the biscuit and eat separately or stack them all together.

With that done I was out of McDonald's back to the PCT.

North this time through the drainage under I-15, past the one person cave and across the wooden hiker bridge.

At the dirt road, I went right. Diagonally across the road to sit in a clearing next to a stream to work on my tan. It felt good to be warm again and I spent my time watching the trains roll by.

That's it. That was my hike for the day.

If you know this section of the PCT you'll know exactly where I stopped. Much further and the trail would start to climb. I didn't want that, 3,000 feet in elevation was high enough. That was almost 1,000 feet lower than the night before.

The plan was that if no one came by I'd sleep there and walk to the Metrolink station the next day.

It shouldn't be too hard to find.

Chapter 3

I thought my stealth camping spot was perfect. I was covered by dense bushes on three sides, the ground was soft and well insulated with leaves slowly turning into soil. Even the passing trains couldn't see me.

After sunset, I put on my base layer and watched a hiker climb the PCT to the north. They were dressed all in black, which I thought was odd, except for the fact that I was also wearing a black puffy jacket, so I didn't think much of it.

The rail crews rolled away and I stood up out of my hidden location to get a better cell signal and stretch a little. Only the "hiker" dressed all in black was now walking down the trail. It was too late to hide, he'd already seen me. He ducked behind a tree high up on the hill and watched me, he wasn't sure that I'd seen him.

So I looked at my phone while keeping my eye on him discreetly. He was acting suspicious, which made me nervous. After a minute or two, he hiked on, south down the trail, towards my position. After he was out of view, and I had no way to know if he was still watching, I shouldered my pack and walked back towards the trail.

As soon as the hill formed by the railroad tracks blocked any possible viewpoint I doubled back, crossing the small stream to stay close to the shrub-covered tracks. I made a quick, impromptu stealth spot, not even 50 yards from my previous location but completely invisible from it.

Through a small gap in the trees, I could watch the approach to the spot where I'd been seen. I waited and watched, and waited some more, but no one ever showed up.

I cowboy camped there next to the stream instead of my perfect stealth camping spot and watched shooting stars all night and listened to the sound of trains rolling by not twenty feet away.

In the morning I was packed and on the trail before 7am. Though I didn't want to climb higher on the PCT, that is exactly what I ended up doing. I was looking for a road that ran parallel with I-15 that had seemed easy to find on Google Maps. Real-life was turning out to be something different.

Maybe it was the road I'd just stealth camped off of, maybe it was that simple. But it didn't look like it, so I climbed up into the mountains, then back down unsigned and unpaved roads until it looked like I was heading in the right direction.

I had a liter of water so I wasn't really concerned about getting lost. Worst came to worst I'd just camp for the night and take another whack at finding my way in the morning.

After a couple of hours, I made it to a point where I could see a paved road and traffic. Only there was no way to get to it. I was blocked by two sets of railroad tracks and what looked like a river gorge.

I checked both directions for trains, ran down the embankment and darted across the tracks. I pushed my way through debris left by the last flood, between two hills and down a precipitous drop to a small river.

The other side looked like it was straight up.

“Just run at it and you’ll make it most of the thirty feet,” I told myself. So I did. And I made it to the last few tentative footholds before the canyon wall went completely vertical.

Ten more feet. I was so close.

I don’t know if you have ever watched cartoons as a child, or maybe even as an adult. There’s always a scene where Wile E Coyote is hanging from a cliff while holding onto a single, fragile, creosote bush. Despite having seen this many times I decided that it was my best course of action. To jump for the old creosote bush hanging off the side of the cliff and somehow use that to pull myself up to the top.

It was only a couple of feet out of my reach and a bit to the left, which had a nice, steep drop-off with a jumble of river rocks piled up at the bottom.

I scrambled, willing my fingers and toes into the cliff face and jumped for it. I managed to catch a branch, not the trunk I had hoped for only five inches higher.

I heard a snap under my hand and I knew the branch wasn’t going to hold. I tried to secure myself in hopes of moving towards the trunk but the cliff face was falling away under my efforts. I could feel the roots of the bush snapping somewhere underground.

The thirty-pound backpack wasn’t doing anything to help my momentum or my leverage, and yet I somehow managed to find the trunk of the creosote in the grasp of my right hand. Only now it was obvious that there was nowhere else to go.

There was down of course. Twenty-five feet straight down onto uneven and unforgiving rocks. I couldn’t even find the foothold I’d once thought was solid enough to hold my weight. Not only was it at least three feet below me and somewhere to the left, but I also couldn’t see it through the falling debris that I was creating just trying to stay in one place.

If I leaped and missed it this whole episode would prove to be fatal. Even a broken leg might keep me trapped at the bottom of the ravine that couldn’t be seen from the air.

The foothold was still there, I was sure. I had to be sure, I had to block out all uncertainty and doubt and just focus on getting back down to where I knew it to be.

The rock wall of the ravine tore flesh from the fingertips of my left hand as it gripped where there was no handhold. My right hand let go of the creosote bush and I began to slide, slow at first, then gaining momentum. But my left foot caught the bump of a rock that would make the difference between life and death.

I shifted my weight and twisted, but the descent was too steep. Gravity pulled at my pack and if I’d let it go we would have tumbled head over heels towards the bottom of the ravine.

I pushed the pack back with all the effort I could muster and dug my heels into the cliff. I was no longer in danger of rolling, now I was glissading down a hill of rocks and broken glass. Broken beer bottles thrown from the parking area above.

When I finally stopped at the bottom I was sure that everything had been torn to shreds. My shorts, my pack, my jacket hanging from the side. I was covered in dirt, bleeding from several cuts, including my fingertips, but otherwise, I was fine.

“Why didn’t you just walk downstream to find an easier way up?” The voice in my head asked. Because in my head it was a race, I realized. Two nights out with nowhere to go and I still hadn’t slowed down yet.

I promised to take it slow walking into San Bernardino, which was made easier by my complete failure at hitchhiking.

Chapter 4

I managed to get to the Metrolink Station to catch the last bus towards Cabazon. From the Morongo Casino I walked back to the PCT and what I hoped would be a warmer stretch of trail.

Only it was late and I was limping from a few newly formed blisters. I didn't exactly make it back to the trail.

I crossed I-10 to walk the Alternate road and a Sheriff's car rolled by, well below the speed limit, to check me out. My blisters had me limping and I may as well have been a drifter, which in a sense was probably more accurate than calling myself a long-distance hiker, but he kept going. Even after the sun had set it remained bright enough that I could easily be seen for many miles in every direction.

When nobody was on the road in either direction I jumped behind some creosote bushes and called it a night. Only the trains could see my location from the tracks, and I tried to put a few tumbleweeds between us to disguise my position.

It was the warmest night yet, but the windmills constantly jolted me awake. I would catch the movement of the fan blades out of the corner of my eye and think that someone was creeping up on my position.

I slept until just before 5am, and while I was rerunning a dream in my head someone drove by real slow with a spotlight trained on the bushes where I was hiding. Police? Hunters? Did the train people spot me and call it in?

I packed up and hiked out as soon as possible and realized that I'd been less than a mile from where the PCT crossed under I-10. To the north was a fire closure, so that wasn't an option. Besides, I was trying to get warmer... so south was the answer.

I hiked the PCT partway up San Jacinto, not as far as I'd hoped but I had a painful blister from the hole in my toe socks. I'd drained some of it in the morning, but it had come back with a vengeance.

I cowboy camped 150 ft west of the water faucet off of the paved section of the trail. Snow Creek Rd. I think. I sat there with this perfectly formed rock as my backrest watching the traffic in the valley. When I stretched out and went to sleep the bitter cold that I'd anticipated never came. Sure, if you were exposed to the wind it was brutal, but I'd managed, for the most part, to use my bivy as a windbreak.

The stars were amazing. Again. And maybe because of the buff over my face there was no condensation inside my bivy by morning. Or maybe the constant wind sucked it off? Either way, I was glad to be dry and warm.

When I packed up it was already warm enough to lose the sweatshirt and jacket. I stripped off my leg base layer lower down the mountain after passing all the houses. I simply jumped off the side of the road and stripped.

Despite the now hardening blister, I felt like I was again just bouncing along. Loving life. I took a picture of the Palm Springs City Limits sign that someone had knocked over and stuck out my thumb.

The first car stopped only seconds later. They dropped me off at the Visitors Center since they were on their way up to the Tramway, the world's largest rotating tram car and a two and a half-mile ride to the top of the mountain.

"Super Bowl Sunday," they said. "Nobody will be out there."

They were very nice, despite the fact that within the confines of their car I noticed that I stink.

As I feared the Sunday bus schedule was limited. The #12 bus that I needed to Yucca Valley if I wanted to hike across Joshua Tree and let the PCT warm up, only ran weekdays. But there was a #15 bus on the weekend which I could take at 6pm. Kind of late to be getting into a strange town, and the bus wouldn't drop me off until 7:30pm. On top of that, there was a \$10 surcharge for weekends on top of the \$5 bus fare which I thought was high enough.

Just to find all of that out took most of the early afternoon. And was mostly due to the nice people at the downtown Palm Springs Visitor's Center in the library. So I stayed there for a couple of hours charging things and using their wifi.

While waiting for the bus that wasn't going to show up, an older homeless man shuffled slowly across the street, stopping traffic. I gave up my spot on the bench so he could sit in the shade while I sat on my pack. He dug through the garbage can and started to eat what he found.

Was this me in the future? Was this how I looked to other people or friends back home?

Not only, I decided, was it not my future but for the first time in a long time, I didn't care what anyone thought about my lifestyle. I was actually happy for once. Even the stress of the unknown was a welcome challenge.

I gave the guy all the change in the hip pouch of my pack. At least a few dollars. After a little bit, I realized that I also had my whole food bag in my pack and took out the almost full bag of Wheat Thins and handed them over.

If, on the extreme outside chance, that I ever end up like that I'd want someone to do the same.

By the time 4pm rolled around, I'd decided that I wasn't going anywhere. I hiked to the visitor's center outside of town and washed my socks in the bathroom. I threw away the toe socks with the hole that caused the blister, put on new ones and hiked out to camp.

I camped about a half-mile north of the Visitor's center outside of town and about a ¼ mile up into the boulder field below the mountains. Completely visible on the hillside to all passing traffic in theory, but in reality, nobody was looking up into the rock field to spot me. Besides my grey hoodie, and even the blue, grey, brown button-up shirt blended with my surroundings.

Still, I kept my head down writing postcards as the sun set and night slowly crept in. It was warm again and at first, I wasn't even going to put on my base layer. But the wind picked up, here and there, with a chill.

I looked and listened for anyone else on the hill. I'd passed several of the areas homeless on the way out of town and spotted one guy's camp closer to the visitors center. It looked like a garbage dump, strewn with blankets and trash. And from the 'borrowed' hospital wheelchair I'd seen I remembered passing him earlier that day hauling out a huge load of even more stuff.

So after dark, I wasn't surprised to hear the edgy cacophony of glass bottles being pushed along in a steel shopping carriage. Every bump and nuance in the pavement sent the bottles bouncing maniacally at each other as if trying to escape their capture.

And then it abruptly stopped.

Well below me, at street level, and I couldn't be sure if it was this side of the road or the other. Most likely the opposite as it had a sidewalk but I couldn't be certain.

Not too long after I heard a hoarse voice sing out a few lines of a song. Then a minute later another verse. Then a mumble, then he was done for the night, not to be heard from again.

I watched the windmills and the lights of the residential area across from where I was perched. On my right planes landed and took off. Above me, I would sometimes catch a glimpse of lights from the tramway. And to my left, most annoyingly of all, was inbound automobile traffic. Though I was certain there was no way that they could make out my form among the rocks it still made one feel as if I were constantly being put under a spotlight.

In the morning I was up and at the bus stop an hour early to catch the first one out of town. A guy on his way to work asked if I was in a race, he was nervous that I was catching up to him so fast. But then he wouldn't let me walk on, he wanted to talk.

"Is that everything you own?"

"Sort of, I'm hiking the PCT," I said, even though it felt like a lie.

"Oh, because you don't look like one of them," he said without being more specific.

"Where are you headed?"

So I told him Joshua Tree and he continued to talk about how much he worked, how little sleep he got, how old he was getting, then, just before he crossed the street to catch his bus he asked, "What's Joshua Tree?"

I couldn't believe it. Here is this guy living maybe 45 minutes away, with a bus leaving from his hometown, and he had no idea what Joshua Tree National Park was.

Around the corner basically.

"Yucca Valley," I said. He shook his head in acknowledgment but I wasn't sure if he knew where that was either.

I had planned resupply in Yucca Valley, had to really, but everything on my list was way overpriced compared to the last supermarket I was in. I had to make do with overpriced cream cheese, a couple of bagels and a small box of breakfast bars that anywhere else for the price would have bought me a family-sized box.

Reluctantly I hit the McDonald's for wifi and there wasn't a single outlet in the place.

"They took them out when they remodeled," the guy cleaning the soda station informed me. Then, to add insult to injury, their soda fountain didn't even dispense water.

I'd be glad to get back to the desert.

Chapter 5

I'd taken a detour through Joshua Tree National Park and with only 16 miles left of the California Hiking and Biking Trail the water from my Camelback tasted like burnt plastic.

I flavored it with Crystal Light so that it was a much smoother raspberry lemonade flavored burnt plastic.

It was recommended that water was cached along the trail beforehand if one intended to hike across the park, even in the winter months. But I didn't have that option having only decided a few days before that I was going to hike the trail and let the Pacific Crest Trail warm up a little. And logistically, caching water was far outside of my realm of possibility. I'd have to hike with what I could carry as there was no water option along the 36 or so mile hike across the park.

I was ahead of where I thought I'd be, but with the heat and the lack of water, I was ready to be done. I sat from 10:30am to noon eating a bagel, trying to rehydrate and hide beneath my umbrella from the relentless sun.

I tried charging my phone from the half-charged battery pack and I still wasn't certain what to do. Sure, camp tonight, but then what? Take bus after bus back around and through Palm Springs again to get to Mecca and the Salton Sea? Or just walk the road through the park to the other side where there was water? Then it was only 13 more miles to Mecca, and maybe I could hitchhike that...

I could road walk at night.

It was too hot to think.

Finding some shade and drinking some Gatorade, my last packet I thought... I wasn't excited about drinking more burnt plastic flavored Gatorade.

After a very quiet night camping in the desert, I walked to within the last two miles of the California Riding and Hiking Trail and cowboy camped for the night. I didn't want to get too close to the end and have someone spot me. Even though it turned out that wasn't something that you had to worry about in the direction of my hike towards Twenty Nine Palms, California. Even at the end of the trail, you are off the main road, then further down from that is the entrance station. Which was closed when I went through. Then it's another 4 to 5 miles to the Visitor's Center.

Man, that water tasted so good.

Not only did they have cold, clean water but an outdoor outlet and even wifi.

An Appalachian Trail thru-hiker from '15 saw the patch on my pack and we got to talking. He was slowly on his way to Flagstaff to do some land conservation thing that didn't pay too much but kept him outside and which he thought would be a great experience. He was headed towards San Jacinto, and if I'd thought about it I could have caught a free ride back to Palm Springs, or maybe even beyond.

But I didn't.

I get so locked into the plan that I often miss out on opportunities like this. Sometimes it's just an interesting conversation but afterward, I feel like the rabbit from Alice in Wonderland.

“Places to go, people to see!” With my schedule ruled by a clockwork of interconnecting bus schedules and expectations.

Because I had decided to bus it. Despite the cost, rather than hoof it across Joshua Tree and hope for a ride, or rides into Mecca.

My feet hurt, my backpack felt heavy for the first time in almost seven months, and a bus would cut at least a day off travel time.

I sat charging everything in Jack in the Box for so long that when I walked outside and the heat hit me I wanted to vomit.

On the bus ride from Twenty-Nine Palms to Yucca Valley the guy behind me was stoned and passed out. Conversations in the back of the bus revolved around AA meetings, probation, and drug rehab. Not a single couple having a conversation, but multiple conversations around the same theme.

I kept coming back to this unfounded, yet deep-seated, fear that the little bit of enjoyment I was experiencing was going to come crashing down into some terrible fate. I remembered when I was a kid, going for a walk with my uncle. We walked past a place that for him represented a perfect time in his life.

“Everything was so perfect in that moment that it crystallized and shattered,” he told me with a deep sadness in his voice.

I’d never been raised to expect anything from life other than to work, pay bills and expect disappointment. Reality, I learned, would crush your dreams.

And now, with what at the time seemed like a titanic effort, but which I now saw was anything but, I was free of that. Barely able to sustain myself sure, but if it took that minuscule amount of effort to get me here then what else was possible with a little more imagination and effort?

The bus back to Palm Springs dropped you off at the airport and not anywhere near where I caught it on the way out. Which meant a hell of a long hike back. After we’d already passed and we’re getting farther away from where I’d camped the last time I was in town I saw a sign. Airport 2 ½ miles.

“Are there any stops before the airport?” I asked the driver.

“I can drop you off at any city bus stop,” he said.

“Right here is good,” I said while we sat at a stoplight. Luckily across the intersection was a bus stop.

“How about right there in front of Stater Bros?”

“That’d be perfect,” I said, resisting the urge to ask this same bus driver if Stater Bros was a supermarket.

A little over an hour walk later and I was up on the hill again below San Jacinto Mountain. Not as far outside of town as before, or as high up, and that bothered me. It was too dark to see if there was anyone around me and that made me slightly paranoid.

I’d passed homeless people already tucked in for the night on my way out of town. Barely hidden under trees, smoking cigarettes or laying behind bus shelters. The few that did come out here wouldn’t make the effort to climb up the hill, they wouldn’t have to. If the police didn’t bother them, or anyone else for that matter, when they were so close and obvious then why put in effort that wasn’t required?

I was pretty sure that I was alone except for the rare individual down by the road. And that there was someone down there became quite obvious as I was falling asleep.

I'm not sure if it was dogs barking or coyotes, but the guy down there was yelling at them and they were barking back. You could hear the anger in his voice that bordered on fear tinged with adrenaline.

At first, I thought it was dogs from the houses across the street, but no one called the cops on a crazy homeless guy screaming at their pets, almost in their own backyard for that matter. Only later was I sure that it had been coyotes because they struck up a chorus of howls, still down by the road but farther outside of town.

The coyotes wouldn't come up to where I was, there was no food or water.

I'm the only one stupid enough to climb up as far as I did.

Chapter 6

My open tent door faced the Salton Sea in the morning as I read an old paperback I picked up for a quarter at the Rancho Mirage Public Library. *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*.

Maybe the old lady behind the counter caught a scent of me because she went from customer service friendly to snooty real quick as I paid for the book.

I washed, or rinsed to be more accurate, my cotton button-up shirt in the free showers at the Corvina Beach Primitive Campground. It and my socks were drying on the roof of my tent as trains rolled by somewhere behind me. "What do you call the sound a seagull makes? Caw? Chirping?" I wondered. They were doing that in the sun at the water's edge.

The day before had been all buses.

I got an all-day pass for \$3 on the #111 going the wrong way, thinking that I would ride it out and back again. Instead, he turned the corner two blocks later and made the last three of us get off and board another bus.

I still wasn't sure what I was doing. People were telling me not to hike the San Diego Trans County Trail, it was too hot, ten degrees hotter than Joshua Tree. And these were locals who had done the hike before. Besides, I had no way to cache water in Arroyo Salada along a long waterless stretch. But I had wanted to see the Salton Sea so I was on a bus in that general direction.

When I saw the library in Rancho Mirage it was still early, and I figured all the campgrounds would be full anyway by the time I arrived at the Salton Sea, so I hopped off the bus and spent some time online. Nothing important. I just didn't want to hurry towards a place where there was most likely nothing for me.

When I was done the timing was perfect. Less than two minutes before the next bus showed up. When I asked the driver about my stop he said it was close, but it still took almost an hour to get to 111 and Flower St. That's where I'd have to wait for my next bus which wasn't going to be there for another two-plus hours.

I was in Indio, California and there was some kind of fair going on. There were families everywhere. I killed time at yet another Del Taco, this one with awesome hot sauce not in packets but in a chilled bowl, and which I did shots of while drinking soda. I also hit the post office to send out the postcards I'd been carrying for almost a week.

The 95 bus through Mecca made me nervous. It didn't look like we were even in the United States anymore. Everything was far apart, the air was dusty and smelled of nearby burning fields. Only the bus driver spoke English. The *Carneceria*, which I guessed was a butcher shop, had bars over their windows and doors as did most of the homes.

The driver dropped me off on a corner in the middle of nowhere and pointed towards the sea.

"Go that way and cross the railroad tracks," he said. "I think that's what you are looking for, I haven't been out here since I was a child. Good luck." He closed the door of the bus and drove away.

The view didn't look too promising. Still, what else was there to do but walk down to the Salton Sea?

The first building with some activity was the North Shore Yacht Club. For a place in the middle of nowhere with abandoned, graffiti-covered buildings to its sides it looked modern and seemed to have a growing amount of traffic as I approached. There was an event, I was informed about by the staff. All the campgrounds were full. To their credit though, when I mentioned I'd walked in they said they could make space for me if I couldn't find anything else.

I got the sense that they were trying to rebuild the area with outside money.

Instead of staying I walked a mile down the road to Mecca Campground. Full and \$20 a night, so even if it had been an option, it wouldn't have been an option.

"What you want is the primitive campground five miles down. Go past the next campground, that one is full too, but what you're looking for is after that," the ranger told me.

Had it been later at night I would have just slipped into the bushes and called it a night. But it was only 3pm. Luckily the Corvina Beach Primitive Campground, which was just a stretch of dirt road along the beach, was only three miles away, not the five miles the ranger had thought.

By the time I'd set up my tent and registered my brain had turned up the volume on potential problems that had crossed my mind all day. Now I was making stuff up to argue about and fantasizing very vivid situations in which I would be having trouble.

At the core of it was a money issue that I'd been coming back to again and again. Certain people owed me money that I desperately needed. It wasn't even a problem, yet, if it ever would be, but I was already anticipating, already imagining a fight. It wasn't a real problem. I was turning it into an imaginary problem by worrying about it. I had to force myself to let it go. That one internal argument had snowballed into everything else being a potential fight.

I was losing my momentum because I had no clear plan, so I slept late trying to put money problems out of my mind. I hadn't even worn my base layers to bed, which felt nice, though I did have to put on my hat and jacket at 2am.

Breakfast and lunch was the week-old cream cheese still left in my pack, spread on tortillas with the sliced ham from two days ago.

It tasted pretty good.

Mostly I snacked on candy corn and read my book. I rinsed out and dried all my clothes and tried to take a shower. The water was ice cold and took my breath away. How they import water from melting icebergs is beyond me. Though the shower water smelled like rotten eggs the drinking water ended up tasting clear and fresh.

I had no idea how to leave where I was and get to San Diego. Or why I would even go to San Diego.

I was just being lazy and was down to two breakfast bars, some peanut butter and a few tortillas for food. I had no idea if I'd be able to resupply, or if there'd be any traffic to hitchhike out towards the coast. But I wasn't worried.

"You know how I know you're poor?" says one drifter to another. "Your tortilla bag doesn't reseal."

The thought was that I'd hitch 78 out towards Julian and maybe Poway before hopping on the SDTCT. Apparently, you don't really need the PCT thru-hiker permit until San Jacinto,

except for mile 15-16, so the idea was to print that in Idyllwild. Which meant no staying in San Diego unless I splurged on a hostel.

Because I wanted to get back to the Pacific Crest Trail. That was supposed to be the point of this whole adventure.

I had been planning on being at Morongo Casino and eating In-N-Out Burger for my birthday, but now with budget issues, I was leaning towards Big Bear Hostel. Two nights there would be cheaper than one at the casino. And I could still have In-N-Out on the way.

I was thinking about burgers, but lunch was a single tortilla. I added one packet of Del Taco Inferno Sauce, one packet of Jack in the Box Hot Sauce and a packet of Parmesan cheese from a pizza place and rolled it up in the tortilla.

It was actually quite good.

Have to pick up more salsa packets, I reminded myself.

Chapter 7

Dam, the truck driver.

That was his name, Dam. He was Vietnamese and his family-owned several farms. He was on his way to Riverside to deliver a load to be processed by more of his family which would then shipped to stores.

Taking a ride to Riverside was tempting.

I'd walked six miles from Corvina Beach when I saw the sign. Mecca, 9 miles. "Fuck this," I said and had stuck out my thumb.

"I see you walk a couple days ago," Dam said in broken, accented English. "I work every day, seven days a week."

I tell him, San Diego, when he asks where I'm going.

"My brother drive San Diego every day," he told me. "I tell him look for you. No worry."

When he was ready to drive off of his route to drop me at a better location I waved him off.

"No, no," I said pointing to my half-full water bottle. He shook his head in understanding and dropped me off at a small market.

"What's your name?"

"Chris."

"Rick?"

"Chris."

"Kr..."

I bought milk thinking that would be it for the day. A mile later there was a truck stop plaza with a Del Taco.

"Okay, one taco," I tell myself. "But only because I have to charge my phone."

My phone was only half charged by the time I left. I wanted to hit the road earlier rather than later in case I had to walk the whole 24 miles to Salton City. After a couple of hours, it was beginning to look like I'd have to. The heat was getting intense and I considered breaking out my umbrella. I only hesitated because I thought it would hinder my ability to get a ride. Not that I was having any luck hitchhiking anyway.

After nine miles someone finally pulled over. No names, he didn't speak English and I didn't speak Spanish. Coca-cola, Bano, and No Mas Pantalones didn't really help me in this situation.

"El Centro," he said. Or maybe asked.

"Salton City," I said, as he started driving. Worse came to worst I could point when we got there.

"Casino," he said.

"In El Centro?" I asked, but that got lost in translation.

When I saw the billboard for the Red Earth Casino I was going to ask if that's what he meant. But I also didn't want him to think that's where I wanted to be dropped off so I kept my mouth shut.

On the outskirts of Salton City, he started gesturing as if to ask where to drop me off. "Anywhere is fine," I said, hoping he would get me a little closer to the main part of town. If there was one.

He pulled off the road, "Gracias," was all I could say as he limply shook my hand. As soon as the door closed he had turned around and was headed back the way we had come. Back to the Red Earth Casino, I guessed, which meant that he went several miles out of his way to drop me off.

12:15. Too hot to be out in the sun. I sat in Jack in the Box for a while to top off my phone and add a little juice to my backup battery. 28 miles to Borrego Springs. I had no idea what to expect crossing the desert.

The road out of Salton City didn't look right. It was a two-lane, unmaintained road that looked like it went off into nowhere.

Nowhere with any water at least.

With my one-liter bottle full I started walking. 28 miles to Borrego Springs. Almost right away someone pulled over for me. A truckload of girls going dirt bike riding out in the desert.

"You can ride with us or jump in the truck behind us with the boys," the driver said.

They were too young and I didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable so I hopped in the truck with the guys. They were only going a couple of miles outside of town to Truckhaven. A place to ride off-road vehicles of all sorts and which had tracks and ramps for people to use.

Anything was better than nothing.

They felt like a church group, but despite all their questions, religion was never mentioned. Not until I got out.

"God bless," they said.

"You too," I said, not knowing if that's what I was supposed to say.

Then I walked for miles. Further and further into the desert, hiding from the unrelenting sun as much as I could under my small umbrella. Cars mostly ignored me, or occasionally looked down their nose at me as if I were trash for even suggesting that they could give me a ride with my outstretched thumb.

All I kept thinking was that Jesus wouldn't even be able to get a ride out here. All of these people, some of whom had to be regular church-going Christians, and they would have left Jesus out here to walk. And he wasn't even as clean-cut as I was.

So I tried to imagine the Spanish guy that had picked me up earlier in the day winning big at the casino. He took a chance, he deserved it. And while I don't often "pray" I said a little prayer that he would do well if it was in the best interest of the universe.

Then, because no one was stopping for me, I started to think about water. Would I have enough? If I ran out and held up a sign that said "water" would anyone stop?

That would be a funny way to die. Dehydrated on the side of a semi-busy road holding a sign asking for water. I smiled into the dry wind and sucked in my cheeks as if all the moisture had been drawn out of my body.

Dead.

Not long after that a father and son picked me up. His wife and daughter in the truck behind, both towing motorcycles.

“Too hot today to be walking,” he said as I scrunched up in the very tight backseat. My knees to my chest and my backpack between my legs.

They offered me water, which I declined, and said they’d drive me all the way to Borrego Springs. Because of the wind, there wasn’t much talking, which was nice, esp. when the radio got turned to a talk show about the Rapture.

In Borrego Springs they were going to drop me off right downtown, “We’re going up the hill if you want to go a little further.”

“Sure,” I said. Why not?

The view, even from the truck, was incredible. And the driver was trying to make good time so it never felt right asking him to stop and let me out. Even when he passed a couple of SDTCT trail access points.

Then we were through Ranchita before I knew it and I told him to let me off at the end of the road. They went right, I went left.

My PCT app said I was half a mile away from the trail but no matter which way I went it seemed to get further away. I later realized it was because I never backtracked.

I walked towards Scissors Crossing, through San Felipe, where I found the perfect stealth camp spot just off the road at least an hour before sunset. And yet I decided to keep walking.

A few miles later I climbed up into the wildlife refuge, behind some cholla cactus and cowboy camped for the night until a coyote came to within 15 feet of where I was sleeping and started howling. It was amazing how it echoed through the valley. But no other coyotes answered him and he never bothered me any further.

Chapter 8

I woke up in the wildlife refuge, packed up and walked towards Scissors Crossing. With maybe five miles to go two old guys in a small pickup truck told me to hop in the back. It was a quick ride but well worth it.

At Scissor's Crossing, I met a family of Canadian Cyclists, all heading home up the west coast. They were worried about water but I told them where to get it going out towards Borrego Springs and the Salton Sea. They told me about a small country store a few miles up the road, which I already knew about, but it was nice to have confirmation, especially when I thought I'd walked through the whole "town" and was on my way back into the desert.

I went to ask a lady in a van delivering mail for directions, but before I could get too close she had her hand in her purse while she kept her eye on me. Gun? Mace? Once she figured me for a hiker she relaxed.

"The store's right up the road, you haven't missed it. Hop in, I'll give you a ride. Just have to make one more mail stop."

Turns out she gives rides to PCT hikers into Julian when the crowd arrives in April.

Stagecoach RV store and campground had soda that was five months out of date and because the person working was sick there were no freshly made sandwiches. The pre-made one was a little dry, I had to use six mayonnaise packets and two packets of mustard. But it was a nice stop out of the sun to charge my phone and get water.

Realistically I should have taken more than a liter. Anzo-Borrego was hot and dry and the sun was unrelenting. After I'd walked across the desert I had to climb up and over the mountains to get to Rancho Cuyamaca State Park.

Soaking wet from sweating I had to stop several times to dry off and catch my breath. I ended up hiking without a shirt, which is unusual for me. Talk about making me feel pale and fat.

Then, after sunset, it cooled off fast. I was shivering and couldn't get my shirt and sweatshirt on fast enough. Even then it felt like I was power walking just to warm up. Again I found a decent place to camp but wanted to push on over the mountain ridge. Past where the SDTCT crossed the PCT.

Then it got dark. By the time I hit a road crossing I had decided to lay down and sleep where I was. After I'd crawled into my sleeping bag a car came down the road, its headlights shining right on me. I'd picked a bad spot because of how the road curved but it was too cold to move.

I slept until 6am when it felt as if I'd be on display to any passing cars. I packed, and just as I finished an official-looking vehicle slowed on the road and stopped to watch me. I hoisted my pack soon after and as I walked away they drove back the way they came.

My problem was that I didn't know what a fire break was. That and I had blisters on the bottom of both feet, it had rained all night the night before, and I wasn't sure if hiking was my thing.

To be honest I do this every time. There's so much that I could be doing. The adventure, the travel, is great but... I feel like I'm running away from what I'm supposed to be doing.

I just don't know what that is.

So I hiked into Lake Cuyamaca. A beautiful hike, Rancho Cuyamaca was nice country. At the general store, it was going to be expensive to pick up food so I just ordered the breakfast special instead, the Cuyamaca Omelet.

The waitress filled my water bottle after I'd downed four large glasses of water with breakfast.

Maybe the desert did dehydrate me a little more than I wanted to admit.

The hike out was slow due to downed trees across the trail. Dead standing trees that looked to have been blown down in the last storm to come through at the beginning of the month. Then it was miles of a quiet, winding road walk. I took a break at the fire station but wasn't sure if this was the one that would let you refill your water bottle, it wasn't in my notes or marked in the GPX file.

The GPX file on my phone was something I'd never done before. I was getting the hang of it and surprised at how little battery power it seemed to draw with the location function on all day to track my progress and double-check that I was still on trail.

Through the Inaja Indian Reservation into backcountry trails in the National Forest where there were signs saying that the trail wasn't maintained or patrolled, to hike at your own risk. Hiking further it really did feel like I was a long way from civilization. The trail was an old road that had been left to nature. It felt abandoned, almost apocalyptic.

Once again I came across the perfect campsite. Off the trail on a grassy area next to the only river I'd seen in a long time. I had a perfect amount of time to set up my tent, relax, and prepare for the rain that I was sure was coming.

Instead, I told myself to keep hiking.

Uphill less than a mile I was sweating. Downhill less than two miles later and I was done. Not a great spot, on the side of the mountain, but I could make it work. Why did I always push on after finding the perfect spot? And for only a few more miles?

Then it rained all night.

No room for my tent, I was cowboy camping. I pulled my tarp over me like a blanket, opened my umbrella and put the handle in my armpit so it would cover me without having to hold it. That's how I slept.

The rain stopped in the morning and I packed quickly just in case it decided to start up again. I was dry but the tarp didn't do the best job. The bivy under it was wet, and parts of my sleeping bag near the top were wet as well. I had no choice but to pack everything wet and hope that I'd get a chance to dry them out later.

And of course, I was out of water.

There was a water spigot, which I hesitate to mention because I hate that word, and a bathroom at the trailhead a couple of miles away. But that was a climb. Sweating, I thought it was taking me all day. According to my notes, there were tacos and a liquor store another two miles away on the trail. But I wasn't sure that there was an official trail. It seemed like the GPX file was one person's version of the trail that differed slightly from another person's notes that I was using.

Then I got off the trail by following the trail.

I wasn't paying attention to the GPX because the trail was so obvious. Unfortunately, I was supposed to get off the trail and bushwack cross country following a firebreak. By the time I realized this I was at the back end of an upscale residential neighborhood.

Bushwacking through the wet brush for several miles just didn't sound like fun. I pulled up Google Maps and decided to road walk around and catch the trail later. Boy did I feel out of place in that neighborhood. It also struck me as a waste, as suburban neighborhoods usually do. So much land wasted, so many resources used. It was garbage day, and even that seemed like a waste of effort. So much fuel and time expended for something that could be managed much easier if the population wasn't so spread out.

Spread out and yet tightly packed. They were horizontal instead of vertical.

The people all had their status symbols, big house, big trucks, too good to look at you, never mind say good morning. I got it. They were rich, they had to waste a lot of resources to show off. They earned their money so gluttony as a lifestyle was justified. I wondered, if I had money, would I be like them?

I crossed the plaza with the tacos and liquor store. Suburban sprawl had made me want to drink. And when I checked the GPX file I was nowhere near the trail. So I had Huevos Rancheros and waited for the drizzle and sprinkling rain to stop.

There were two ways back to the trail. Wildcat Canyon Road was the closest, the other option was to walk all the way to Poway and skip a bunch of the trail.

I didn't feel like doing either.

I had planned on walking, or maybe hitchhiking into Poway but by the time I got to Wildcat Canyon Road, I'd set my mind to getting to the Motel 6 in El Cajon. Well over twenty miles away and it was already noon. It seemed impossible, but I felt like this was where I was going to end up.

I stuck out my thumb and the first car was a single white lady in a BMW who didn't want to look at me. This was going to be impossible.

The second vehicle was a truck, and it felt like this was my ride, only he didn't stop. He slowed a little, then pulled over slightly, then kept going. It was like he was thinking about it. He eventually stopped, further away than any hitch I've ever had.

"Please don't drive away," I kept thinking as I ran to the truck with my pack bouncing behind me.

"I never pick up hitchhikers," he said, then drove me to within a few blocks of the Motel 6.

I'm guessing that he was of local Native American descent, his accent was thick enough that I didn't catch his name. He was a diesel mechanic on his way to work, which I'm guessing he owned. He told me about the area and asked about back east. Despite getting along it seemed as if he couldn't figure out why he picked me up.

"I thought maybe it was going to rain, or maybe it was just my good deed for the day..."

Whatever it was I thanked him. I was in El Cajon before 1pm. Too early to check into the motel. So I splurged 99 cents on a chocolate Frosty at a Wendy's to try and get rid of my craving for ice cream. The sugar craving which masked the desire to drink.

Motel 6 let me check-in at 2pm and I picked up a half-gallon of milk, some snack cakes, and a 2-liter bottle of root beer at Food 4 Less, as well as a small bottle of whiskey at a liquor store down the street.

I washed my socks in the sink, my underwear when I took a shower, drank the whiskey and relaxed.

I took my time checking out in the morning. Still leaving by 10am despite the noon check-out time. I wanted to make sure not only that I'd have enough time to get back to the trail but also that there'd be a way to do that without walking 20+ miles.

I sat outside of the Starbucks off Broadway to use their wifi and track down bus routes, making the mistake of not buying an all-day pass when I got on the bus so I had to pick one up at the El Cajon Transit Center. That was another \$2.25 wasted. I could justify the motel room, but not my stupidity.

Figuring I'd have enough time to get to Poway I rode the Greenline for a while to see some of San Diego. Not too long, I still wanted to make sure that I could get there. Four buses and a train later and I was in Poway.

The trail was between me, a Costco, and an In-N-Out. And since I didn't have to be at the ocean until Monday to catch a ride I'd managed to arrange to the southern terminus of the Pacific Crest Trail I was tempted to find a place to camp and eat in town the next day. I'd never been in a Costco before and I'd seen pictures of a few hikers of the San Diego County Trail stop in there for lunch.

After that, I figured it was only 30 more trail miles to the ocean. Or maybe 15 if I looked at my other set of trail notes... Not that I couldn't have arrived there that day via bus.

By the way, as one person in town reminded me, it is pronounced, "Pow-way," and not "Po-way."

Go figure.

Chapter 9

I woke up just off the trail in Poway. The inside of my bivy was soaked with condensation. More than ever before. I had no choice but to put everything away wet.

I backtracked up the trail and walked into Costco. Not only would I have to wait another three hours for it to open but the sign said members only. Despite having planned on staying in town until at least noon, and eating hot dogs at the Costco because I'd never been in one before, I said fuck it and walked away.

McDonald's was even worse. The dollar menu seems to be a thing of the past. As do electrical outlets. To top it off this McDonald's, in particular, had horrible wifi and I used up over half of my battery trying to get it to work.

I walked out of town and just kept going. All the way to Torrey Pines.

There I took my shoes off, stood in the Pacific ocean and realized that it was the seven month anniversary of living out of my backpack. Seven months since X-Day, and the end of the Winter of My Discount Tent.

And I had no idea what I was doing.

It was Saturday and I was two days early for my ride to the southern terminus of the PCT. It was too soon to visit Frodo and Scout, the trail angel's with whom I'd arranged the ride. I had nowhere to go. So I just sat there using the last of my backup battery just to keep my phone on.

About an hour before sunset I decided to hike back to a pine tree on the edge of the salt marsh at the end of the San Diego Trans County Trail. It was maybe two miles back and despite the no camping signs, I was pretty sure that I wouldn't be discovered.

No sooner than I'd crossed the Pacific Coast Highway, 101, than I noticed how hard it was to see me from the road. That, and there was a clump of trees to my left, looking north. Investigating closer I found a flat piece of cleared ground under the trees that almost completely covered it.

That no one camped there was obvious from the natural debris. I cleared that away, opened my sleeping bag in a last-ditch effort to dry it out a little, and resigned myself to sleeping in it damp.

Despite the dampness seeping into my clothes and the night fog, I slept pretty well. With the tree cover I didn't have any morning condensation issues, and because I left the bivy open half the night I was actually drier in the morning than when I went to bed the night before.

I walked into Del Mar along 101 but that felt all wrong. So I hopped on the 101 bus going in the other direction and paid for a day pass. I was headed to Fashion Valley to ride the trolley, as they called it, but the 30 bus arrived first at my connection and I rode that for a while. On and off a couple of times looking for a place to charge my phone and kill some time.

A lot harder than you'd think in San Diego apparently. Finally, there was a KFC that had an outlet, I had been hoping for tacos but...

There was a homeless guy carrying not only a well-worn courier bag with his jacket hanging just inside the flap, but also a trash bag, and through the holes, it looked like he was carrying a blanket. The weird thing was that he was carrying a cheap calculator in a flip-open

leather case. As if it was a phone. He would periodically open it, gaze at it as if reading a text and type a few numbers before flipping it closed again.

This was his disguise. This was how he tried to look normal, tried to fit in. By doing something meaningless he was mimicking the behavior of those around him.

For his safety, I wondered?

Then I hopped back on the 30 bus to La Jolla to look for a beach and for whatever reason decided to pick up a bottle of Jim Beam. I had no idea where I was sleeping that night or if I was going to ride the train to every stop as I'd planned. For the moment I was just enjoying the sun and the sound of the ocean waves crashing against the shore.

I watched some late twenties douche in jeans and a baseball cap throwing rocks at someone's lost surfboard and an old creepy guy in a sunhat and a button-up powder blue shirt and khaki shorts with a telephoto lens on his expensive camera. He was taking pics of teenage girls in bathing suits. They were too engrossed in taking staged photos of themselves, selfies, to notice.

Living out of my backpack had given me the slap in the face, a wake-up call, that nobody really cares about anything other than their small circle of reality. Nobody stopped long enough to look at the world around them.

I hopped on the bus back to Torrey Pines where I changed into my base layer in the bathrooms just after sunset. Then I crossed the road, a little higher up than I had done before because I thought maybe the state park's truck was watching me. As soon as the hill was between us, blocking their view, I scooted across and down to my campsite for another quiet night's sleep.

I was picked up at 9:30am by Scout, a PCT trail angel, and board member, so that I could stay with him and his wife Frodo. She would drive me to the southern terminus of the Pacific Crest Trail the next morning.

They really were unbelievable. All trail angels are, but they host hundreds of hikers every year, and I was their first hiker for the 2016 hiking season. It was still early to be hiking, but their generosity gave me a chance to resupply, print my permit and water report, take a shower, do laundry and even cut my hair.

Granted, they were beard trimmers so I really only did the sides and it looked horrible, but c'mon, that's amazing. Truly great people. And they cooked dinner. Talk about being spoiled. I almost felt... human.

Chapter 10

5am. A couple of scrambled eggs with a few pumpkin spice pancakes. All-natural syrup... oh well, I need the calories. I packed, hugs all around, and we're off.

Frodo drops me off at the new southern terminus monument, takes my picture and takes off. And I'm glad, not because I am happy to see her go, but because I have to go to the bathroom. Only as she leaves there is a new car approaching, and nowhere to piss in private. As they walk up I throw on my pack, say hello and goodbye, and I'm gone.

I piss further down the trail but when I start hiking again all I can hear is them behind me. Constant, incessant, yammering.

"Shut up already and hike. Just enjoy the morning," I want to say, but I don't, and they don't either. Not two miles later I stopped hiking. Not because I am tired or that the trail is too difficult. No. I just wanted them to pass me.

When they do, the man of the couple has his cell phone clipped to his chest strap blasting some obscure rock n roll song. Maybe from his own band of fellow retirees. They're easily mid 50's and out for a short hike. I give them at least 20 minutes before I hit the trail again.

An hour later I caught up to them and stopped to have a brownie to let them hike on. Before I know it I've done 12 miles before noon. I had planned on sleeping at mile 5 and hitting the Lake Morena store for a breakfast burrito. Now I figured I'd just hit it for a late lunch/early dinner.

Other than the climb in the midday sun just before Lake Morena, the trail flew by. I hit the Lake Morena Malt Shop, 4/10's of a mile off-trail. Two guys outside the store looked like locals and asked if I'm hiking. Only one of them is local. The other, Oscar, says he is hiking the whole trail. But he has been here in town for four days, and his eyelids are a bit droopy from drinking.

I grab a couple of Gatorades and a small bag of Fritos from inside the store. Oscar moves from where he was to sit at my table, talk about the trail, and have a cigarette. He's got Halfmile's maps and datasheets for the whole trail printed out and kept together in a three-ring binder.

"I try to keep my pack light," he says. "Between 40 – 50 pounds." He doesn't hitchhike, he goes up to people in stores and offers them \$10 or \$20 to drive him where he needs to go. He doesn't know what fire closures are.

"I'm not hurtin nothin. I'll just hike in and put up my tent."

That his girlfriend had recently died and he had plenty of money slips out and I figured he got some kind of settlement money.

"I just don't know what to do with my life," he tells me, taking another swig of vodka from the fifth in his pocket.

"Just take it day by day," I tell him. "You're out here on an adventure. Take your time, enjoy it."

He said that God would show him what to do, that he intends on buying new gear for the cold in the Sierras. In between thoughts he bought another bottle of vodka, paying a store customer to take him back to his tent and pack.

He had camped up the trail a little further and I tried to be vague about where I was staying because I was going to hike out and camp on the trail to get away from the cold night at the lake. But now... I walked to the Lake Morena campground and paid the \$5 for a hiker tent site. They had outlets by the bathrooms so at least I could top off my phone.

I got up for an early morning start to the day's hike but they were hosing down the bathrooms with powerful chemical cleaners. By the time I'd packed the tent and half charged my phone it was 8:30am.

There was no sign of Oscar when I hiked through his campground, and I thought maybe he had hiked ahead. Later I passed a couple of local day hikers who said they'd seen him just before their hike, back at that same campground.

"He didn't look like he was making any miles," they said.

I hiked just under twelve miles for the day. Taking an hour-long lunch at 11am and decided to stop at mile 32.05 of the PCT when a strange sort of drowsiness had overtaken me. It looked like a nice enough place to camp, even if it was early in the day. The fire pit was still hot enough from whoever had a fire the night before that it ignited a few twigs that I dropped on it. But I didn't have enough energy to build a fire, nevermind keep my eye on it while I slept. I laid down and tried to take a nap. Not really sleeping, but drifting in and out of consciousness.

By the time the sun was about to set, I wished that I'd had a warmer sleeping bag. It was far too cold to be out this early on the PCT. What was I thinking? What was it I was trying to do?

In the morning I hiked into Mt. Laguna for the cheeseburgers at the Pine House Cafe and Tavern. I'd heard they were some of the best along the trail. Only they didn't open until 5pm on Thursdays and were then only open for two hours. Instead of waiting I settled on a half a gallon of milk and a box of Chewy Chips Ahoy cookies from the Mt. Laguna Store instead. Which cost \$10 but felt absolutely worth it.

The owner plugged my phone in behind the counter to let it charge and I couldn't imagine what he must have to put up with during the busy season with hikers en masse pleading for an outlet.

I'd passed another hiker heading south earlier in the morning. He said he was a thru-hiker but after how cold the nights had been he was calling it quits.

"I'll come back in May," he said. His name was "Grizzle", and apparently he was the one who left the smoldering campfire where I stopped the night before. Not even a mile up the trail after I'd met him I could smell another fire. The fire ring where he had camped the night before was still smoking. Without water or enough dirt to cover it, I stirred and spread out the embers and dropped a huge boulder on it that covered most of the ring.

I was somewhat relieved at the thought of him getting off-trail.

After eating the cookies I retired to the visitors center bathroom with a Coke and a bag of chili cheese Fritos to further charge my phone and backup battery. I sat in the sun pretty much doing nothing. Watching tourists frantically heading towards the bathrooms. One older guy had to go bad and had made the mistake of thinking the bathrooms were up at the top by the store.

By the time he got down to the actual bathrooms his pants were half off and his ass was hanging out.

Not a pretty sight. Not while I was eating. But, hang out by the bathrooms and what could you expect?

Chapter 11

I hiked out to the 50-mile mark on the PCT and slept just off the trail where I thought the early morning sun would hit me the soonest. I wrapped my all-weather blanket around the bivy and slept pretty decently. It was so absolutely quiet out there that if I accidentally made a noise, if I started to snore or rolled over, I would wake up and look around.

Fighting what felt like a cold all night, which was maybe just the dry air and elevation, I wondered, I woke up early and put in ten miles by 10am. Going into Scissors Crossing meant a 12 to 15 mile hitch in both directions to get to Julian. If I got off the trail I could walk the nine miles into Julian and only have to hitch back. Then the question became, back to here, or back to Scissors Crossing?

I wasn't even sure what I needed for resupply. There seemed to be a long stretch of the trail coming up with nothing available. Not that I had actually been eating the food that I brought... It didn't sound like there was anything in Warner Springs or Anza. And that put me 100 miles away from Idyllwild and the fire closure just before there.

With trail logistics on my mind, I took the Sunrise Trail in for water, but there was no obvious source there. Someone had left a gallon juice jug filled $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way with water. I took half a liter. Thought about making lunch, maybe camping there and hitching into Julian. Then a Jeep stopped, and he would have given me a ride, but I just waved and sat there in the sun.

It wasn't even noon yet.

Finally, I decided to hitchhike, and the first truck stopped. Not for me, but for a geocache just below where I'd been laying in the grass. It was in the old VW bug rusting away in the ditch. He said he'd give me a ride anyway, as long as I don't mind him stopping for one more on the way out of town. His wife and he lived in a fifth wheel and were out visiting family. She wasn't feeling well so he was out here by himself, he explained.

He dropped me off at the intersection of 78 and 79. I went left into Julian and what looked like most of the town. I suspected that there was free pie for hikers somewhere in town but I wasn't sure where, I hadn't really planned this hike. Then I spotted Mom's and for whatever reason, that clicked.

Warm, fresh, bumbleberry pie. Blueberries, blackberries, and boysenberries, with whipped cream and a free Sprite. And they had outlets!

Now what, I wondered? Hitchhiking back to Scissor's Crossing seemed like a no brainer. Maybe pick up something in town. I wasn't sure what. That would mean fifteen trail miles skipped. But I wasn't thru-hiking, I was just hiking to have fun. I wasn't hiking for anyone else. So why was it such a hard choice to make? Why was I arguing with myself as if I had someone to impress?

I walked out of Julian. 78 east just outside of town is a winding, curving road with no shoulder. Hitchhiking didn't look good heading out of town and once I'd hit the curves I'd resigned myself to walking back to the trail.

But I got lucky. Gabriel and his buddy were out slow cruising, listening to late 70's early 80's mellow rock and just enjoying the view. They were cruising up through Ranchita and Borrego Springs out to the Salton Sea because his Buddy had never been out this way.

I squeezed into the backseat of their pickup truck and off we went. Just barely touching the speed limit. Any mellower and I'd expect them to be smoking weed. I gathered Gabriel was a reformed alcoholic, "No more wild turkey for me," he said. "You know what a Gorilla Fart is? Half Wild Turkey and half Bacardi 151 in a shot glass. After that, you don't Gorilla Fart... but slurred so it sounds like give a fuck."

Try as I might, rolling it over in my head, I couldn't get it to sound right. Maybe you had to have been there.

They dropped me off at Scissor's Crossing and I managed to walk half a mile past the trail before I figured out that I'd gone too far. As I hiked back the sun was cooking me and I realized that I didn't want to climb the trail just yet. So I hiked the trail south and thought about camping somewhere around there. It was only 3pm.

I sat under the bridge to get out of the sun and open up my pack of hot dogs and can of soda. Resupply from Julian. If I camped there under the bridge I could even walk back to the RV place and refill water and charge stuff again.

Or I could hike north when it cooled down a bit.

I hiked north, up the mountains, figuring that I didn't need to spend any more money and so what if my phone died for a day or two before I could charge it.

Only the cold that I'd been fighting since Lake Morena had other ideas.

I camped two miles up the trail in a dry creek bed or wash, far thirstier than usual. I finished off almost a liter of water before I knew what I was doing. And that was a problem since I was only carrying two liters.

So I checked to see the location of the next water source and was discouraged to find out that it is over 20 miles away. My liter of water wouldn't last the night, never mind 20 to 25 miles. And the night would have been perfect if it wasn't for the intense pain every time I swallowed. My head was so congested that laying down sometimes felt as if I was suffocating.

But at least it was warm.

I popped a couple of aspirin and tried my best to sleep through it. In the morning I was up but not motivated for the walk back down into Shelter Valley. Two early morning hikers surprised me though, I didn't think that I'd see anyone all day. The truth was I'd considered leaving my tent right there only feet off the trail. Not that I had much out here anyone would want to steal. They were out for a day hike but they were loaded with water.

I ended up rolling my sleeping bag, sleeping pad and silk cocoon liner up inside my tent, then wrapped that with my OD green tarp. I stashed it further up the dry creek bed, out of sight, off the trail and under some rocks and branches. I only packed out my clothes and food to bring into town. Mostly I had to figure out how to pack out more water without using my hydration bladder.

Because I hated the way the plastic tasted.

On the way down the mountain, I passed two female hikers. Unless one of them had to pee and got off-trail at the exact point where my stuff is hidden, they'd never even suspect that it was there.

And still, I worried.

Under the bridge at Scissor's Crossing someone has stashed two cases of water. I drank a bottle and planned on refilling it in town. Worse comes to worst I could carry up a couple more on my way back.

Egg, ham, and cheese on a croissant with an out of date Coke again at the Stagecoach Trails RV Park. At least the sandwich was freshly made this time and I could refill the liter bottle of soda with water on my way out.

I charged my phone, of course, a never-ending process, and sat until the AC forced me outside to warm up. Even then I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to be at camp too early and have people hiking by staring at me, or worse, talking to me.

Between the tourists and the Boy Scout Troop out for a hike I just wanted to drink and forget the world. Alcohol consumption inspired by Boy Scouts with bad troop leaders. One too out of shape to hike met them at Stagecoach RV to buy them all ice cream. The one that hiked with them didn't know how to wear his pack. They were uncoordinated and unorganized, often contradicting each other in what they told the kids.

Tourists complaining about the heat in the shade retreated to their cars to roll up the windows and run the air conditioning. I had to walk away from the building when they started using spray-on sunscreen. The chemicals on the breeze drifting towards me were overpowering.

Part of me wanted to leave. Part of me said that there was no reason to hurry. Sitting there, doing nothing, but occasionally hopping on their wifi that they don't know I had the password for, I bought a grilled cheese sandwich. Tomato and provolone with garlic cilantro sauce.

At that point, I'd spent double what I'd hoped to spend. I had \$8 or \$9 left in cash, but at least I couldn't spend that in the desert.

I hiked back to the trail and as soon as I gave up on hitchhiking the very next car pulled over, without my thumb even being out.

I sat under the bridge for a while drinking another one of the cached waters and ate my last two hot dogs before hitting the trail, passing a nice couple from British Columbia who lived near Manning Park where the trail terminates. They hiked down, heading south, and said that I must have hidden my tent and sleeping bag well because they never saw it. They also hoped I hadn't caught what the wife had when they asked if I was feeling okay. I had the same symptoms they said and it took her a month to shake it.

I hiked up the trail with the umbrella open to block the sun when the wind wasn't crushing it, and almost stepped on a rattlesnake.

It was within inches of my foot, and I may have got him if he hadn't been paying attention and coiled up to strike me. There was nowhere to go. One step left and I was off-trail on a very steep slope down which I did not want to fall.

That first step sideways after I'd noticed the rattlesnake put him just about at waist level, maybe a little below, and now only two feet away. He looked to be about three feet long, and a rattlesnake can strike at least the distance of its body length.

But before any of that processed mentally, my umbrella was between us like a shield and I was climbing up off the very steep slope and back to the trail.

Other than the first rattle in surprise, he didn't rattle again until I took out my phone and got closer to take his picture. I watched his tail flick back and forth for a minute, then told him to relax.

He stopped rattling but stayed coiled and facing me. I was going to have to pay a lot more attention to the trail from then on. His colors blended right into the landscape. I only hoped that he stood out enough to make a decent Instagram photo.

Chapter 12

It was a warm night, and it would have been comfortable if it wasn't for the damn sore throat. It hurt to swallow and breathe.

I hiked out after 7am, and what a dry section of trail. The whole time I was hiking the 20+ miles to the next road crossing I kept looking down at 52, the road to the left of the trail. From having walked/hitchhiked through this area before I knew that the same distance I was hiking was only 12 miles down there by road. And that was without the elevation changes or rocky terrain.

I stopped at 9am having done only six miles, and finished off my first liter of water. I couldn't remember ever being as thirsty beyond a handful of times. Not only did the water not seem to quench my thirst but I started to wonder if three liters were going to be enough to get me to the next water source.

After a week I figured my cream cheese had had it. Without that there wasn't much food left. I ate some salami wrapped around string cheese because that's all I had. But I wasn't very hungry.

I passed two other hikers doing sections. They only hiked about seven miles per day, they said. "We did ten and a half once," the wife tells me, shaking her head. "Never again!"

"We'll go maybe eight, or eight and a half, to get to a decent campsite, but that's about it," the husband said.

I pass them but take a break at my 12-mile mark. 12x12, twelve miles before noon. I finish off most of my second liter of water before they show up again. "Done for the day?" I ask.

"Just a bit farther ahead..." they explain, sitting in the sparse shade nearby.

I'd read about one source of water along this section but was going to skip it. The sign and logbook had me thinking otherwise. It was off-trail a ways and I wasn't sure what to expect. The section hiking couple were cooling off in the shade, too tired to go check it out.

The side trail was about a third of a mile long and had a dirt road that led in from behind. Someone had stashed hundreds of store-bought gallon containers of water and covered most with tarps. There were signs. Use these first, these later, and please, no more than three liters per person. There was even a giant bin to put the empty plastic jugs in so that you didn't have to pack them out.

I filled up a liter and was grateful for that.

That and the increase in vegetation lifted my mood for a bit. But I came back to thinking about the road to my left again. I thought about quitting the hike. There was a road that crossed just north of Warner Springs, where I was headed the next day, and that led directly to Palm Desert. I'd never been there but there was a commuter link bus that picked you up there and dropped you in Riverside. Which is where the Megabus to Las Vegas picks up.

That there was also a local 54 bus to the Del Taco in Indio didn't help. Tacos and homemade-like salsa, i.e., not in packets, kept intruding on my thoughts. Air conditioning. Free soda refills.

I was still so thirsty.

Was there too much snow on San Jacinto? Would hiking into Idyllwild be too far to backtrack? Where does that winding road out of Idyllwild go? Cabazon? Beaumont? Would it be hard to hitch? Did I have any money?

I hiked across S22 and pretty much just sat down off the side of the trail. Mile 101.6. Good enough. It didn't look like a great place to camp. Buggy and already colder than the night before.

But it was time to strip out of my sweat-soaked clothes and put on something warmer.

The night was colder than I'd expected and I woke up from the sound of passing hikers talking as they walked by on the nearby trail. I was invisible behind the bushes but figured more hikers would show up the later it got.

The trail descended into a green valley and the hiking was easy. The sun was out and everything seemed perfect. My spirits were up in a way that they hadn't been in days and I figured the cold must have run its course. There were black and white cows quietly munching on grass, a few scattered here and there. Following the trail around a hill, the large field on the other side was populated with even more cows, some of whom were very close, and even on the trail.

I wondered how dangerous they were, being so big, but I also thought of cheeseburgers and this made me laugh. Self-conscious about laughing out loud I looked around to be sure that there were no other hikers behind me. There wasn't another person to be seen, only a single coyote crouched low in the shade of a small hill just off the side of the trail. I wonder what he's doing, I thought to myself.

The cows stared at me as I walked, some running out of my way as I approached on the trail. Some circling behind me to where they once stood, watching me walk away. There were a few calves here and there that ran faster at my approach, but I began to feel a tension in my gut about the massive number of cows I found myself having to walk through. I started to worry about one that was following me, huffing big breaths of air out of its nostrils.

One by one the cows that dispersed from in front of me would end up behind, following the snorting cow that was slowly getting closer behind me as I walked up the trail. At first, it was kind of funny, but the tension in my stomach was a little worrisome. And why was the coyote hiding exactly? Was he a threat to the calves causing the cows to be overprotective? Was he hiding because he knew something about these cows that I did not?

When there were more than a dozen cows following behind me on the trail they seemed to have built up courage in numbers. The lead cow started pounding his hooves into the trail and jolted forward in my direction as if testing me.

I was going to have to punch a cow in the face, I thought to myself. There was nowhere to go, the field was wide open with only a few rolling hills. I had no choice but to face the herd.

I pulled out my umbrella, which was so lightweight it wouldn't do any damage to a charging cow, but they didn't know that.

"Yah!" I roared with a deep breath coming from the bottom of my stomach. I flapped the umbrella open and closed a few times in an attempt to be menacing, and the leader of the group slowed down. Hesitating.

I laughed to myself at how silly I had been. Cows wouldn't gang up on you or be dangerous, so I fumbled for my cell phone to take a picture while they were still gathered behind me on the trail. As I was taking their picture, still walking backward, they started getting closer.

Maybe it was because I had slowed down to take their picture I thought.

So I turned back to walk the trail, keeping my eye on the herd still following behind me. But perhaps showing them my back was the wrong thing to do because it seemed to embolden them even more. More of the cows were huffing now, coming closer, pounding their hooves in the dirt and grass.

Now it felt like they were chasing me, and I figured if I ran they would stampede over my body after they knocked me to the ground. I would die, right there on the Pacific Crest Trail before ever reaching Eagle Rock.

I turned again with my umbrella and threatened them. Flapping it hard and yelling. My voice sounded pathetic. Despite the danger, I felt I couldn't build up the rage that would scare them off my trail. It was all so hilarious despite the danger. They would charge, I would flap my umbrella, all the while walking backwards up the trail.

Slowly but surely the trail climbed up, out of the field, and as the trail became narrow, fewer of the cows could stand side by side until the point that they were almost in single file behind me.

And at that point, they gave up. Either because they didn't have the support of the group or because I was now leaving their territory I wasn't sure. I was just glad for the reprieve.

Suddenly I realized how much I was sweating. I hadn't been paying attention to anything other than the immediate threat of the cows and now my base layer was soaked in perspiration.

I walked for a short distance to make sure the cows didn't follow, dropped my pack and stripped. The whole time expecting to look up and see a cow charging at me while I had one leg in, and one leg out of my tights.

I hiked with my umbrella in hand as I did the eight miles into Warner Springs, stopping only briefly at Eagle Rock. There was no real reason to stay in Warner Springs, at least according to a hiker who had spent two days tenting at the resource center. He'd missed the post office on Saturday and simply stuck around.

With no food in town, he had to get a ride eight miles up 79 to a small store there. Apparently, it had beer and Fireball whiskey, which he'd been drinking to keep himself entertained. I took a shot of the whiskey he offered and he handed me two protein bars and a bag of trail mix. As it was he had too much food, or so he said, and still hadn't opened his bounce box waiting for him at the post office.

I hesitated to take another hiker's food, but I was very grateful.

I charged my phone and backup battery, ate the snacks he gave me and used the free wifi for a while. Hike on or stay? That was the question.

I waited for the volunteer to open the resource center. Her name was Colletta, and she happened to originally be from Massachusetts. I helped her carry in almost a dozen bags of books someone had donated and we chatted for a while. They don't do food anymore, she told me, too many health code rules.

“Water, electricity, and wifi were about all there was,” she said. Which seemed like more than enough, and I was pretty happy with that. That alone was more than any reasonable person could expect.

There was a small bar in the golf club down the street if I wanted to get food, but it sounded expensive and I still wasn't sure if I had any money in my account.

I sat outside, using my phone to get online until I decided to put up my tent under the tree. Then I sat there and did nothing.

That damn Del Taco in Inyo was sounding damn good right about then.

Chapter 13

I'd hiked to the Paradise Valley Cafe and planned on staying until it closed, then camping somewhere nearby. The waitress explained that behind the restaurant was all National Forest land, but I was also welcome to sleep on the front patio area if I'd like.

It was tempting but hospitality has a tendency to make me feel uncomfortable. And sleeping in front of a business made me feel more homeless than I wanted to admit. I ate a burger, rehydrated, and had a vanilla milkshake, leaving there after sunset and camping in the trees less than half a mile behind the cafe. Halfway back to the PCT my tent was up but nobody could see me from the road, the trail, or the restaurant.

The night was cool enough that I didn't want it to get much worse, but it wasn't so bad that spending another night was no longer an option. Breakfast and a full zero-day being the motivating factors.

The next day I'd rolled up my tent, sleeping bag and sleeping pad inside the olive drab tarp and stashed that behind a bush while I ate and checked out hitchhiking spots for the following day. Because I'd made up my mind to get off trail for a while. I didn't want to be too close to the restaurant while hitchhiking, but I wanted a lot of pullover space for any cars that might pick me up. Right by the PCT crossing seemed to be perfect.

I made a cardboard sign that said Palm Desert for the next day. Figuring that it was supposed to rain and snow the next couple of days meant that getting off-trail then would give me a little wiggle room in getting back to Las Vegas.

The trail north of the Paradise Valley Cafe was cut off due to fire closure for the next ten miles. The reroute was ten miles back down to 74, a point that was only four miles from where I was camped. Why would I hike ten miles to go a distance of four? And if I skipped that, then what? I would be in Idyllwild for the snowstorm? Then I couldn't get over San Jacinto until it melted, and even then there was the fire closure on the other side.

I'd sort of planned on getting off trail for my birthday, going to either Morongo Casino or Bear Lake Hostel, but after looking at finances I decided that I'd like to get my laptop and try to make some money.

How I'd funded my hiking was by writing a few short mystery novels which sold surprisingly well and provided almost enough to live off of. That had been supplemented with my slowly dwindling savings. But I hadn't written a single thing in over a year and the regular royalty checks were getting smaller and smaller every month.

It was a lot colder the second night behind the cafe. I tried to double layer the all-weather blanket around my feet, to be warmer there, and so I wouldn't get condensation on my chest from breathing. In the morning there was no condensation, but my feet were ten times colder than normal for some reason.

I really wanted to see Idyllwild after spending some time camping in Mountain Center, California. I loved the relaxed feeling of tenting around Paradise Valley Cafe. That and camping above Scissors Crossing had probably the highlight of the PCT at that point. I enjoyed camping more than hiking, but I also wanted to see new places, and that meant hiking.

I packed up early in the morning and hit the road to hitchhike. Only the sun was at my back and therefore in the driver's eyes. So I wasn't sure they could see me properly or read the cardboard sign I was holding. Six cars went by and I was already thinking that I'd have to wait for the sun to change position before I stood a chance. Only car number four, a truck actually, turned around and came back to pick me up.

This validated my rule of never flipping off people or cussing them out for not picking you up as some hikers did. Sometimes they do turn around. In this case, he just couldn't read my sign in-time.

He was bringing his autistic daughter to school in the valley, he was 40 years old and finally going back to school himself. He was having a hard time adjusting to how rude the kids were and how much attention they paid to their phones.

"I'll be standing there in the hall and they'll just walk into me. Staring at their phones and not paying attention to where they're going," he said as he drove.

He always wanted to hike the PCT to Canada, but now, with marriage and kids...

"I don't think my wife would let me," he said. Plus he had his autistic daughter. "That's 60 pounds to carry right there," he added.

The dashboard was broken, there was no seat belt for me in the passenger seat, which was why his daughter was in the back, and he tells me how they had to struggle to pay bills and put his wife through college. Now that she has a decent paying job it was his turn.

Then the State Police stop traffic. A common occurrence, he tells me, usually a fatality in a car wreck, but this time it's a BMW commercial.

"Last week they had the road painted green. I kept blinking and looking at it, like, is there something wrong with my eyes?"

The nearest way around adds 100 miles to the drive. Luckily we get through in no time and as we approach Palm Desert he tells me that he'll be heading out of town at 3pm on the same road. If I want a ride back up the mountain he'll keep an eye out for me.

I thank him, but I'm still thinking about Las Vegas.

I had forgotten that the Del Taco in Indio was across from the courthouse.

"I just got out a couple of weeks ago." – "Can I borrow your phone?" – "No, he's still locked up." – "Parole was denied," was the gist of most conversations. Some tables of single moms with multiple kids switching back and forth between English and Spanish.

Worse, no outlet to charge my phone. I mailed out a few postcards and caught the local bus back to Desert Palms to wait for the bus to Riverside. There were no bathrooms there so after drinking a half-gallon of chocolate milk I had to hustle into the mall and back.

When I got back a traveling couple was there with their dog. I didn't catch their names but the dog's name was Bruiser, spelling was optional. They were heading north to escape the heat, which I thought was funny. My time in the mountains being anything but warm. They were headed to Riverside to hopefully be swimming at some point the next day. Their packs were huge and well worn but I gave them MRE peanut butter, crackers and pop tarts that I got from the hiker box in the Paradise Valley Cafe.

Some guy who grew up in Riverside was intent on giving them ideas on where to camp and swim so I sat back on the bus and let the miles roll by. Free wifi, but again, no outlets.

The group's consensus was that Oregon is the best place to travel. North Carolina the worst. They have a sign, "Jokes 25 cents," with "5 for \$1," in smaller print. They haven't flown it in a while. Mostly they sit outside a Walmart and eat a rotisserie chicken and people will come up and give them money. No sign required.

When they were in Vegas after the first four days they'd made enough to pay for a week at Seigal Suites. They paid for it mostly in \$1 bills and a sack of quarters. \$205 in total. They made all of that panhandling.

"No problem," they said, eating peanuts with sriracha sauce squirted on top. Crack a peanut in half, add a drop to each and shoot it like they were oysters. Except for the chewing part that is.

The guy who grew up in Riverside also lived in Idyllwild and tried to sell me on how great and laid back the place is, "Hippies and musicians," he says.

We're all dirty, but I feel weird being the cleanest. Traveling in my laundry clothes. My glad rags, I think, wondering if the traveling kids would know the old hobo term.

Meanwhile, we're all trying to ignore the woman in nurse scrubs who keeps trying to butt in with stories about how she was touched by God and the hand of Jesus, and how he gives her books but she hasn't found the time to read them all yet. She keeps straying from the path, but someday she'll get back to it, or, "back to where she should have been when she was younger," she tells us through a mostly toothless mouth.

She keeps twitching and sweating and I wonder if, like the bus driver, she drank a 5 Hour Energy before she got on the bus, or was it maybe something else? She had no focus and pretended to read the bus schedule or do sudoku. Switching back and forth between the two.

I got off at the Metrolink, everyone else rode on until the end. I had eight hours until my 1am Megabus to Las Vegas and I needed to find an outlet. My bus ticket was a screenshot on my phone and I'd already used up most of my backup battery.

I walked University past Main St. and nothing looked decent. Farther than that and it looked worse. Bus stop, homeless people, police precinct, Mexican grocery stores, and a liquor store. So I turned around and ended up at Farmer Boys, a small fast-food chain.

And still no outlet.

Chapter 14

In Las Vegas, I didn't do anything but drink.

Within two days of being there, I scratched the idea of finding a job and an apartment. There was no way I could see myself living there for any length of time. Other than The Strip and hiking out in the desert, the rest of Las Vegas just made me feel uncomfortable.

My big birthday celebration was a free Denny's Grand Slam for breakfast and then an REI garage sale where I picked up a 20 degree North Face sleeping bag for \$78.

I was glad to be out of the snow but there had to be a better way, a better life for me somewhere.

Every day I wanted to put a bullet in my head.

But I couldn't. I wanted to see what happened next.

What happened was that people who owed me money I desperately needed had stopped communicating and I somehow managed to break off a piece of my front tooth. I was so self-conscious about it that I figured I would never again smile, not that I had much reason for smiling.

So for \$16 I bought a bus ticket back to California to resume my PCT hike. Real-life wasn't ready for me. Besides, what's the worst that could happen?

Chapter 15

There were no available seats left on the Megabus to Riverside, the bus was packed.

Arriving a half-hour late I had to hustle to catch a local city bus in order to get to the station from which the Big Bear Bus left. I was headed to Big Bear Lake, California to resume my hike from there. It skipped some of the trail, but not much since I would have to reroute around the fire closures. I'd miss Idylwild and the peak of San Jacinto, but not much else.

At first, it looked like I'd be the only one on the Big Bear Bus, but a couple stops later two guys jumped on, one not having enough money.

"Do you have a military discount?" He asked the driver.

"We do," the bus driver said.

"Well, I can't prove I'm in the military, I don't have any ID or anything..."

At that point, I stopped listening. He was obviously lying, but the driver waved him aboard.

Then I fell asleep for a bit because the hour and a half ride went pretty quickly. I kept drifting in and out, jolting awake with the harsh turns in the mountain road.

After tacos at Wabos Tacos, which had some of the best salsa I'd had in a while, the day went downhill.

A lady pulling out of a chainsaw sculptor store hit me with her car. She had looked left for traffic but not forward or right for pedestrians. She hit my legs with the bumper of her car, my hand hit her hood, and luckily she braked. She tried to apologize but her complete lack of attention had pissed me off.

"Just look out for pedestrians lady," I said. I didn't yell it, despite the rage I felt. I had been hit while riding my bicycle years before in exactly the same situation. By a driver not looking where they were going, by not coming to a complete stop at a stop sign. As soon as there was a break in the traffic she squealed her tires, accelerating into the road. I'd already walked away but if she had hit me with that kind of speed I'd have been on the hood and in her windshield.

And she almost got rear-ended in the process of trying to get away from the uncomfortable situation.

Instead of picking up any food and being smart about resupply I snacked on a quart of milk and a king-sized package of Reese's peanut butter cups. I walked out of town knowing that it was a mistake. Everything should have been fine, but being hit by the car was still running in the back of my head. It was probably that which made the trail harder to find than it should have been. And since I was already mad my head pulled out the fact that certain people hadn't gotten back to me about the money they owed, despite promising to do that before I was back on the trail.

Fuel to the fire.

Then HalfMile's app kept changing how far away from the trail access I was. .27 miles it said. So I walked that, only then it said .17, but now I was walking in the wrong direction.

I came very close to smashing my phone several times. I wanted to throw rocks and punch trees, but that was juvenile and immature. A child throwing a tantrum. I wanted to delete all social media and never go back. I wanted to forget that anything back home on the east coast ever existed. I was digging deep to add fuel for the fire. I fanned the flames even though I could see what it was doing to me. I wanted the anger gone, I wanted to pull it out and burn it with my rage.

I thought most of it had been eliminated. That it was still so powerful made me want to break down and cry right there in the middle of nowhere. That was too easy though. The trail, my old relationship problems, and the money situation were just triggers firing off rounds into my weak points. And they were getting a reaction.

When I found the trail I hiked hard, not that I hadn't been before, back and forth, up and down Van Dusen Road looking for it. But when I hit the trail I was really sweating. And that was no good in the snow. Because the trail still had snow on it. It was already cold and down in town it was supposed to be 29 degrees Fahrenheit later that night. I had hiked well above that in elevation in hope of getting over the mountains and descending some. To be as far away from the population as possible.

Not that I'd looked at the elevation profile or the water report for that matter. I wasn't prepared for this hike. I wasn't thinking straight. So I stopped only a mile and a half up the trail and pitched camp at an old picnic table. No tent. I didn't bring that. Do I hang my food, I wondered? Big Bear Lake, Big Bear City... I was sensing a theme.

There was snow at the campsite but it was on an incline. My hope was that the cold air would move past me further down the hill.

My fingers were frozen from setting up camp and I still had two hours before sunset. At least I had the new, warmer sleeping bag.

Then again, I was hanging out in camp in just my long johns and hoodie.

What the hell was I doing with my life?

Sleeping that night was strange.

I'd become conscious, but not in a way that you would normally describe it. Not in a way where you were thinking thoughts, other than having realized I'd been completely unconscious. Not a dreaming sleep or even hypnagogic, just pure black going into infinity. A complete lack of a sense of self or location. When I "woke up", as I said, it wasn't like "I'm awake now, and I was just sleeping a moment ago." It was more like, "On. Off." But only because Off was an absence of awareness despite being conscious and On was equally an absence of infinity while being conscious, yet not fully awake.

This went on for a while on the cold quiet mountain until I thought the sun should be coming up at any time. But it was only just after midnight. So I went to real sleep.

The morning was cool. Some condensation inside the bivy from laying on my right side and breathing. The new sleeping bag holding up surprisingly well.

I hiked out of the last of the snow, or at least that's what I hoped, and stopped for a lunch break at Little Bear Spring Camp where there were ten or so hikers ahead of me on the trail.

The anger from the day before was gone, replaced by a sense of calm. Exercise, sunshine and a lack of alcohol seemed to make all the difference.

I hiked from there to Deep Creek Hot Springs and decided to soak my feet and relax. The place was full of people, too many for a weekday, but there was a Full Moon Festival going on. Whatever that was. Nobody talked to me and the girls all gave me dirty looks for not being a hippie. As if that made me some kind of pervert for hanging out at a clothing-optional hot spring, even if I was far away from everyone else.

The relaxing atmosphere was ruined by judgemental hippies, and I put my shoes back on and hiked out.

I caught up to a couple of the section hikers that I'd seen earlier in the day. They didn't want to talk to me either. One mentioned they were doing 50 miles.

"To Cajon Pass?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, immediately getting an angry glare from his girlfriend. They were two stragglers of a group, which I quickly caught up to as well, only to have them herded away by their chaperone. I was pretty sure he told them not to talk to me. He was very paranoid and gave me the creeps. They were inexperienced hikers being guided by a control freak who encouraged them to be afraid of strangers.

Even among other hikers, I was alone.

Chapter 16

In the morning there was ice on both my sleeping bag and bivy. I unzipped the bivy and figured I'd lay there until the sun melted and dried both while I was comfortable in my sleeping bag.

Only because of the mountains blocking the early morning sunrise it wouldn't be for a couple of hours. And despite it being 27 miles away I wanted to hit Cajon Pass by the next morning. So I shook the ice off and carried both the sleeping bag and bivy unrolled in my hands, up the mountain, with what felt like an empty pack. As soon as I'd climbed high enough to be in the sun I laid everything out to dry.

According to the HalfMile app and maps, I was supposed to hit a piped spring in a couple of miles, which was good because I'd slept dry the night before, meaning I had no water source. A half-mile after the piped spring it looked like there was an unpaved road which connected with 138, which paralleled the PCT before rejoining it. So instead of doing the climb and the winding in and out of the trail while looking down on a road that was a straight shot and getting pissed off, I figured I'd walk the road.

Only there was no piped spring, and if there was, then it was dry. I had walked to the unpaved road that would take me to 138 and I started to backtrack the quarter-mile to get water but stopped and said, "Fuck it, something will come up," and walked down the unpaved road.

My faith was rewarded with a cold stream from which I filtered water. I drank a liter and saved a liter. I had a cell signal and posted an Instagram picture and tried to recharge my phone with the last of the backup battery. I was dying for some sort of positive social contact but I didn't know if I'd have enough charge to last until Cajon Pass. I had to make sure not to get lost.

The whole time a Sheriff's helicopter had been doing circles and working its way closer to me. Automatically I sat under branches to break up my outline. Then I started to think that they were either looking for a lost hiker or an escaped convict. I didn't want them thinking that I was either.

So I got out in plain sight and did a one-handed wave when they circled by. One hand means fine, two hands means help. Only they didn't see me. Which I thought was odd. I wasn't that invisible. I walked down to the road as planned, and this time they saw me and came in close for a good view. I stopped and waved and waited as they checked me out.

Slowly they circled away.

A hundred yards down the road not one, not two, but six sheriff and police cars were just off the side of the road. And they saw me coming. I took off my aviator glasses so they could see my eyes, which would put them at ease. I knew they wouldn't do the same, it's an intimidation thing.

"Are you a PCT hiker?" The first officer asked.

"Yep. I just got off the trail because I saw the helicopter and didn't want to interrupt you if you were searching for a lost hiker."

"Not a hiker. A walker. Walked away from his car. Black guy, well built, with tattoos. You see anyone like that?"

“His name’s Terrance,” another one chimed in.

I told them I hadn’t seen him, filled them in on where I was coming from, and assured them that I’d call 911 if I came across him. I regret not asking if he was violent or armed because not far down the road an old discarded mattress had an odd lump running the length of it. As if someone was lying under it. But that morning had been about embracing my coyote nature, so I skedaddled, getting away from the fracas.

That didn’t stop the helicopter from thoroughly checking me out twice more as I walked.

I thought about hitchhiking but twelve miles of winding trail was only six miles of road. If I got a ride I’d just be getting right back out. So I walked. No shoulder on the side of the road, so when cars went by I’d stand aside and wait, especially on the turns.

Then a pickup stopped for no reason. Fuck it, I thought and hopped in. James was on his way home from working his horse. He’d hiked several sections of the PCT and was glad to give me a lift. He mentioned a gas station at an intersection and I said sure. He was taking 138 through Cajon Pass and I could have gone all the way there if I’d asked, but I didn’t. I’d hike. I had nothing better to do.

He stopped in a weird location and said, “The PCT is just up that way.” But we hadn’t gone very far.

“You mentioned the gas station, and I thought the PCT came right down to 138.”

Afterward, I’d realized he’d gone too far. We passed a gas station but he didn’t stop. Then the road got winding and the trails off to the sides all looked very familiar. We’d gone way too far.

He dropped me off at McDonald’s in Cajon Pass.

Despite my lack of hunger, I walked over to Del Taco for a taco. And then a second, because I’d used so much wifi at McDonald’s my phone battery was already near dead. And there was an outlet in the outdoor dining area at Del Taco.

A guy who I assumed was living in his van struck up a conversation while he refilled his 5-gallon jug of water from the outdoor spigot. At least I knew where to refill my water, I thought. On the third or fourth trip, he came back and said, “Do you need any shoe inserts?” Holding up one each of two different brands, but one left and one right.

The truth was I’d quickly worn through my socks, quality and cheap ones alike, and through the shoe inserts I got before I started at Campo. As of the day before I’d worn through the sole on my left shoe, from the inside out.

So I took the left one.

“God bless,” he said, after making sure that I knew about the trail angel list in the hardware store in Wrightwood. “They’ll give you a place to stay and probably cook you a home-cooked meal.”

The universe will take care of you, I thought. If I need it, it will be there. Just don’t get too greedy, I reminded myself with a chuckle.

I walked back under I-15 to the stealth spot by the railroad tracks where I’d slept my second night on the PCT, and there on the trail was a pair of men’s heavy-duty socks. Dirty, because they’d been on the ground, but otherwise brand new. I could throw them in the wash in Wrightwood before I wore them, I thought.

The universe provides? Or was that a joke?

All I knew was that there wasn't a single thing in the world that I needed as I went to sleep on the ground next to the railroad tracks.

Chapter 17

Part of me no longer wanted to be hiking, but it couldn't decide what else I was supposed to be doing.

I crossed back under I-15 to get online using the wifi at McDonald's and weigh my options, and there in the dark of the tunnel was a guy wearing a hoodie with a large screwdriver in his hand.

"Good morning," I said, not wanting to be rude. Not wanting to pull out my headlamp to shine in his face.

"Mornin," he said, not lifting his head, and I never saw his face.

I hung out at McDonald's for a while, then Del Taco. The loosely formed plan had been to spend all day at Cajon Pass. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I hiked out late with the intention of maybe doing ten miles and calling it a night. That would get me closer to Wrightwood and stop me from spending more money.

I only took one liter of water though.

On the way back out I crossed under I-15 again and heard a screwdriver drop, the sound echoing off the hard concrete walls. He was still in there I realized. I walked slowly, checking the dark corners, but he was all the way at the other entrance, with someone in a wheelchair. The usual thing one might see in a dark tunnel if it happened to be a nightmare of some kind.

I got closer and could see that the person in the wheelchair was elderly, not supporting octopus limbs, and was perhaps his mother. He had rocks that he had chipped from the tunnel in various homemade buckets.

"Looking for gold?" I asked after letting them know that I was approaching.

"That's the idea," he said, and they were so intent on their results, or hesitant to make eye contact, that I left them to it.

"Good luck," I said.

"You too," he called out from the tunnel as I walked into the light.

I hiked the trail north but it was too hot, my stomach was too full of tacos and ice cream. I took my time, and when I realized I didn't have enough water I'd gone too far. Too far to backtrack and there was no place to camp. The trail was steep uphill on one side and steep downhill on the other. But the views were great.

Maybe the best of the trail.

The problem was the distance to the next campsite. I'd left too late to make it no matter how fast I hiked. So, after the sunset and it got darker, it got a little dangerous. The trail was a little more indistinct. And it slid away in certain steep sections where it was no longer flat but a 45-degree angle down an increasingly steep slope that dropped off into the darkness.

Worst hiker ever, I thought to myself.

Well after sunset, at the first road crossing, I said forget it. I was just going to lay down and call it a night. Hopefully, I wouldn't be run over in the middle of the night, because there wasn't a flat spot to sleep on besides the edge of the road. At least not that I could find in the dark.

The view of Hesperia's twinkling lights and skyline though made me feel as if everything was perfect in the world. As if everything I had endured or experienced was trivial in comparison, and somehow that was comforting.

Even if I did get run over in my sleep.

I had less than half a liter of water when I woke up. I drank half of that and hit the trail.

That's when I first noticed the problem with my left knee, most likely due to the new shoe insert, I thought, but kept on hiking. The scenery got a little more scenic, but soon I was out of water. Bone dry.

No problem, I thought, Guffy Spring was only nine miles away.

Then I hit my first patch of snow and decided to pack it in my water bottle. Scraping away the top layer of dirt and dust, and scooping from underneath with my bare hands. It was cold, numbing work and the temperature wasn't really conducive to melting snow, but at least I tried. I also added powdered Powerade to the snow and shook it up, making a fruit punch slushie. With a few pine needles and dirt for extra flavor.

By the time I hiked into Guffy Campground I was in love with the place. The scenery, the elevation. If only there was water there I'd stay for a week, or more.

I'd passed on the Acorn Trail, a short but steep trail that would have taken me directly into Wrightwood. It was said to be extremely steep, and on the north face of the mountain, it was still covered in snow. Besides, I'd planned on getting water at Guffy Spring. Only after climbing down the steep Guffy Spring Trail, with a short glissade, the spring was dry. Tons of snow, but no flowing water.

I must have sat at Guffy Campground for at least an hour. If that spring had been flowing I would have sat in peaceful bliss until I ran out of food or the weather chased me off the mountain.

But I pushed on, further north, through the dark side of the mountain. There was no sun, and lots of snow still on the trail, much of it now icy and dangerous. Each patch of snow not only slowed me down but sapped a lot of energy. I was winded and my heart raced after every section. Part of that was from the steepness of the slopes. One wrong step and it would be a while before my body would quit rolling down the mountain.

At one point I couldn't even dig my feet into the snow. I had to use a rock to hand-cut footholds as I went across a 30-foot section. Foothold by foothold. If I wasn't having so much fun I would have hated it. Something about the danger, the intense focus, made me smile. I was having more fun than I'd had in a long time.

It took almost two hours to go from Guffy Campground to State Road 2, just over five miles. Which doesn't sound bad, I must have made up some time because most of it was downhill and the last mile or so was clear of snow and ice.

At the road, I decided to walk the five miles into town because there was no traffic. The first car, two old guys waved at me as if it was impossible for them to pick me up. Despite the empty backseat in their Cadillac SUV. The second car was a rich Middle Eastern couple who stared at me as if I was a sideshow attraction. He veered far into the other lane and if anyone had been coming they all would have died. The third car, an Indian couple, had pretty much the same reaction as the previous car, they just weren't as rich. The fourth was a pickup. I had high

hopes. I'd already done at least a mile of walking and I could just hop in the back. Only as they got closer I saw that it was covered. But they pulled over anyway and squeezed me in up front.

He was a trail runner and they stashed water for his run the next day and checked the spigot at the visitors center.

"It's running so you'll be able to get water there," he told me.

They dropped me off "downtown" and told me to avoid Acorn Trail and to take the road back up to the PCT.

I had a hot dog and soda at Wrightwood Marketplace, then went to Mountain Hardware for hiker information on places to stay. Only I missed them by two minutes. 5:02pm. I knocked, not expecting anything, and by the time someone did open the door, I'd remembered Camp Wrightwood. But they gave me directions, making life easier.

Wrightwood was semi-famous in long-distance hiking circles as being a hiker-friendly town, and Wrightwood Campground put me up in a cabin, free of charge. Which was great because apparently, that shoe insert wasn't a good idea. My left knee hurt to flex. I was walking with a limp and I didn't even want to put pressure on it.

I had no energy to do anything but fall asleep.

I was out of the Wrightwood Camp cabin by 8am. There was nobody in the office to say thank you or ask to stay another night. For some reason, I had staying there for Easter services in my head. Hoping for a home-cooked meal. Surely there was a potluck or free dinner? Humans with whom I could socialize.

Instead, I went to the Evergreen Cafe where a customer saw my Massachusetts and Rhode Island patches on my sweatshirt and asked if I'd hiked there.

"I live there," I said. They used to live there as well, not too far from the Blackstone Valley Bikeway where I trained for my Meals on Wheels fundraising ride. They had purchased a house in Wrightwood the year before to work in the valley, and we talked for a bit. As they walked out the husband wished me good luck on my hike and told me that he had paid for my breakfast.

The waitress said he tipped too, but I felt funny leaving without paying so I left an extra \$5 tip.

Was that the socializing and free meal I'd hoped for, I wondered as I hitched out of town?

The driver that picked me up was hammered. Swerving, driving slow, then a little faster only to slow down again. As if to confirm my suspicions he reached behind the seat and pulled out a bottle of whiskey, offering me some, then finishing off what was left when I declined.

He told me his full name, something of Yugoslavian descent, but it was slurred so I couldn't be sure. He kept repeating, "Wow, Rhode Island!" after any break in the conversation. He didn't want me to get out at Inspiration Point either.

"That's stupid," he said, "I'll drive you up to Grassy Hollow Visitor's Center, there's no point in this part of the trail."

Whatever. I was going there to fill my liter of water anyway.

But then we got there and he said, "This is stupid. The water here tastes bad. What I should do is drive you down to Lamb Spring. Only a couple more miles. Then you can camp on Baden Powell tonight."

“Isn’t Baden Powell iced over?” I asked, already considering the High Desert Trail Route around the mountain.

“Nah, well, maybe in spots...”

I filled up with water at Grassy Hollow and told him it tasted fine enough to get me down the trail.

“You sure?” He asked, digging around in his ashtray. “Thought I’d have some weed to give you but I guess not,” he slurred a little.

Then he was gone. The wrong-way down a one-way road and it would take me almost fifteen minutes to realize that my sunglasses were still in his truck.

Chapter 18

I cowboy camped at mile 372.77, 450 feet off the Pacific Crest Trail, just north of the Grassy Hollow Visitor's Center.

I had packed out a bottle of whiskey, and despite how well the hike and my time in Wrightwood had gone I still wasn't feeling the hike. The more I thought about the problem the more I realized it wasn't the hike that was bothering me. It was my life.

If I got off-trail there was nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to do.

So I drank, trying to forget about my problems, trying to relieve the stress caused by my lack of options. I laid in the sun, daydreaming, and I couldn't have asked for a more perfect day.

The next morning I set up the tarp between two Ponderosa pines, too close together, but they provided good overhead cover as well as hiding my camp. Not that I was worried about anyone stumbling on my camp that far off the trail, but it was supposed to snow within the next couple of days. I'd had my one perfect moment in the sun, and I was fine with that, but I wanted to squeeze as much time out of the location as possible.

The truth was I didn't know why I was staying. Other than the fact that I had nowhere else to go. I had enough food, and water was available back at the Visitor's Center which was only two and a half miles away. There was also a spring three miles up the trail but that was a long descent to the road, and then a climb partway up Baden Powell.

If the weather didn't end up being as bad as they'd said I'd stay into the week and hitchhike back into Wrightwood to catch the bus down the mountain to resupply.

I had a plan that wasn't a plan. It all depended on the weather.

What happened was that I woke up the next morning to heavy fog, cold temperatures, and wind gusts that had started the night before. It wasn't awful, or unbearable, but if it got colder or really did start snowing I'd be miserable in my sleeping bag all day long.

I was being chased out of my perfect location.

I packed up and hiked down to Vincent Gulch Divide where they'd already shut down the road. From there, because of the thick fog I couldn't even see a hint of the trail where I'd hiked down, nevermind higher up the much snowier Baden Powell. So I took the Manzanita Trail, also known as the High Desert Trail reroute around Baden Powell.

After five miles of that, I got to South Fork Campground where it was still windy as hell. The gusts of wind seemed to funnel down the canyon, whipping up dirt and dust. I considered staying, hiding out in the smelly outhouse to avoid the wind, but it was only 1pm.

Without a cell phone signal to check the weather, which seemed to be turning worse, I walked out the paved road towards where I'd assumed there were towns. Out towards 138. And I just kept going.

By the time I hit 138 it was getting late. No Pacific Crest Trail tonight, I thought.

"Did you make a wrong turn?" Some guy asked as he got out of his car.

"Sort of," I said, "weather turned bad on Baden Powell and I had to get off trail."

“You’re hiking the PCT?” He asked. It turned out that he had hiked some of the PCT and had ridden much of it on his horse, both here and near his other property by Kennedy Meadows, and he can see Baden Powell behind us covered in clouds.

“Where are you going tonight?” He asked.

“Not really sure. Going to check the weather and my maps and try to figure out where I am to make a plan.”

“Well, if you want you can camp out on my property. I have 25 acres about two and a half miles back up there,” he said, pointing towards the mountain ridge in the distance. Maybe he saw my hesitation because I’d just met him, “Just let me know before I’m done,” he said and went into the convenience store.

There were plenty of places to just walk into the desert and lay down. But then what? Suffer through cold winds all night long while I just laid there? So I discretely took a picture of his license plate and said, “Sure, I’ll camp at your place.”

He told me that he had a wife who lived with him but I never saw her. “Don’t let the house fool you,” he said as we pulled up. “We’re broke.”

Instead of camping somewhere in his backyard he had a sauna or a trailer behind the house that I could choose from. I chose the trailer and he gave me his wife password and a bottle of soda, two bottles of juice, one with chia seeds, and a bag of bee pollen which had come up in our conversation on the drive to his house.

The wind rocked the trailer half of the night, and in the morning it was cold again. But my very generous host had to go to work so I met him in his kitchen. He could get me halfway to San Angeles Highway, he explained, which would get me back towards the trail. Only I asked if there was a Walmart for shoe inserts.

My knees were killing me.

He dropped me off there and gave me his phone number, just in case, but also so I could call for a place to stay when I got to Kennedy Meadows.

The world is full of good people, I thought.

Walmart didn’t have the shoe inserts I was looking for, and for whatever reason, I went without purchasing any.

If the weather was this bad here there was no way I was going to make it to Kennedy Meadows.

Heading further north on the PCT didn't seem too promising so I splurged on breakfast at Denny’s. I justified it by topping off my phone and backup battery using one of their electrical outlets and using their wifi in a leisurely manner instead of sitting outside in the cold burning battery power. It was better than being huddled up outside Walmart plugged in behind a soda machine, and without internet access.

While I was online I ordered a \$10 bus ticket for the next week, LA to San Francisco. The soonest and cheapest I could get. All the bus tickets that arrived in San Francisco during the day had jumped up to \$41, so I’d be getting in at midnight. Not something I looked forward to, getting into a strange city after dark with no place to sleep.

I walked 47th street out of town and into the mountains. Took a left on Emma Mountain Road and a couple of miles later I noticed the rain. Mostly back towards town, and I was glad it

missed me. But the clouds were creeping over the mountains to the west. Dark clouds that blotted out everything in their path.

I got out my rain jacket and sat off the side of the road. I could just huddle up with my tarp wrapped around me, I thought, but I didn't know how long the rain was going to last. Or if it would even hit me. I could get lucky and it might pass me by, sticking to the lower elevations in town.

I debated, back and forth, as the clouds got closer. After quite a bit of hesitation, I set up my tarp in an A-frame between a couple of dead, fire-scorched trees. No sooner was I under it than I heard it hit. Only it wasn't raining at this elevation, it was snow.

No big deal, I thought, I'll wait it out. After all, it was only just after 2pm.

I unrolled my groundsheet in the cramped space beneath my tarp and settled in for a while. Only the temperature kept dropping and the snow was coming down harder and harder with each passing moment. I unpacked my sleeping bag and crawled in to fend off the cold. A little while after that I pulled on my base layer over my shorts because I was already wearing my jacket and hat.

I was wearing everything I owned basically, and the snowfall continued to build until after 5pm. Large flakes continued to fall here and there, it was far too late to pack up and hike on. This was camp for the night.

The sun briefly broke through the clouds for a moment just before sunset without warming me up. And I slept there, a hundred or so feet off the side of Emma Mountain Road.

Chapter 19

After Emma Mountain Road it was a long uphill hike back to the PCT. I swear the HalfMile app changed my destination on me at some point. I may have been less than a quarter-mile from the trail, but if so it was a vertical quarter-mile up the side of a mountain.

I hiked into Messenger Flats Campground just before dark only to find that it was closed. Not wanting to risk a fine, not that anyone was around, I walked a couple of hundred feet down the trail and set up my tarp and hung my food. There were bear warning signs at the closed campground and I didn't want to risk trouble by sleeping with my food like I usually did.

Heavy clouds were heading my way again, so I figured the tarp was necessary. I set it up low to try and trap in some of my heat and keep me out of the wind. As soon as I was snuggled into my sleeping bag the area was shrouded in a thick fog. But there was no rain or snow, it was way too cold for rain anyway.

It was far too cold and windy in the morning when I woke up, so I slept in until the sun was high. It still wasn't even 9am by the time I'd packed up, taking my time hiking north. Though I was almost out of water, I wasn't in a hurry. There were only fourteen miles to the Acton KOA to refill if the spring ended up being dry, which it was. Luckily I passed two section hikers going south to Cajon Pass.

"There's water stashed at North Fork Fire Station in a couple of miles," they told me, "And Hiker Heaven in Agua Dulce is supposed to re-open April 1st."

The day I was supposed to be hiking through town. That raised my spirits and put a little spring in my step. I felt like I was cruising down the trail until I wasn't sure I was still on the trail. I was certain that I had to be close to the Acton KOA, but I hadn't seen a trail sign in at least a mile, maybe more. I couldn't remember. I really should pay more attention, I thought to myself.

I spotted a guy sitting in his Range Rover in a parking area just off the trail so I figured I'd ask for directions. When he saw me approaching his vehicle though he shook his finger at me from behind his closed window and sped off in his vehicle, leaving me stranded. I laughed out loud at the absurdity of his reaction.

Stranger danger!

Luckily the Acton KOA wasn't too hard to find from there once I'd walked down to the main road. I wasn't planning on staying, but they had the most well-stocked hiker box I had ever seen. It was tempting, my left knee hurt again, my phone and backup battery were dead, and I was two sips away from being out of water. But I wanted to save the \$15 they charged hikers.

Then I looked through the hiker box again. Setting aside one pound of chia seeds, four packs Breakfast Essentials shake powder, a pack of snack-sized Almond Joy's, Ziplock bags, hand sanitizer, Ramen, mashed potatoes, a foil pack of chicken, two packs of Pop-Tarts, dried mango, three Jif to-go peanut butter packs, Honey Stinger chews and PB Burst peanut butter packets. All that and I hadn't put a dent in the boxes of stuff they had available.

And that wasn't including the Alpine Aire hiker meal that I had for dinner or the Louis L'amour book. I could have taken more, in fact, was encouraged to do so by the employees there, but I wasn't sure if my pack had the room. The chia seeds alone weighed a pound! I tried

splitting some off into a Ziplock bag but the lady who worked there said no, and pushed the whole unopened package on me.

So I stayed for the night, sleeping on a gazebo, and wondering what the hell I was doing with my life. Despite how fantastic the hike had been going there was an emptiness I couldn't quite put my finger on. Something was bothering me, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out what it was.

On the hike north towards Agua Dulce there were a lot of crows on the trail, circling and occasionally diving at my head. Hundreds of them swooping close enough that I once again opened up my umbrella in an attempt to protect myself from the onslaught of wild animals. I just hoped the murder of crows didn't tear through the fabric.

It was as if they were trying to drive me off the trail. Like the cows, it was as if they were telling me that I didn't belong there, "I have nowhere else to go," I yelled up at them.

The otherwise quiet hike into Agua Dulce from the KOA was five miles of uphill and five miles down. All of it exposed to the sun, and of course, the crows circling above me, but they thinned out as I approached the tunnel under State Route 14, the Antelope Valley Freeway. Then the Pacific Crest Trail went past Vasquez Rocks, which was named after a bandit who had hidden out in the area in the late 1800s. It was more often recognized for its role in a famous episode of Star Trek called The Arena, but it had also appeared in Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey, an episode of MacGyver, and the movies Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back and Blazing Saddles to name a few.

In Agua Dulce, I wasn't sure how to find Hiker Heaven. I stood on what looked like the main road through town wondering what to do when a red pickup pulled to a stop in the middle of the street. Donna, aka L-Rod, ran Hiker Heaven and quickly gave me direction to her house before driving off.

Serendipity.

Though she was not at home when I arrived there were three other hikers already there, helping to set up and getting the place ready for the incoming flux of thru-hikers. Refrigerator, Country Gold and Scott, who hadn't yet received a trail name. It was still too early in the season and there weren't many people on the trail to offer trail name suggestions.

Hiker Heaven is truly an oasis on the trail. With lots of goodwill coming from all around the hiking community, focusing on making this place happen again. All of the food I'd resupplied out of the Acton KOA hiker boxes had been donated by Hiker Heaven the year before when they'd planned on being closed.

There wasn't much for me to do to help besides sort donations into various hiker boxes and cook once in a while so I felt guilty staying for a couple of nights. I had no idea what I was doing. Heading north wasn't much of an option, there was snow further up, and by the time I hit that and would no longer be able to hike, I would be pretty well isolated from public transportation with which to get back to a major city. And if I had to get off the trail I was going to head up to San Francisco. Maybe hike the Lost Coast Trail.

I had no idea but picked up new shoe inserts on a Walmart run with the guys and they seemed to instantly make my knees feel better. I also picked up a cuben fiber tent from the hiker box, but just as quickly put it back. It needed trekking poles and nine tent stakes, and as it was I had enough to carry.

Having made the decision to get off the Pacific Crest Trail I road walked to Santa Clarita, making it most of the way when the Agua Dulce Fire Chief passed me on his way home, stopped, and asked if I was a PCT hiker and if I was lost. He insisted on driving me the last few miles to the Metrolink station but I got out at Arby's with the excuse that I was going to get something to eat before I went to LA.

The truth was I planned on camping somewhere in town, the neighborhood looked harmless enough, and I couldn't imagine downtown Los Angeles being any better.

I could have stayed at Hiker Heaven one more night and walked the road the next day, but I had felt like I overstayed. I needed to get out really. With nothing but wifi and a liquor store down the road, I'd slipped into drinking and watching YouTube videos again. I was avoiding my own life and I hated myself for falling into that routine.

Having internet access though had put the seed of an idea into my head, something so silly that I wouldn't mention it to anyone, but which intrigued me enough that I thought about it every day. The idea was generating an income using nothing more than a cell phone. Several cell phones, creating a phone farm. That it was so ridiculous was what intrigued me. It made the idea fun to think about and I hadn't had anything fun to think about in quite a long time.

"Was it productive?" I kept asking myself. Probably not, especially when I was living out of my backpack with zero internet access except the occasional free wifi in fast food restaurants. But I liked thinking about the logistics of the idea, how I would source the equipment and set up a location from which to farm the internet for money. There was so much about it that I didn't know, and that was exciting to me.

In a way that nothing else was in my life.

And that was sad.

Finding a stealth camping spot was harder than it should have been. I'd left Arby's too early and it had still been light out. I walked back up Sierra Highway, past the spot I'd scoped out, figuring I'd come back if there wasn't anything better. With no real way through the houses and into the hills heading west, I came across a hillside shaded by decorative trees on the east side of the highway. I slipped into the shadow created by the trees and felt like I'd gone too far.

For about half an hour I tried a couple of different spots, all of them too steep. I could lean against the small trees and maybe not roll down the hill but I wouldn't get much sleep, if any.

So I moved back closer to the town after dark. Running up a hill to a private community. Well-manicured and without places to hide, it was also spotlighted by the street lights and the lights in the storage yard across the busy road below. But for how open and exposed it was it also felt like nobody could see me.

At least that was the idea.

I used the groundsheet alone at first, but as the temperature dropped from the wind chill the sleeping bag came out. And I slept great until 4am, when I'd originally wanted to head in for the Metrolink. But I slept for another hour before walking to the Metrolink where I slept on the train for a while as well.

Los Angeles wasn't that exciting. And it was hot.

I didn't want to sweat and stink too much so I ended up back at Union Station early to read. Then my nose started to run, only it was blood pouring out, which got all over my hands

while trying to wipe it away. I pulled the bandana from the pack to try and block the blood flow. By the time it finally stopped I headed outside to the bus stop. And sitting, the bench felt extra warm on my testicles. One look and I realized that my underwear and shorts had finally given out. Things that should have been concealed were hanging out, resting on the bench. I had to put my pack in front of me to cover the scene.

I had one more pair of underwear, but getting it out of the bottom of the clothes bag and repacking was a chore. It didn't help that some sickly looking guy with a hospital bracelet still on his arm sat next to me and tried to pick me up for bathroom sex.

Where was this bus? Get me out of here.

Chapter 20

I was sitting in the Denny's on Mission Street in San Francisco thinking about getting the hell out of the city, and I'd only been there a couple of hours. Across the Golden Gate Bridge and somewhere north on 101 seemed like my best option, when Flock of Seagulls came on the overhead speakers. I had to laugh. The song was, And I Ran.

For whatever reason, I was pinning my hopes on the Ashland/Medford, Oregon area as being my salvation. Partly because there was a bus between the two, so if I couldn't find a job or an apartment in one I'd have the other as well. I wanted to be back in the woods, semi-permanently, or at least as long as possible before I had to find a job and a place to live. The coast, the redwoods and then Oregon. That was the plan I'd come up with sitting in Denny's.

San Francisco was bigger than I'd thought and the homeless people were a special kind of crazy. I had killed almost an hour at the bus stop, another hour and \$3.75 at All Star Donuts, only a half-mile, but a very sketchy walk from the bus stop. Then a couple more hours at Denny's another half-mile away. Which was overpriced compared to recent Denny's stops, but what was I going to do?

Morning came and the streets were busy well before sunrise. I rode the streetcar down to Fisherman's Wharf and hung out there for a bit. Wandered over to Safeway then to the Presidio Visitor's Center where I still had to wait another hour for them to open. Too bad I misunderstood the signs. Not only was this the wrong place but I could have called at any time to reserve the free spots on Bicentennial Campground. Everything online had made it sound like you had to sign up in person. Now they were full, and all the Federal parks around Marin Headlands were as well.

My only choice was my backup plan. Mount Tamalpais, called Mt. Tam even by locals, so I had no idea how to pronounce it. Mount Tam was a state park with a hiker/biker site, much farther away. But what else did I have to do? Spending a night on the streets of San Francisco had already been ruled out.

I took my time walking across the Golden Gate Bridge. Sat down for a bit, out of the wind, and had some chocolate. I'd end up where I'd end up. No worries. I was going nowhere and had plenty of time to get there. Through Sausalito, and Marin City, down a bike path to hook up with US-1. Only the farther I went the less of a roadside there was to walk on. Plenty of "Share the Road" signs, but I didn't think drivers paid attention to that.

I put the reflective vest piece that I carried for visibility on the back of my pack. It wasn't a whole reflective safety vest, just a panel I'd cut away to save me from carrying the whole thing since it hardly ever got used. But after less than a mile I gave up, finding a wide spot in the road and stuck out my thumb. With the dangerous curves, the amount of traffic and mostly rich people, I had my doubts. "Well, I tried hitchhiking, for my own safety," I would tell them, "But nobody wanted to help out."

Ten or so cars later though a couple of girls picked me up, and one of them was a hiker she explained. They were going to where I was going, and of course, they'd give me a ride all

the way there. Thank God, I thought as they drove, the road only grew more dangerous for any pedestrian that attempted to walk it.

But on the mountain, it was freezing. Cold winds blowing and the treetops were filled with thick fog rolling in. It was supposed to rain for the next couple of days as well, the ranger informed me.

Under my tarp it felt like I'd slept for two days. I'd gone to bed early, having not slept at all in San Francisco, and the limited sleep going back since before LA had taken its toll.

The tarp was soaked but everything else was relatively dry. With the damp morning air, and the fog still hanging in the trees, I took my time getting out from undercover. I used the blower, aka hand dryer, in the bathroom to dry off some of the dampness in my sleeping bag and bivy before I packed them. Having spoonfuls of peanut butter and a couple of Stinger gummies for breakfast.

I could have stopped the bus to Bolinas if I'd waved, but I didn't. It turned out that I'd lost my rain jacket somewhere, most likely that time it snowed on the side of Emma Mountain Road. I'd taken it out but didn't unstuff it or put it on. Something that small and olive drab could have easily been left behind.

Luckily it didn't rain and was no more than a sprinkle.

I took the Matt Davis Trail to the Bolinas Ridge Trail. Which was perfect for not having to walk the road and it worked well in getting me farther up the coast. Not only was it a beautiful hike but I wouldn't have known about it were it not for the maps at the park.

Then it started to rain.

Bolinas to Shafter Grade, which was either 1.7 miles or 2.8 depending on which sign you believed, to Cross Marin Trail into Samuel P. Taylor State Park.

Dinner was Ramen noodles and olive oil with my spices. Cooked in the firepit with leftover wood and kindling I'd collected, despite signs saying no collecting firewood. That usually meant from the trees and surrounding forest, not empty campsites. All of the food consumed was from the hiker box at Acton KOA, which itself was leftovers from Hiker Heaven.

There was a foreign cyclist there in the hiker/biker camp, who spoke no real English apparently. He was cycling Argentina to Canada. I used his state road map for a bit, but the fact that he had no Adventure Cycling Maps was a letdown. Those carry so much more detailed information that it would have been a great help.

I spent a zero at Sam P. Taylor State Park because there was too much rain, and with no rain jacket hiking didn't sound that appealing. I also didn't want to hitchhike in the rain. Which meant that I didn't do much. I walked around when it wasn't raining, but even that meant wet socks and feet because of the holes in my sneakers. I looked at old pictures on my phone while huddled up under the tarp, seeing some of my family from the year before. I felt so alone and isolated from the world. I thought maybe I'd call... home? I wasn't sure what to call it.

I didn't live there and I didn't want to go back, but hearing their voices, even if they weren't upbeat and happy, was what I needed. Real people. A conversation. Some sort of social connection.

On a lighter note the family camping next to the hiker/biker camp heated up water for me so I got to eat mashed potatoes for dinner.

The next morning I was on the first bus out of the park towards Point Reyes Station. Over six miles that I wouldn't have to walk. Thankfully, because it was still raining. From there it was thirty miles up Highway 1 to Bodega Bay where I could catch a bus at 5pm further up the coast.

So I hitchhiked out of Point Reyes Station, which took a while. A lot of empty cars going by with drivers throwing up their hands as if there was nothing they could do. The first ride took me to a place called Miller's Boat Ramp. They had an errand to do, they had said, and dropped me off on the road outside. I figured it was because I smelled a little ripe, the driver having made a homeless camp joke just before we parted ways.

But I didn't even manage a mile down the road before the same couple picked me up again. Only this time they veered off Highway 1 after a while. They offered to let me out but swore that I had to try this bakery a mile up, so okay, I went with it. A couple of miles later it's another mile up another road. But the road is called Bodega Highway and it goes directly to Bodega Bay with more traffic than the previous road.

Long story short, I couldn't afford the bakery and they didn't bring any out for me to sample. I didn't expect it, but I hoped. The smell was amazing but had my stomach doing flip flops of desire. Real food was so close but I had no money. So despite the bus I was catching later stopping at that intersection, I hitchhiked. There was no point in waiting six hours for a bus while being tortured by delicious smells outside of my budget.

A German guy with a thick accent drove me straight to Bodega Bay Golf Club while telling me about the town and what a pain it was to own so many properties that he has to go check on them to see if they're still there. He owned empty houses along the coast, and if I'd been smarter I would have offered my house sitting services. But I was numb in a way that I'd never felt before. Nothing mattered. I was only going through the motions of being alive.

I walked the last bit of road into Bodega Bay and didn't feel like hitchhiking anymore. I could smell myself. So I'd wait the five hours for the bus because I couldn't find the motivation to do anything else.

I slept outside of Point Arena that night. Across from City Hall, somewhere in the woods. It was a good thing I double checked the bus schedule before I went to sleep because there was only one 8am bus out of town which would connect with the one to Fort Bragg. And as far as being the biggest town on the north coast, there wasn't much in Fort Bragg. The library was closed which killed any idea of what to do with my time. No bathroom, electricity, wifi, or water. I ended up hiking all the way back to Safeway on the other side of town from where the bus had dropped me off and resupplying a week's worth of food.

The plan was to try and hike the Lost Coast Trail, which was only forty-five-ish miles away.

Then I remembered that I still had to do taxes.

Chapter 21

The tax filing issue was a monkey wrench, a shoe in the loom. It always was. For a guy who had almost no income, it often cost me a large percentage of my savings just to have my taxes prepared. Because the majority of my minuscule income comes from online sales and not standard employment I couldn't file using a free option that most people could use online.

At first, it looked like I'd owe \$200 on top of the filing fees according to the H&R Block in Fort Bragg. And I couldn't get a hold of the previous year's tax prep person to find out if I had to file a schedule C. My stomach tense, I told H&R Block to wait, rented a hotel room for way too much and drank a fifth of whiskey by myself.

Then in the morning, I tried to sober up, drinking all the hot chocolate available in the hotel lobby before I went back before the firing squad. Luckily I had tracked my expenses in a spreadsheet and used that to offset the tax liability plus the fees for H&R Block. All that money spent and time wasted for a \$9 tax return on a Visa card in my pocket.

Had I figured that out the day before instead of focusing on my impending doom I'd have saved \$100 by not getting the hotel room. But... I was showered, had clean shirts, underwear, and socks. I hiked out of town in a funk, following the California Coastal Trail signs which disappeared into the beach. I sat down after walking a while, between the dunes where nobody could see me. Not that there was anyone around, and didn't want to walk anymore. It wasn't even 5pm and I was done. For the day, forever.

What's the point in all of this, I wondered. Going nowhere to do nothing. Was I even running from anything? Or towards something?

I slept there, through the sporadic rainfall, and once again the tarp on top of my bivy soaked my sleeping bag. I dried it off the best I could, packed the sleeping bag and bivy separate and hoped for the best. Through the dunes, back to Highway 1, I'd already passed Mackerriche SP so I kept heading north. Forty-something miles to Sinkyone State Park.

A random surfer guy offered a ride the last four or five miles into Westport and I took it. It used to be the biggest port between San Francisco and Eureka. Now there wasn't even a pier. There were a few hippie girls and a couple of guys packed in a VW bus at the store. But I didn't ask for a ride because there was no room. I walked out of town, past a rock slide that had Highway 1 cut down to one lane of traffic. I had just missed the action of a second slide that almost pushed a worker and his truck off the cliff. He was saved by the guardrail and they were still removing this secondary debris and pulling his truck back from the cliff.

A lady in Westport, who at first I thought was a tipsy local, but may have just been a sleepy or grumpy owner, told me to look out for milepost 90 to find USLA Rd. The dirt road off Highway 1 to Sinkyone and the Lost Coast Trail. I had the food for it, but I wasn't feeling the coast. I didn't want to walk on sand and fight tides and have wet feet.

I didn't want to do anything except maybe hibernate for a year. I was tired in a way that I'd never felt before.

But I found the road, maybe, I wasn't sure.

It was after a short hitch with a depressing Jesus guy who had homeless signs on various pieces of cardboard on his truck seat. Everything from his tone of voice to his slouch to his stories told me how pathetic his life was and that he needed handouts to get by. Like how he doesn't know if he'll have enough gas to get to Leggett. Then a few minutes later he reminds me that his gas light just went on. "First time ever in this truck," he tells me. He drops me off but doesn't put on his blinker or hazards. I give him \$2 and shrug my shoulders at the pissed off car behind him.

I walked up the unnamed, unpaved road and wondered if I was making a mistake. About the road, about not heading all the way to the 101. Six miles later I'm at Usla Beach. Sinkyone State Park, but no hiker/biker camp unless you want to walk several more miles up the beach on the Lost Cove Trail. The visitors center is a couple of days hike north, maybe, the map isn't very clear, neither are the instructions to prepay without going to the visitors center. There is no cell phone signal but there are lots of ticks, mountain lions and bears. Oh yeah, and no bear canisters, which is required to hike the Lost Coast Trail. Or was that in King's Range only? I hadn't taken detailed notes about the hike because I thought there was supposed to be a ranger's station.

Again, I got the feeling that I didn't want to be there, despite the small herd of massive elk sunning themselves on the beach and the power of the waves. It was a beautiful scene, and any other time I would have considered myself lucky to be there to experience it. But it felt like nothing. Less than nothing. I had no emotional connection to anything. I'd cook dinner and walk back out having wasted a whole day only to find out that my plan wasn't a plan.

I couldn't sit there, I couldn't enjoy the moment.

I got to talking to a couple celebrating the anniversary of their meeting and they offered a ride back to Highway 1. He was an ex-firefighter with liver damage and she was from Rhode Island of all places. I cooked and ate with them while they packed up for their ride back to Fort Bragg. I could have gone back, but why? I wanted away from the coast. And the worst part was that the weather changed. Rain was coming. Again. And I still wasn't dry from the night before.

They dropped me off back on the paved road. I walked a mile up the road and jumped off into the trees to try and set up my tarp. It was so dark after sunset that I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or closed unless a car was coming up the road. It rained hard and the foot of my bivy got soaked at the lower end of the tarp. I had to pull my pack closer and tie my umbrella to it as cover. It rained off and on the whole night. My knees pulled up close while I slept to prevent anything from getting any wetter.

I love the rain. I love being out in it. When I have a warm, dry place to go afterward. This was wet with no chance of dry. The tarp did its job well enough. In the morning I waited for the rain to stop, the drops falling from the trees would keep going all day. All in all not too bad.

I just didn't want to be there.

"So where?" I asked, but I didn't know. The only thing to do was walk and hitchhike.

Wayne lived in Washington and was heading home after coming down to meet a woman he met online. A few days in Fort Bragg and she wanted a commitment. He was supposed to stay until the following day but had a talk with her the night before and hit the road this morning. He was running out of gas and had to stop in Leggett. He only puts \$10 in his tank to get him further down the road. He has money, he just doesn't like the gas price. "You're free to ride

further," he said, when I asked if he wanted to drop me off at the gas station. Luckily avoiding more rain and making more miles.

Avenue of the Giants wasn't all that impressive from the car. Unless we missed something on the drive halfway through. He wanted to go back to 101, and I probably should as well, I thought, but I got out and walked instead.

After the town of Miranda, Avenue of the Giants got way better than anything we'd seen from the car. In fact, after I crossed under Highway 1 again it was as if I had the redwoods all to myself. There wasn't a single car on the road and I was closed in on both sides by the giant redwood trees as I walked the double yellow line and forgot about my wet socks and cold feet. I marveled at the trees.

It was still damp in the shade of those trees when I camped at Humbolt Redwoods, but after a hot meal, I felt a little better for the first time since Fort Bragg. Or had I been in a funk longer than that?

I'd already laid down for the night in my damp sleeping bag when a female cyclist came in, she was looking for a place to set up her tarp and admired my setup. She must have been on a budget to admire mine, I thought, and wondered what she had. It rained twice through the night. Short bursts mostly filtered off by the tree cover. She never noticed. Her giant tarp was set up over her two-person, double-walled tent, which I'm pretty sure was partially taking up residence in someone else's campsite.

I cooked up most of the hot chocolate I had taken from the motel and by the time I was heading out she'd woken up and started coffee in a giant pot in the extra space covered by her tarp. She offered coffee but I don't drink it. Never caught her name, only that she was cycling 101, not Highway 1, to San Francisco.

I hiked out the Weott-Burlington Trail into the town of Weott and caught a bus to Eureka. The hike out was great, and Eureka wasn't at all what I expected. Talk about a town without smiles. Less than an hour after getting there I was plotting my escape. Bus to Trinidad. The farthest north their local buses would go. From Trinidad, it's a five or six-mile walk to Patrick's Point State Park, which was luckily on a side road and not 101. It was a great park but I had to tie my tarp off to the picnic table again.

Odd thing. No matter how I looked at it I would end up in Ashland on 04/20. Nine months since I walked out. Nine months since I'd been living out of my backpack. Recently I'd been thinking that I wanted to go home, only I didn't have one. Then, in between thoughts, I'd catch a glimpse of the inner voice saying, "Almost home." As if in less than a week I'd be home.

Did the voice mean Ashland? Or more morosely, dead?

I think I'll take Ashland for the win.

Chapter 22

Or maybe I'd be hit by a car on the 101 before I could get to Ashland.

I headed out of Patrick's Point along the Rim Trail to the Agate Creek Trail which takes you down to the beach. That turned into a long coastal walk which was part of the California Coastal Trail. God, I hate walking in soft sand. Even close to the water's edge there was too much give in every step and I was burning way too much energy.

But the lagoons were cool.

By the time I hit Dry Lagoon Campground I was done with the beach, despite still having to hike over Sharp Point and past Stone Lagoon.

I'd rather road walk.

Back out to 101, I walked north. Hoping for lunch in Orick, instead, it was chili cheese Fritos, which broke an already broken tooth. Wiggled out that chunk, put it in my pocket, and hiked out.

I'm falling apart and going nowhere.

After spending the night at Prairie Creek Redwoods I ended up at the Travelodge in Crescent City, California. Another motel room. Killing the budget, hitting zero, again. But why? It was nice out, I only had nine miles in either direction to camp in a hiker/biker campground. There was no need for this or drinking.

Because I couldn't wait to get my hands on another bottle of whiskey.

It had taken me until noon to walk north back out to 101 from Prairie Creek Redwoods. The sign on the on-ramp said no pedestrians, but it was the one and only road going north. Fuck you sign. A little later are official bike route signs. So a person can drive or ride a bicycle, but if I can't afford either I'm screwed?

I was putting myself in a bad mood, worse than I had been in a while and nobody was picking me up as I hitchhiked. I was sweating and stinking and second-guessing getting a ride. I didn't want to put anyone through that awkward phase of cracking windows and not being able to tell me to get out when they've had too much.

All of this beauty and freedom and I hated my life.

But a car put on its blinker as it approached and I was thankful. They were two Chinese visitors here on a visa driving the California highway from southern California to Portland, Oregon.

Again, the theme continues, they were out of gas. And they asked about local gas stations, hoping I'd know. I had no idea where we even were, but they found a gas station on the GPS mounted on the dashboard and we made it in on fumes. After a few stops to take pictures and admire the coast, something they do which I find more interesting than the actual view, they dropped me off in Crescent City and wished me luck.

Good luck getting drunk, I thought, because I had no other plans. No other desire. I wanted to be obliterated. I no longer wanted to exist.

By April 20th, when I was supposed to have been in Ashland, Oregon by all of my previous estimates, nine months since X-Day, I was still in Crescent City.

I had no plan. No destination. And I was thinking about disappearing. No Facebook or Instagram. Not that anyone had stayed in contact even when it was made so easy for them. Everybody and everything disgusted me. As much as I took the time to reach out to people only to never hear back, friends that I had known my entire life seemed indifferent to putting in the minuscule amount of effort it would take to respond.

Nobody cared if I was alive or dead.

While it felt so good to have clean sheets and a place to be, I had to peel myself away from the hotel room. I was bleeding money in a way that put any future options in jeopardy. Even if nobody else cared whether I was dead or alive, I had to care.

Except I didn't.

I just didn't like the drain on resources that I knew were not going to be replaced anytime soon.

I walked ten miles out of town to Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park to stay in the hiker/biker camp there for another two days. I could have stayed there for a week for what a single night in the hotel room had cost. How did I still have any money left, I wondered? Because somehow I'd managed to also purchase a bus ticket online using the free wifi in a fast food restaurant before I left Crescent City. That would get me to Ashland.

Was that home? Was that my final destination, I wondered on the bus.

Arriving in Ashland I wasn't so sure. An apartment, even with a roommate, was slightly outside of my remaining budget. But with the requirement of first month's rent and a security deposit, I was priced out. Just barely for a few cheaper options, but then I'd not only be broke but would have to sign a lease. Did I want to stay for a year?

I looked around town, felt the vibe and tried to imagine myself living there for a year or more. Did this feel like home?

The answer was no.

I tried in vain to find a way out, to make some other plan. There were so many homeless people I didn't know if I wanted to compete for a stealth camping spot or worry about being hassled in the middle of the night. And Ashland seemed to attract rain, and maybe even snow the next few days looking at the weather.

What happened to my endless summer? My long, relaxing and carefree hike on the Pacific Crest Trail? This was like the winter that wouldn't end. Or at least an early spring that stretched into eternity. But that was it, I was early. Early for everything because I had nowhere to go. I was in a rush to be somewhere that wasn't ready for me.

Every town before Ashland was hiring, this place just felt like it was full of bums. I wanted to stop traveling. I wanted a place to live and a job to earn rent money, which felt like choosing slavery, even if it would be temporary. Ashland was supposed to be laid back, but it didn't feel that way at all. It felt like uptight people with money mixed with homeless drifters with anger management and drug dependency issues.

I wanted to sit someplace and not feel that I was being hustled out.

I had seen a lot in my travels. I didn't regret any of it. But it was time to move on to what was next. I just had no idea how much farther up the road that would be, and I didn't feel like putting the effort to get there.

Was Bend the end? Was that home? Klamath Falls? Maybe if I could find a job and an apartment, and if the vibe was any better.

It was funny. This trip, everywhere I'd been since X-Day, the C&O Canal, hiking the Appalachian Trail, Las Vegas, the PCT, the Redwoods and San Francisco were all things I'd wanted to do before I changed my mind and went back to New England to be in a relationship all those years ago. They were things that I missed out on because of her. Is that all this had been? Working out lost expectations and frustration over being trapped and betrayed?

If so, if I was living out my old expectations, then there was never anything else afterward. Going back to work in the restaurant in New England was still a very real option. I wished it wasn't, but the fact was that it popped up every once in a while like a weakness. The quiet, meek voice whispering in my ear, "You could always go back."

But I had the X-Day date tattooed on my leg to remind me that wasn't an option.

And if it wasn't for the tattoo, I would have gone back. In a heartbeat.

But I'd made a promise to myself. The tattoo was like my signature on a contract.

Keep walking, don't go back.

I ended up in the Ashland Hostel after picking up a little extra food resupply to try and get all the way to Bend, Oregon. North out of Ashland on the PCT you're supposed to, it is suggested, send a resupply box ahead to Crater Lake. I wasn't sure if the Pacific Crest Trail would be hikable but I was going to try. Without a mail drop, because I wasn't sure where I was actually going.

I had to get away from people. I had to get away from myself, but that didn't seem possible.

Chapter 23

It had been snowing since before the owner of the Ashland Hostel dropped me off on Dead Indian Road. She felt weird about dropping me off in the middle of nowhere and told me to call when I was safe. But there was no cell signal up there in the High Cascades. Either because of the storm or because of how remote it was.

I'd hiked the short section of the PCT from Dead Indian Road to South Brown Mountain Shelter, getting there just before noon. Taking a three-hour nap, feeling like I'd run out of money, options and energy.

Though there was a wood stove in the cabin I hadn't planned on starting a fire. Leave the firewood for a real emergency, I thought. But it was cold enough when I woke up at 3pm that I split up some kindling and set aside a few logs to make it through the night. Four logs total, including the kindling.

Man, it was cold. Dinner or a fire?

This was supposed to be my never-ending summer, instead, it was the winter I couldn't seem to escape. The coldest winter in Las Vegas in decades, frozen water bottles and toes in southern California, and now snow, in late April.

In trying to figure out how to escape this never-ending cold I realized that I was always trying to go somewhere else. Not picking a place to be, a place to stay. I was always running from something, but was it the cold?

I could have made a home in Las Vegas, I could have stayed in Rhode Island after the housesitting, I could have found a place in Idyllwild, Big Bear Lake or Wrightwood. All of those towns were hiring for the tourist season. I had planned on staying in Ashland, but my running had run down my funds. My deepening depression the last few weeks had put a huge dent in my budget. Now I couldn't afford to stay. Not in town like I'd planned, and well, out here it was snowing.

I was trapped. And all my running had led me here. To the end of the line.

There were no more options. I couldn't even leave the mountain if I wanted to, I was snowed in.

South Brown Mountain Shelter was my version of Chris McCandless and his Magic Bus, I thought to myself. Another wandering hiker who had died in an old Fairbanks City Transit System Bus abandoned on the Stampede Trail in Alaska. Nobody would write a book about me though, I would be forgotten the moment they hauled my rotting corpse off the mountain.

Except that I didn't plan on dying.

No matter how tempting it would be to sleep forever.

I could stay in the South Brown Shelter until someone kicked me out or I ran out of food. Easily another four or five days before anyone would likely come up, maybe a little less before I ran out of food. I wasn't planning on burning any wood beyond what I did the first night. It was cold, but not so cold that warm clothes and my sleeping bag couldn't handle it. And that's where I seemed to spend most of my time anyway. I'd lay in my sleeping bag for hours, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about my life, my mistakes, wondering what I was running from.

There was nowhere else to run. If I couldn't go back then I had to face whatever this demon was that wouldn't let me rest.

The sun felt warmer over the next couple of days. I'd sit outside, getting ready to melt more snow despite having a liter of snowmelt on reserve. I filtered that through my blaze orange Hike for Mental Health bandana, still stained from the bloody nose in Los Angeles, into the 1-liter platypus to remove random debris. The water tasted like you'd think a dirty snowball melted in an old aluminum coffee pot would taste.

If I hiked away from the shelter, up the snow mounds and back towards the road and held my cell phone above my head, I could get a weak signal if the weather was clear. I called the Ashland Hostel so that they wouldn't send out a search party. I was still alive I assured them. Then back to airplane mode and the cabin.

Locals had hiked in through the snow just before 2pm to drop off some paperbacks. "Go ahead, use the wood," the wife told me. "They stock it up in the fall."

"Yeah, usually the whole back wall is stacked with wood. Won't be much use for the rest of the season," the husband told me. "Besides, it's supposed to snow tonight into tomorrow." Oh great, I thought. "But from here north down to 140 and Fish Lake usually has far less snow, on the trail," he said.

And then, somewhere in the middle of eating my dinner of mashed potatoes made with melted snow filtered through a dirty handkerchief, I realized that I was happy. I was out of money, homeless, and stuck in a snow-covered forest with no place else to go. I had hit rock bottom. The day before all I could picture doing with the rest of my life was drinking every day until I was dead.

No one was going to save me.

Nobody cared.

I was no different than anyone else on the planet. I wasn't special or handsome or smart like my mom had always told me. No matter how much I had come to realize over the years that I despised people who thought they were special, secretly, deep down, I believed that about myself.

My Facebook and Instagram posts, my zines and media stunts long before that, every adventure I'd ever gone on, all saying, "Look at me!"

And then gradually I'd quit all of that. There were no friends interested in what I was doing. To them, I was a loser. A homeless drifter. No job, no money, no home. I'd never had much feedback or guidance in life, and once I'd stopped using social media my lack of purpose became more pronounced. My life was empty and meaningless.

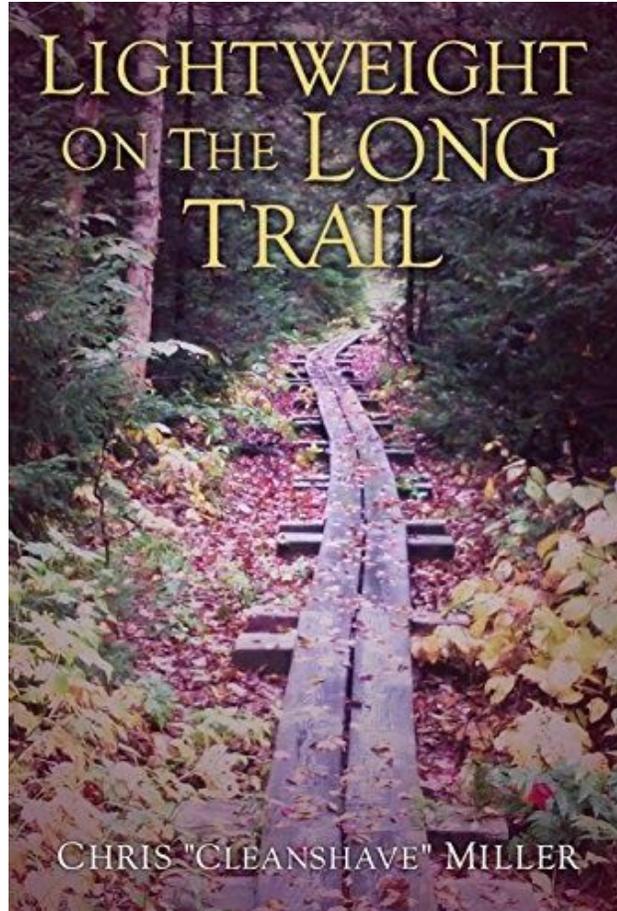
What I saw, staring at the ceiling of the cabin from my sleeping bag, was that there was no more show. Admitting that I was not a beautiful and unique snowflake freed me from that emptiness. I didn't have to do anything or impress anyone. Whatever I was going to do was what I was going to do, and that would be just fine.

It only had to matter to me.

The realization was a weight off my shoulders. I was free to soar to new heights or fail miserably, and neither one was wrong or right. Que Sera, Sera. Whatever will be will be.

I was so lucky to have nothing.

Also Available

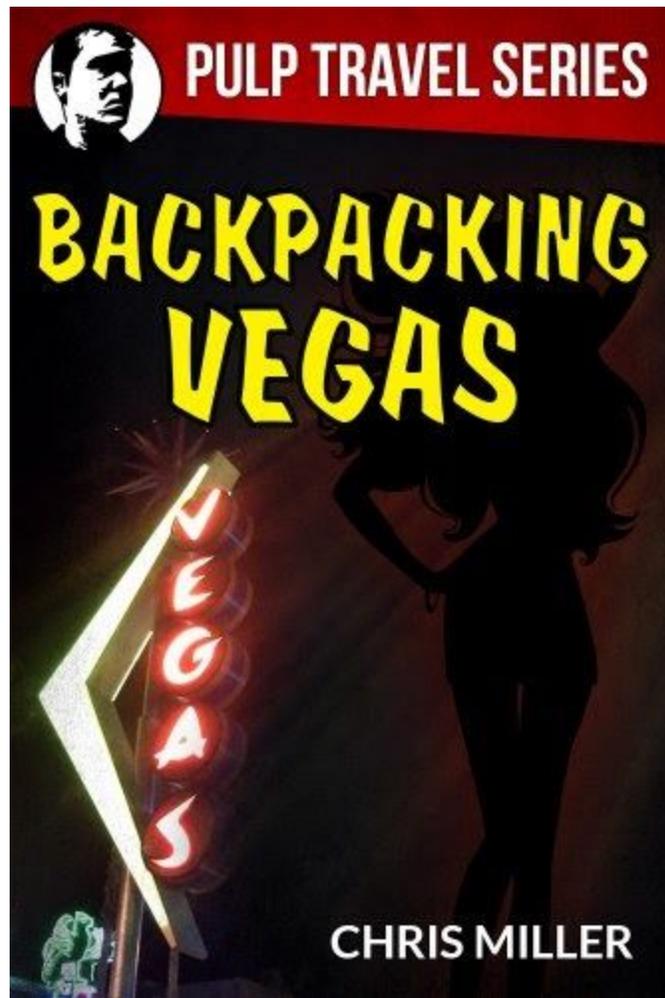


What would you do if you had just given up your apartment and donated all of your belongings to charity? For Chris "Cleanshave" Miller the answer was simple: *Go Hiking!*

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About the Author



Chris "Cleanshave" Miller is an avid hiker and low budget traveler. He has bicycle toured the East Coast Greenway to raise money for Meals on Wheels, jumped off the Stratosphere Hotel in Las Vegas, taken the Polar Bear Plunge in Newport, RI, hiked the Appalachian Trail, Vermont's Long Trail, and the Oregon Coast Trail among many others, and more recently cycled Adventure Cycling's Southern Tier on a fixed-gear bicycle.

He is currently traveling the United States living out of his backpack.

[Check out my Blog: Cleanshave.org](http://Cleanshave.org)

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