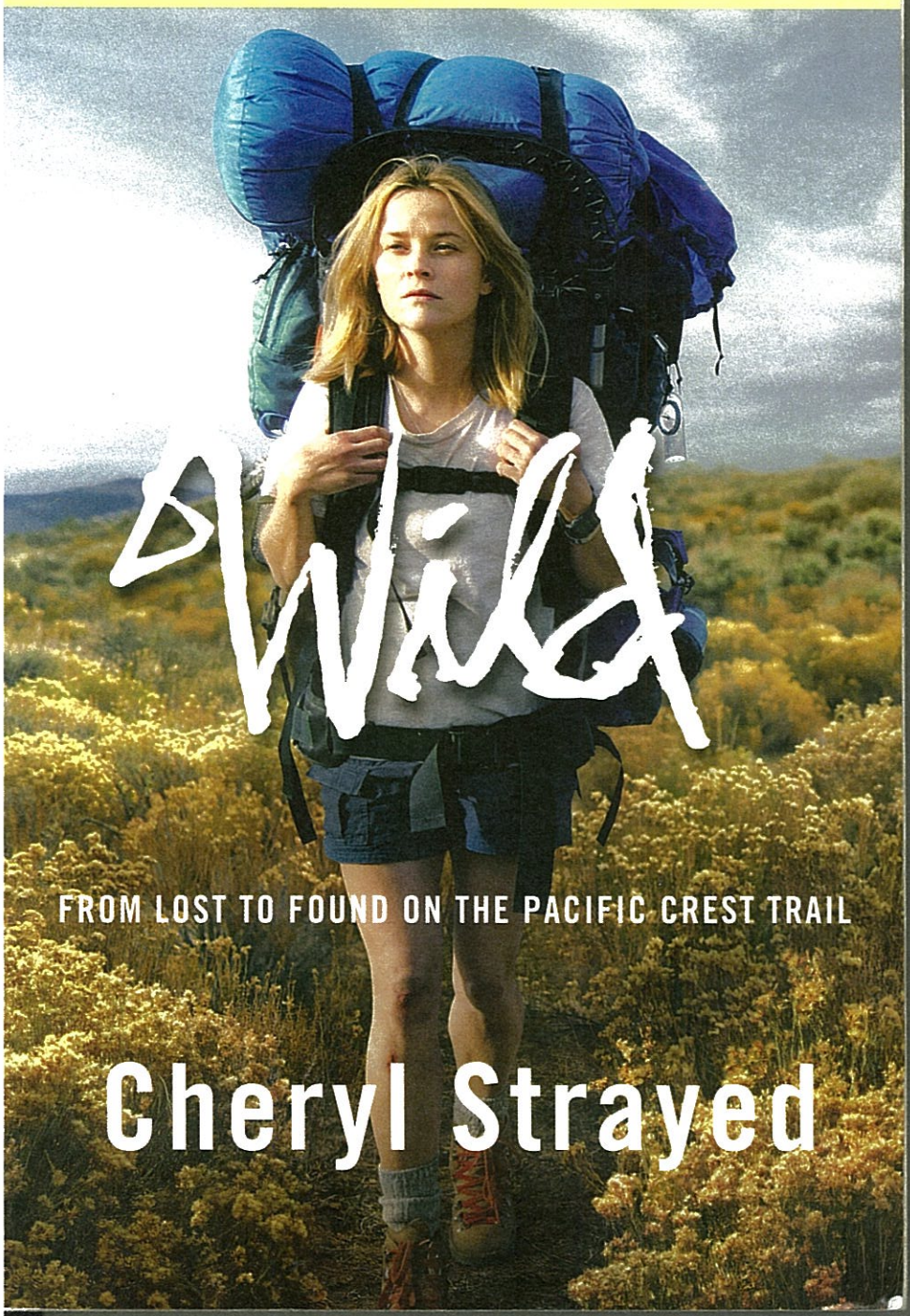
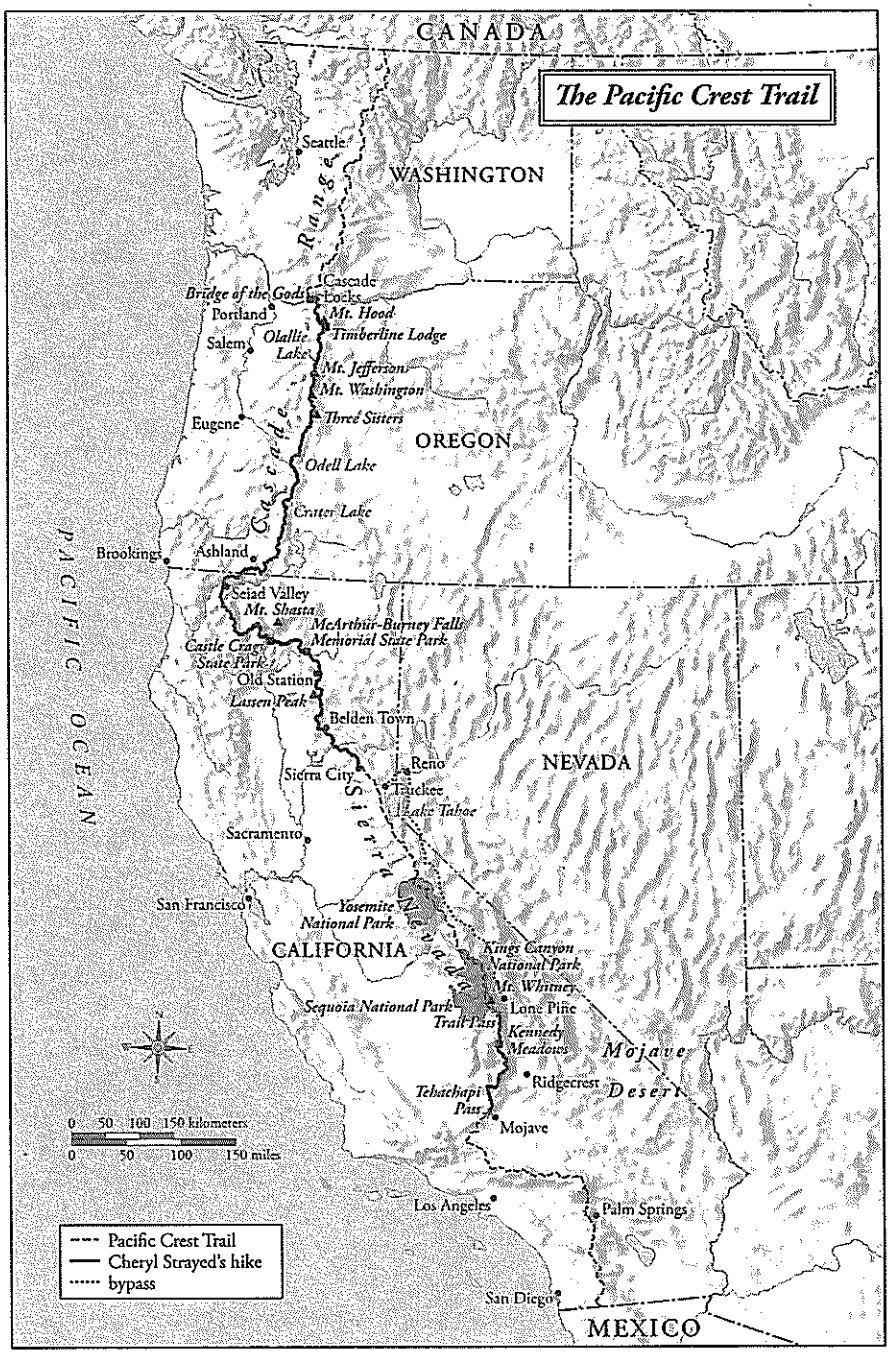
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER
NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE




The Pacific Crest Trail
CANADA
WASHINGTON
OREGON
NEVADA
CALIFORNIA
MEXICO
PACIFIC OCEAN
Cascade Range
Sierra Nevada
Mojave Desert
Seattle
Bridge of the Gods
Cascade Locks
Portland
Mt. Hood
Timberline Lodge
Salem
Olallie Lake
Mt. Jefferson
Mt. Washington
Three Sisters
Eugene
Odell Lake
Crater Lake
Brookings
Ashland
Seiad Valley
Mt. Shasta
McArthur-Burney Falls Memorial State Park
Castle Crags State Park
Old Station
Lassen Peak
Belden Town
Reno
Sierra City
Truckee
Lake Tahoe
Sacramento
San Francisco
Yosemite National Park
Kings Canyon National Park
Mt. Whitney
Sequoia National Park
Lone Pine
Trail Pass
Kennedy Meadows
Ridgecrest
Tehachapi Pass
Mojave
Los Angeles
Palm Springs
San Diego
0 50 100 150 kilometers
0 50 100 150 miles
Pacific Crest Trail
Cheryl Strayed's hike
bypass

PART ONE

THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

The breaking of so great a thing
should make a greater crack.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,
Antony and Cleopatra

PART TWO

TRACKS

The words are purposes.
The words are maps.

ADRIENNE RICH,
"Diving into the Wreck"

Will you take me as I am?
Will you?

JONI MITCHELL,
"California"

PART THREE

RANGE OF LIGHT

We are now in the mountains
and they are in us . . .

JOHN MUIR,
My First Summer in the Sierra

If your Nerve, deny you –
Go above your Nerve –

EMILY DICKINSON

PART FOUR

WILD

When I had no roof I made
Audacity my roof.

ROBERT PINSKY,
"Samurai Song"

Never never never give up.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

PART FIVE

BOX OF RAIN

I'm a slow walker, but I never walk back.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

MARY OLIVER,
"The Summer Day"

BOOKS BURNED ON THE PCT

The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California, Jeffrey P. Schaffer, Thomas Winnett, Ben Schifrin, and Ruby Jenkins. Fourth edition, Wilderness Press, January 1989.

Staying Found: The Complete Map and Compass Handbook, June Fleming.

**The Dream of a Common Language,* Adrienne Rich.

As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner.

***The Complete Stories,* Flannery O'Connor.

The Novel, James Michener.

A Summer Bird-Cage, Margaret Drabble.

Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov.

Dubliners, James Joyce.

Waiting for the Barbarians, J. M. Coetzee.

The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 2: Oregon and Washington, Jeffrey P. Schaffer and Andy Selters. Fifth edition, Wilderness Press, May 1992.

The Best American Essays 1991, edited by Robert Atwan and Joyce Carol Oates.

The Ten Thousand Things, Maria Dermoût.

*Not burned. Carried all the way.
**Not burned. Traded for *The Novel.*

PROLOGUE

The trees were tall, but I was taller, standing above them on a steep mountain slope in northern California. Moments before, I'd removed my hiking boots and the left one had fallen into those trees, first catapulting into the air when my enormous backpack toppled onto it, then skittering across the gravelly trail and flying over the edge. It bounced off of a rocky outcropping several feet beneath me before disappearing into the forest canopy below, impossible to retrieve. I let out a stunned gasp, though I'd been in the wilderness thirty-eight days and by then I'd come to know that anything could happen and that everything would. But that doesn't mean I wasn't shocked when it did.

My boot was gone. Actually gone.

I clutched its mate to my chest like a baby, though of course it was futile. What is one boot without the other boot? It is nothing. It is useless, an orphan forevermore, and I could take no mercy on it. It was a big lug of a thing, of genuine heft, a brown leather Raichle boot with a red lace and silver metal fasts. I lifted it high and threw it with all my might and watched it fall into the lush trees and out of my life.

I was alone. I was barefoot. I was twenty-six years old and an orphan too. *An actual stray,* a stranger had observed a couple of weeks before, when I'd told him my name and explained how very loose I was in the world. My father left my life when I was six. My mother died when I was

twenty-two. In the wake of her death, my stepfather morphed from the person I considered my dad into a man I only occasionally recognized. My two siblings scattered in their grief, in spite of my efforts to hold us together, until I gave up and scattered as well.

In the years before I pitched my boot over the edge of that mountain, I'd been pitching myself over the edge too. I'd ranged and roamed and railed—from Minnesota to New York to Oregon and all across the West—until at last I found myself, bootless, in the summer of 1995, not so much loose in the world as bound to it.

It was a world I'd never been to and yet had known was there all along, one I'd staggered to in sorrow and confusion and fear and hope. A world I thought would both make me into the woman I knew I could become and turn me back into the girl I'd once been. A world that measured two feet wide and 2,663 miles long.

A world called the Pacific Crest Trail.

I'd first heard of it only seven months before, when I was living in Minneapolis, sad and desperate and on the brink of divorcing a man I still loved. I'd been standing in line at an outdoor store waiting to purchase a foldable shovel when I picked up a book called *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* from a nearby shelf and read the back cover. The PCT, it said, was a continuous wilderness trail that went from the Mexican border in California to just beyond the Canadian border along the crest of nine mountain ranges—the Laguna, San Jacinto, San Bernardino, San Gabriel, Liebre, Tehachapi, Sierra Nevada, Klamath, and Cascades. That distance was a thousand miles as the crow flies, but the trail was more than double that. Traversing the entire length of the states of California, Oregon, and Washington, the PCT passes through national parks and wilderness areas as well as federal, tribal, and privately held lands; through deserts and mountains and rain forests; across rivers and highways. I turned the book over and gazed at its front cover—a boulder-strewn lake surrounded by rocky crags against a blue sky—then placed it back on the shelf, paid for my shovel, and left.

But later I returned and bought the book. The Pacific Crest Trail wasn't a world to me then. It was an idea, vague and outlandish, full of promise and mystery. Something bloomed inside me as I traced its jagged line with my finger on a map.

I would walk that line, I decided—or at least as much of it as I could in about a hundred days. I was living alone in a studio apartment in

Minneapolis, separated from my husband, and working as a waitress, as low and mixed-up as I'd ever been in my life. Each day I felt as if I were looking up from the bottom of a deep well. But from that well, I set about becoming a solo wilderness trekker. And why not? I'd been so many things already. A loving wife and an adulteress. A beloved daughter who now spent holidays alone. An ambitious overachiever and aspiring writer who hopped from one meaningless job to the next while dabbling dangerously with drugs and sleeping with too many men. I was the granddaughter of a Pennsylvania coal miner, the daughter of a steelworker turned salesman. After my parents split up, I lived with my mother, brother, and sister in apartment complexes populated by single mothers and their kids. As a teen, I lived back-to-the-land style in the Minnesota northwoods in a house that didn't have an indoor toilet, electricity, or running water. In spite of this, I'd become a high school cheerleader and homecoming queen, and then I went off to college and became a left-wing feminist campus radical.

But a woman who walks alone in the wilderness for eleven hundred miles? I'd never been anything like that before. I had nothing to lose by giving it a whirl.

It seemed like years ago now—as I stood barefoot on that mountain in California—in a different lifetime, really, when I'd made the arguably unreasonable decision to take a long walk alone on the PCT in order to save myself. When I believed that all the things I'd been before had prepared me for this journey. But nothing had or could. Each day on the trail was the only possible preparation for the one that followed. And sometimes even the day before didn't prepare me for what would happen next.

Such as my boots sailing irretrievably off the side of a mountain.

The truth is, I was only half sorry to see them go. In the six weeks I'd spent in those boots, I'd trekked across deserts and snow, past trees and bushes and grasses and flowers of all shapes and sizes and colors, walked up and down mountains and over fields and glades and stretches of land I couldn't possibly define, except to say that I had been there, passed over it, made it through. And all the while, those boots had blistered my feet and rubbed them raw; they'd caused my nails to blacken and detach themselves excruciatingly from four of my toes. I was done with those boots by the time I lost them and those boots were done with me, though it's also true that I loved them. They had become not so

much inanimate objects to me as extensions of who I was, as had just about everything else I carried that summer—my backpack, tent, sleeping bag, water purifier, ultralight stove, and the little orange whistle that I carried in lieu of a gun. They were the things I knew and could rely upon, the things that got me through.

I looked down at the trees below me, the tall tops of them waving gently in the hot breeze. They could keep my boots, I thought, gazing across the great green expanse. I'd chosen to rest in this place because of the view. It was late afternoon in mid-July, and I was miles from civilization in every direction, days away from the lonely post office where I'd collect my next resupply box. There was a chance someone would come hiking down the trail, but only rarely did that happen. Usually I went days without seeing another person. It didn't matter whether someone came along anyway. I was in this alone.

I gazed at my bare and battered feet, with their smattering of remaining toenails. They were ghostly pale to the line a few inches above my ankles, where the wool socks I usually wore ended. My calves above them were muscled and golden and hairy, dusted with dirt and a constellation of bruises and scratches. I'd started walking in the Mojave Desert and I didn't plan to stop until I touched my hand to a bridge that crosses the Columbia River at the Oregon-Washington border with the grandiose name the Bridge of the Gods.

I looked north, in its direction—the very thought of that bridge a beacon to me. I looked south, to where I'd been, to the wild land that had schooled and scorched me, and considered my options. There was only one, I knew. There was always only one.

To keep walking.

My mother looked down at me and didn't say a word for several moments.

"Honey," she said eventually, gazing at me, her hand reaching to stroke the top of my head. It was a word she used often throughout my childhood, delivered in a highly specific tone. This is not the way I wanted it to be, that single *honey* said, but it was the way it was. It was this very acceptance of suffering that annoyed me most about my mom, her unending optimism and cheer.

"Let's go," I said after I'd wrestled her shoes on.

Her movements were slow and thick as she put on her coat. She held on to the walls as she made her way through the house, her two beloved dogs following her as she went, pushing their noses into her hands and thighs. I watched the way she patted their heads. I didn't have a prayer anymore. The words *fuck them* were two dry pills in my mouth.

"Bye, darlings," she said to the dogs. "Bye, house," she said as she followed me out the door.

It hadn't occurred to me that my mother would die. Until she was dying, the thought had never entered my mind. She was monolithic and insurmountable, the keeper of my life. She would grow old and still work in the garden. This image was fixed in my mind, like one of the memories from her childhood that I'd made her explain so intricately that I remembered it as if it were mine. She would be old and beautiful like the black-and-white photo of Georgia O'Keeffe I'd once sent her. I held fast to this image for the first couple of weeks after we left the Mayo Clinic, and then, once she was admitted to the hospice wing of the hospital in Duluth, that image unfurled, gave way to others, more modest and true. I imagined my mother in October; I wrote the scene in my mind. And then the one of my mother in August and another in May. Each day that passed, another month peeled away.

On her first day in the hospital, a nurse offered my mother morphine, but she refused. "Morphine is what they give to dying people," she said. "Morphine means there's no hope."

But she held out against it for only one day. She slept and woke, talked and laughed. She cried from the pain. I camped out during the days with her and Eddie took the nights. Leif and Karen stayed away, making excuses that I found inexplicable and infuriating, though their absence

didn't seem to bother my mom. She was preoccupied with nothing but eradicating her pain, an impossible task in the spaces of time between the doses of morphine. We could never get the pillows right. One afternoon, a doctor I'd never seen came into the room and explained that my mother was *actively dying.*

"But it's only been a month," I said indignantly. "The other doctor told us a year."

He made no reply. He was young, perhaps thirty. He stood next to my mother, a gentle hairy hand slung into his pocket, looking down at her in the bed. "From this point on, our only concern is that she's comfortable."

Comfortable, and yet the nurses tried to give her as little morphine as they could. One of the nurses was a man, and I could see the outline of his penis through his tight white nurse's trousers. I wanted desperately to pull him into the small bathroom beyond the foot of my mother's bed and offer myself up to him, to do anything at all if he would help us. And also I wanted to take pleasure from him, to feel the weight of his body against me, to feel his mouth in my hair and hear him say my name to me over and over again, to force him to acknowledge me, to make this matter to him, to crush his heart with mercy for us.

When my mother asked him for more morphine, she asked for it in a way that I have never heard anyone ask for anything. A mad dog. He did not look at her when she asked him this, but at his wristwatch. He held the same expression on his face regardless of the answer. Sometimes he gave it to her without a word, and sometimes he told her no in a voice as soft as his penis in his pants. My mother begged and whimpered then. She cried and her tears fell in the wrong direction. Not down over the light of her cheeks to the corners of her mouth, but away from the edges of her eyes to her ears and into the nest of her hair on the bed.

She didn't live a year. She didn't live to October or August or May. She lived forty-nine days after the first doctor in Duluth told her she had cancer; thirty-four after the one at the Mayo Clinic did. But each day was an eternity, one stacked up on the other, a cold clarity inside of a deep haze.

Leif didn't come to visit her. Karen came once after I'd insisted she must. I was in heartbroken and enraged disbelief. "I don't like seeing her

this way," my sister would offer weakly when we spoke, and then burst into tears. I couldn't speak to my brother—where he was during those weeks was a mystery to Eddie and me. One friend told us he was staying with a girl named Sue in St. Cloud. Another spotted him ice fishing on Sheriff Lake. I didn't have time to do much about it, consumed as I was each day at my mother's side, holding plastic pans for her to retch into, adjusting the impossible pillows again and again, hoisting her up and onto the potty chair the nurses had propped near her bed, cajoling her to eat a bite of food that she'd vomit up ten minutes later. Mostly, I watched her sleep, the hardest task of all, to see her in repose, her face still pinched with pain. Each time she moved, the IV tubes that dangled all around her swayed and my heart raced, afraid she'd disturb the needles that attached the tubes to her swollen wrists and hands.

"How are you feeling?" I'd coo hopefully when she woke, reaching through the tubes to smooth her flattened hair into place.

"Oh, honey," was all she could say most times. And then she'd look away.

I roamed the hospital hallways while my mother slept, my eyes darting into other people's rooms as I passed their open doors, catching glimpses of old men with bad coughs and purpled flesh, women with bandages around their fat knees.

"How are you doing?" the nurses would ask me in melancholy tones.

"We're holding up," I'd say, as if I were a we.

But it was just me. My husband, Paul, did everything he could to make me feel less alone. He was still the kind and tender man I'd fallen for a few years before, the one I'd loved so fiercely I'd shocked everyone by marrying just shy of twenty, but once my mother started dying, something inside of me was dead to Paul, no matter what he did or said. Still, I called him each day from the pay phone in the hospital during the long afternoons, or back at my mom and Eddie's house in the evenings. We'd have long conversations during which I'd weep and tell him everything and he would cry with me and try to make it all just a tiny bit more okay, but his words rang hollow. It was almost as if I couldn't hear them at all. What did he know about losing anything? His parents were still alive and happily married to each other. My connection with him and his gloriously unfractured life only seemed to increase my pain. It wasn't his fault. Being with him felt unbearable, but being with anyone else did

too. The only person I could bear to be with was the most unbearable person of all: my mother.

In the mornings, I would sit near her bed and try to read to her. I had two books: *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, and *The Optimist's Daughter*, by Eudora Welty. These were books we'd read in college, books we loved. So I started in, but I could not go on. Each word I spoke erased itself in the air.

It was the same when I tried to pray. I prayed fervently, rabidly, to God, any god, to a god I could not identify or find. I cursed my mother, who'd not given me any religious education. Resentful of her own repressive Catholic upbringing, she'd avoided church altogether in her adult life, and now she was dying and I didn't even have God. I prayed to the whole wide universe and hoped that God would be in it, listening to me. I prayed and prayed, and then I faltered. Not because I couldn't find God, but because suddenly I absolutely did: God was there, I realized, and God had no intention of making things happen or not, of saving my mother's life. God was not a granter of wishes. God was a ruthless bitch.

The last couple of days of her life, my mother was not so much high as down under. She was on a morphine drip by then, a clear bag of liquid flowing slowly down a tube that was taped to her wrist. When she woke, she'd say, "Oh, oh." Or she'd let out a sad gulp of air. She'd look at me, and there would be a flash of love. Other times she'd roll back into sleep as if I were not there. Sometimes when my mother woke she did not know where she was. She demanded an enchilada and then some applesauce. She believed that all the animals she'd ever loved were in the room with her—and there had been a lot. She'd say, "That horse darn near stepped on me," and look around for it accusingly, or her hands would move to stroke an invisible cat that lay at her hip. During this time I wanted my mother to say to me that I had been the best daughter in the world. I did not want to want this, but I did, inexplicably, as if I had a great fever that could be cooled only by those words. I went so far as to ask her directly, "Have I been the best daughter in the world?"

She said yes, I had, of course.

But this was not enough. I wanted those words to knit together in my mother's mind and for them to be delivered, fresh, to me.

I was ravenous for love.

3

HUNCHING IN A REMOTELY UPRIGHT POSITION

When I woke the next morning in my room at White's Motel, I showered and stood naked in front of the mirror, watching myself solemnly brush my teeth. I tried to feel something like excitement but came up only with a morose unease. Every now and then I could see myself—truly see myself—and a sentence would come to me, thundering like a god into my head, and as I saw myself then in front of that tarnished mirror what came was *the woman with the hole in her heart.* That was me. That was why I'd longed for a companion the night before. That was why I was here, naked in a motel, with this preposterous idea of hiking alone for three months on the PCT. I set my toothbrush down, then leaned into the mirror and stared into my own eyes. I could feel myself disintegrating inside myself like a past-bloom flower in the wind. Every time I moved a muscle, another petal of me blew away. *Please,* I thought. *Please.*

I went to the bed and looked at my hiking outfit. I'd laid it out carefully on the bed before I'd gotten into the shower, the way my mom had done for me when I was a child on the first day of school. When I put on my bra and T-shirt, the tiny scabs that still rimmed my new tattoo caught on the shirt's sleeve and I delicately picked at them. It was my only tattoo—a blue horse on my left deltoid. Paul had one to match. We'd had them done together in honor of our divorce, which had

become final only the month before. We weren't married anymore, but the tattoos seemed proof to us of our everlasting bond.

I wanted to call Paul even more desperately than I had the previous night, but I couldn't let myself. He knew me too well. He'd hear the sorrow and hesitation in my voice and discern that it was not only that I felt anxious about beginning on the PCT. He'd sense that I had something to tell.

I put my socks on and laced up my boots, went to the window, and pushed the curtain back. The sun was blinding against the white stones of the parking lot. There was a gas station across the way—a good place to hitch a ride to the PCT, I supposed. When I let go of the curtain, the room went dark again. I liked it that way, like a safe cocoon that I'd never have to leave, though I knew I was wrong. It was nine in the morning and already hot outside, the vented white box in the corner come alive with its breezy roar. In spite of everything that implied I was going nowhere, I had someplace to be: it was day 1 on the PCT.

I opened the compartments of my pack and pulled everything out, tossing each item onto the bed. I lifted the plastic bags and emptied them too, then stared at the pile of things. It was everything I had to carry for the next three months.

There was a blue compression sack that held the clothes I wasn't already wearing—a pair of fleece pants, a long-sleeved thermal shirt, a thick fleece anorak with a hood, two pair of wool socks and two pair of underwear, a thin pair of gloves, a sun hat, a fleece hat, and rain pants—and another, sturdier sack called a dry bag, packed to the gills with all the food I'd need over the next fourteen days, before I reached my first resupply stop at a place called Kennedy Meadows. There was a sleeping bag and a camp chair that could be unclipped to use as a sleeping pad and a headlamp like the kind miners wear and five bungee cords. There was a water purifier and a tiny collapsible stove, a tall aluminum canister of gas, and a little pink lighter. There was a small cooking pot nested inside a larger cooking pot and utensils that folded in half and a cheap pair of sports sandals I intended to wear in camp at the end of each day. There was a quick-dry pack towel, a thermometer keychain, a tarp, and an insulated plastic mug with a handle. There was a snakebite kit and a Swiss army knife, a miniature pair of binoculars in a fake leather zip-up case and a coil of fluorescent-colored rope, a compass I hadn't yet learned how to use and a book that would teach me how to use the compass

called *Staying Found* that I had intended to read on the plane to LA, but hadn't. There was a first aid kit in a pristine red canvas case that snapped shut and a roll of toilet paper in a ziplock bag and a stainless-steel trowel that had its own black sheath that said U-Dig-It on the front. There was a small bag of toiletries and personal items I thought I'd need along the way—shampoo and conditioner, soap and lotion and deodorant, nail clippers and insect repellent and sunscreen, a hairbrush and a natural menstrual sponge, and a tube of waterproof sunblock lip balm. There was a flashlight and a metal candle lantern with a votive candle inside and an extra candle and a foldable saw—for what, I did not know—and a green nylon bag with my tent inside. There were two 32-ounce plastic water bottles and a dromedary bag capable of holding 2.6 gallons of water and a nylon fist that unfurled into a rain cover for my backpack and a Gore-Tex ball that opened up to become my raincoat. There were things I brought in case the other things I brought failed—extra batteries, a box of waterproof matches, a Mylar blanket, and a bottle of iodine pills. There were two pens and three books in addition to *Staying Found: The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* (the very guidebook that had set me off on this journey, written by a quartet of authors who spoke in one calm but stern voice about the rigors and rewards of the trail), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying,* and Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language.* There was an eight-by-eleven two-hundred-page hardback sketchbook that I used as a journal and a ziplock bag with my driver's license inside and a small wad of cash, a sheaf of postage stamps, and a tiny spiral notebook with the addresses of friends scrawled on a few pages. There was a full-sized, professional-quality 35-millimeter Minolta X-700 camera with a separate attachable zoom lens and another separate attachable flash and a tiny collapsible tripod, all of which was packed inside a padded camera case the size of a football.

Not that I was a photographer.

I'd gone to an outdoor store in Minneapolis called REI about a dozen times over the previous months to purchase a good portion of these items. Seldom was this a straightforward affair. To buy even a water bottle without first thoroughly considering the latest water bottle technology was folly, I quickly learned. There were the pros and cons of various materials to take into account, not to mention the research that had been done regarding design. And this was only the smallest, least complex of the purchases I had to make. The rest of the gear I would need was

ever more complex, I realized after consulting with the men and women of REI, who inquired hopefully if they could help me whenever they spotted me before displays of ultralight stoves or strolling among the tents. These employees ranged in age and manner and area of wilderness adventure proclivity, but what they had in common was that every last one of them could talk about gear, with interest and nuance, for a length of time that was so dumbfounding that I was ultimately bedazzled by it. They *cared* if my sleeping bag had snag-free zipper guards and a face muff that allowed the hood to be cinched snug without obstructing my breathing. They took *pleasure* in the fact that my water purifier had a pleated glass-fiber element for increased surface area. And their knowledge had a way of rubbing off on me. By the time I made the decision about which backpack to purchase—a top-of-the-line Gregory hybrid external frame that claimed to have the balance and agility of an internal—I felt as if I'd become a backpacking expert.

It was only as I stood gazing at that pile of meticulously chosen gear on the bed in my Mojave motel room that I knew with profound humility that I was not.

I worked my way through the mountain of things, wedging and cramming and forcing them into every available space of my pack until nothing more could possibly fit. I had planned to use the bungee cords to attach my food bag, tent, tarp, clothing sack, and camp chair that doubled as a sleeping pad to the outside of my pack—in the places on the external frame meant for that purpose—but now it was apparent that there were other things that would have to go on the outside too. I pulled the bungee cords around all the things I'd planned to and then looped a few extra things through them as well: the straps of my sandals and the camera case and the handles of the insulated mug and the candle lantern. I clipped the metal trowel in its U-Dig-It sheath to my backpack's belt and attached the keychain that was a thermometer to one of my pack's zippers.

When I was done, I sat on the floor, sweaty from my exertions, and stared peaceably at my pack. And then I remembered one last thing: water.

I'd chosen to begin my hike where I had simply because from there I estimated it would take me about a hundred days to walk to Ashland, Oregon—the place I'd originally planned to end my hike because I'd heard good things about the town and thought I might like to stay there

to live. Months ago, I'd traced my finger southward down the map, adding up the miles and the days, and stopped at Tehachapi Pass, where the PCT crosses Highway 58 in the northwest corner of the Mojave Desert, not far from the town of Mojave. What I hadn't realized until a couple of weeks before was that I was beginning my hike on one of the driest sections of the trail, a section where even the fastest, fittest, and most seasoned hikers couldn't always get from one water source to another each day. For me, it would be impossible. It would take me two days to reach the first water source seventeen miles into my hike, I guessed, so I would have to carry enough to get me through.

I filled my 32-ounce bottles in the bathroom sink and put them in my pack's mesh side pockets. I dug out my dromedary bag from the place I'd crammed it in my pack's main compartment and filled up all 2.6 gallons of it. Water, I later learned, weighs 8.3 pounds a gallon. I don't know how much my pack weighed on that first day, but I do know the water alone was 24.5 pounds. And it was an unwieldy 24.5 pounds. The dromedary bag was like a giant flattish water balloon, sloshing and buckling and slipping out of my hands and flipping itself onto the floor as I attempted to secure it to my pack. The bag was rimmed with webbing straps; with great effort I wove the bungee cords through them, next to the camera bag and sandals and the insulated cup and candle lantern, until I grew so frustrated that I pulled out the insulated cup and threw it across the room.

Finally, when everything I was going to carry was in the place that I needed to carry it, a hush came over me. I was ready to begin. I put on my watch, looped my sunglasses around my neck by their pink neoprene holder, donned my hat, and looked at my pack. It was at once enormous and compact, mildly adorable and intimidatingly self-contained. It had an animate quality; in its company, I didn't feel entirely alone. Standing, it came up to my waist. I gripped it and bent to lift it.

It wouldn't budge.

I squatted and grasped its frame more robustly and tried to lift it again. Again it did not move. Not even an inch. I tried to lift it with both hands, with my legs braced beneath me, while attempting to wrap it in a bear hug, with all of my breath and my might and my will, with everything in me. And still it would not come. It was exactly like attempting to lift a Volkswagen Beetle. It looked so cute, so *ready* to be lifted—and yet it was impossible to do.

I sat down on the floor beside it and pondered my situation. How could I carry a backpack more than a thousand miles over rugged mountains and waterless deserts if I couldn't even budge it an inch in an air-conditioned motel room? The notion was preposterous and yet I *had* to lift that pack. It hadn't occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to. I'd simply thought that if I added up all the things I needed in order to go backpacking, it would equal a weight that I could carry. The people at REI, it was true, had mentioned weight rather often in their soliloquies, but I hadn't paid much attention. It seemed there had been more important questions to consider. Like whether a face muff allowed the hood to be cinched snug without obstructing my breathing.

I thought about what I might take out of my pack, but each item struck me as either so obviously needed or so in-case-of-emergency necessary that I didn't dare remove it. I would have to try to carry the pack as it was.

I scooted over the carpet and situated myself on my rump right in front of my pack, wove my arms through the shoulder straps, and clipped the sternum strap across my chest. I took a deep breath and began rocking back and forth to gain momentum, until finally I hurled myself forward with everything in me and got myself onto my hands and knees. My backpack was no longer on the floor. It was officially attached to me. It still seemed like a Volkswagen Beetle, only now it seemed like a Volkswagen Beetle that was parked on my back. I stayed there for a few moments, trying to get my balance. Slowly, I worked my feet beneath me while simultaneously scaling the metal cooling unit with my hands until I was vertical enough that I could do a dead lift. The frame of the pack squeaked as I rose, it too straining from the tremendous weight. By the time I was standing—which is to say, hunching in a remotely upright position—I was holding the vented metal panel that I'd accidentally ripped loose from the cooling unit in my efforts.

I couldn't even begin to reattach it. The place it needed to go was only inches out of my reach, but those inches were entirely out of the question. I propped the panel against the wall, buckled my hip belt, and staggered and swayed around the room, my center of gravity pulled in any direction I so much as leaned. The weight dug painfully into the tops of my shoulders, so I cinched my hip belt tighter and tighter still, trying to balance the burden, squeezing my middle so tightly that my flesh ballooned out on either side. My pack rose up like a mantle behind

me, towering several inches above my head, and gripped me like a vise all the way down to my tailbone. It felt pretty awful, and yet perhaps this was how it felt to be a backpacker.

I didn't know.

I only knew that it was time to go, so I opened the door and stepped into the light.

4

THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, VOLUME 1: CALIFORNIA

I'd done a lot of dumb and dangerous things in my life, but soliciting a ride with a stranger was not yet one of them. Horrible things happened to hitchhikers, I knew, especially to women hitchhiking alone. They were raped and decapitated. Tortured and left for dead. But as I made my way from White's Motel to the nearby gas station, I could not allow such thoughts to distract me. Unless I wanted to walk twelve miles along the broiling shoulder of the highway to reach the trail, I needed a ride.

Plus, hitchhiking was simply what PCT hikers *did* on occasion. And I was a PCT hiker, right? *Right?*

Right.

The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California had explained the process with its usual equanimity. On some occasions the PCT would cross a road and miles down that road would be the post office where one would have mailed the box of food and supplies needed on the next section of the trail. Hitchhiking was the only practical solution when it came to fetching those boxes and returning to the trail.

I stood near the soda machines up against the gas station building, watching people come and go, trying to work up the nerve to approach one of them, hoping I'd sense that I was safe from harm when I saw the right person. I watched old desert-grizzled men in cowboy hats and families whose cars were full already and teenagers who pulled up with

music blasting out their open windows. Nobody in particular looked like a murderer or rapist, but nobody in particular didn't look like one either. I bought a can of Coke and drank it with a casual air that belied the fact that I could not stand up properly because of the unbelievable weight on my back. Finally, I had to make a move. It was nearly eleven, pitching steadily into the heat of a June day in the desert.

A minivan with Colorado plates pulled up and two men got out. One man was about my age, the other looked to be in his fifties. I approached them and asked for a ride. They hesitated and glanced at each other, their expressions making it apparent that they were united in their silent search for a reason to say no, so I kept talking, explaining in quick bursts about the PCT.

"Sure," the older one said finally, with obvious reluctance.

"Thank you," I trilled girlishly. When I hobbled toward the big door on the side of the van, the younger man rolled it open for me. I gazed inside, realizing suddenly that I had no idea how to get in. I couldn't even attempt to step up into it with my pack on. I'd have to take my pack off, and yet how? If I undid the buckles that held the backpack's straps around my waist and over my shoulders, there would be no way that I could keep it from falling so violently away from me that it might rip my arms off.

"You need a hand?" the young man asked.

"No. I've got it," I said in a falsely unruffled tone. The only thing I could think to do was turn my back to the van and squat to sit on the doorframe while clutching the edge of the sliding door, letting my pack rest on the floor behind me. It was bliss. I unclipped my pack's straps and carefully extricated myself without tipping my pack over and then turned to climb inside the van to sit beside it.

The men were friendlier to me once we were on our way, driving west through an arid landscape of parched-looking bushes and pale mountains stretching off into the distance. They were a father and son from a suburb of Denver, on their way to a graduation ceremony in San Luis Obispo. Before long, a sign announcing Tehachapi Pass appeared and the older man slowed the van and pulled to the side of the road. The younger man got out and slid the big door open for me. I'd hoped to put my pack on the same way I'd taken it off, aided by the height of the van's floor as I squatted in the doorway, but before I could step out, the man pulled out my pack and dropped it heavily in the gravelly dirt by

the side of the road. It fell so hard I feared my dromedary bag would burst. I climbed out after it and pulled it back to standing position and dusted it off.

"Are you sure you can lift that?" he asked. "'Cause *I* barely can."

"Of course I can lift it," I said.

He stood there, as if waiting for me to prove it.

"Thanks for the ride," I said, wanting him to leave, so he wouldn't be witness to my humiliating pack-donning routine.

He nodded and slid the van's door shut. "Be safe out there."

"I will," I said, and watched him get back in the van.

I stood by the silent highway after they drove away. Small clouds of dust blew in swirling gusts beneath the glaring noon sun. I was at an elevation of nearly 3,800 feet, surrounded in all directions by beige, barren-looking mountains dotted with clusters of sagebrush, Joshua trees, and waist-high chaparral. I was standing at the western edge of the Mojave Desert and at the southern foot of the Sierra Nevada, the vast mountain range that stretched north for more than four hundred miles to Lassen Volcanic National Park, where it connected with the Cascade Range, which extended from northern California all the way through Oregon and Washington and beyond the Canadian border. Those two mountain ranges would be my world for the next three months; their crest, my home. On a fence post beyond the ditch I spied a palm-sized metal blaze that said PACIFIC CREST TRAIL.

I was here. I could begin at last.

It occurred to me that now would be the perfect time to take a photograph, but to unpack the camera would entail such a series of gear and bungee cord removals that I didn't even want to attempt it. Plus, in order to get myself in the picture, I'd have to find something to prop the camera on so I could set its timer and get into place before it took the shot, and nothing around me looked too promising. Even the fence post that the PCT blaze was attached to seemed too desiccated and frail. Instead, I sat down in the dirt in front of my pack, the same way I'd done in the motel room, wrested it onto my shoulders, and then hurled myself onto my hands and knees and did my dead lift to stand.

Elated, nervous, hunching in a remotely upright position, I buckled and cinched my pack and staggered the first steps down the trail to a brown metal box that was tacked to another fence post. When I lifted the lid, I saw a notebook and pen inside. It was the trail register, which

I'd read about in my guidebook. I wrote my name and the date and read the names and notes from the hikers who'd passed through in the weeks ahead of me, most of them men traveling in pairs, not one of them a woman alone. I lingered a bit longer, feeling a swell of emotion over the occasion, and then I realized there was nothing to do but go, so I did.

The trail headed east, paralleling the highway for a while, dipping down into rocky washes and back up again. *I'm hiking!* I thought. And then, *I am hiking on the Pacific Crest Trail.* It was this very act, of hiking, that had been at the heart of my belief that such a trip was a reasonable endeavor. What is hiking but walking, after all? *I can walk!* I'd argued when Paul had expressed his concern about my never actually having gone backpacking. I walked all the time. I walked for hours on end in my work as a waitress. I walked around the cities I lived in and visited. I walked for pleasure and purpose. All of these things were true. But after about fifteen minutes of walking on the PCT, it was clear that I had never walked into desert mountains in early June with a pack that weighed significantly more than half of what I did strapped onto my back.

Which, it turns out, is not very much like walking at all. Which, in fact, resembles walking less than it does hell.

I began panting and sweating immediately, dust caking my boots and calves as the trail turned north and began to climb rather than undulate. Each step was a toil, as I ascended higher and higher still, interrupted only by the occasional short descent, which was not so much a break in the hell as it was a new kind of hell because I had to brace myself against each step, lest gravity's pull cause me, with my tremendous, uncontrollable weight, to catapult forward and fall. I felt like the pack was not so much attached to me as me to it. Like I was a building with limbs, unmoored from my foundation, careening through the wilderness.

Within forty minutes, the voice inside my head was screaming, *What have I gotten myself into?* I tried to ignore it, to hum as I hiked, though humming proved too difficult to do while also panting and moaning in agony and trying to remain hunched in that remotely upright position while also propelling myself forward when I felt like a building with legs. So then I tried to simply concentrate on what I heard—my feet thudding against the dry and rocky trail, the brittle leaves and branches of the low-lying bushes I passed clattering in the hot wind—but it could not be done. The clamor of *What have I gotten myself into?* was a mighty

shout. It could not be drowned out. The only possible distraction was my vigilant search for rattlesnakes. I expected one around every bend, ready to strike. The landscape was made for them, it seemed. And also for mountain lions and wilderness-savvy serial killers.

But I wasn't thinking of them.

It was a deal I'd made with myself months before and the only thing that allowed me to hike alone. I knew that if I allowed fear to overtake me, my journey was doomed. Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves, and so I chose to tell myself a different story from the one women are told. I decided I was safe. I was strong. I was brave. Nothing could vanquish me. Insisting on this story was a form of mind control, but for the most part, it worked. Every time I heard a sound of unknown origin or felt something horrible cohering in my imagination, I pushed it away. I simply did not let myself become afraid. Fear begets fear. Power begets power. I willed myself to beget power. And it wasn't long before I actually *wasn't* afraid.

I was working too hard to be afraid.

I took one step and then another, moving along at barely more than a crawl. I hadn't thought that hiking the PCT would be easy. I'd known it would take some getting adjusted. But now that I was out here, I was less sure I would adjust. Hiking the PCT was different than I'd imagined. *I* was different than I'd imagined. I couldn't even remember what it was I'd imagined six months ago, back in December, when I'd first decided to do this.

I'd been driving on a stretch of highway east of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, when the idea came to me. I'd driven to Sioux Falls from Minneapolis the day before with my friend Aimee to retrieve my truck, which had been left there the week before when it broke down while a friend was borrowing it.

By the time Aimee and I arrived in Sioux Falls, my truck had been towed from the street. Now it was in a lot surrounded by a chain-link fence and buried in snow from the blizzard that had passed through a couple of days before. It had been for this blizzard that I'd gone to REI the previous day to purchase a shovel. As I waited in line to pay for it, I'd spotted a guidebook about something called the Pacific Crest Trail. I picked it up and studied its cover and read the back before returning it to its place on the shelf.

Once Aimee and I had cleared the snow away from my truck that day

in Sioux Falls, I got inside and turned the key. I assumed I'd hear nothing but that dead clicking sound that automobiles make when they've got nothing left to give you, but it started right up. We could've driven back to Minneapolis then, but we decided to check into a motel for the night instead. We went out to a Mexican restaurant for an early dinner, elated with the unexpected ease of our journey. As we ate chips and salsa and drank margaritas, I got a funny feeling in my gut.

"It's like I swallowed the chips whole," I told Aimee, "like the edges are still intact and jabbing me inside." I felt full and tingly down low, like I'd never felt before. "Maybe I'm pregnant," I joked, and then the moment I said it, I realized I wasn't joking.

"Are you?" asked Aimee.

"I could be," I said, suddenly terrified. I'd had sex a few weeks before with a man named Joe. I'd met him the previous summer in Portland, when I'd gone there to visit Lisa and escape my troubles. I'd been there only a few days when he'd walked up to me in a bar and put his hand on my wrist.

"Nice," he said, outlining the sharp edges of my tin bracelet with his fingers.

He had neon punk-rock hair cut close to the scalp and a garish tattoo that covered half his arm, though his face was in precise contradiction to those disguises: tenacious and tender—like a kitten wanting milk. He was twenty-four and I was twenty-five. I hadn't slept with anyone since Paul and I had broken up three months before. That night we had sex on Joe's lumpy futon on the floor and barely slept, talking until the sun rose, mostly about him. He told me about his smart mother and his alcoholic father and the fancy and rigorous school where he'd earned his BA the year before.

"Have you ever tried heroin?" he asked in the morning.

I shook my head and laughed idly. "Should I?"

I could've let it drop. Joe had only just started using it when he met me. It was something he did separate from me, with a group of friends he'd made whom I didn't know. I could've glided right past it, but something compelled me to pause instead. I was intrigued. I was unattached. In my youth and sorrow, I was ready to self-destruct.

So I didn't just say yes to heroin. I pulled it in with both hands.

I was cuddled up with Joe, postsex, on his ratty couch the first time I used it, a week after we'd met. We took turns sucking up the smoke from

a burning dab of black tar heroin that sat on a sheet of aluminum foil through a pipe that was made of foil too. Within a few days, I wasn't in Portland to visit Lisa and escape my sorrows anymore. I was in Portland falling into a drug-fueled half love with Joe. I moved into his apartment above an abandoned drugstore, where we spent most of the summer having adventuresome sex and doing heroin. In the beginning, it was a few times a week, then it was every couple of days, then it was every day. First we smoked it, then we snorted it. *But we would never shoot it!* we said. Absolutely not.

Then we shot it.

It was good. It was like something inordinately beautiful and out of this world. Like I'd found an actual planet that I didn't know had been there all along. Planet Heroin. The place where there was no pain, where it was unfortunate but essentially okay that my mother was dead and my biological father was not in my life and my family had collapsed and I couldn't manage to stay married to a man I loved.

At least that's how it felt while I was high.

In the mornings, my pain was magnified by about a thousand. In the mornings there weren't only those sad facts about my life. Now there was also the additional fact that I was a pile of shit. I'd wake in Joe's squalid room implicated by every banal thing: the lamp and the table, the book that had fallen and rested now belly-down and open, its flimsy pages buckled on the floor. In the bathroom, I'd wash my face and sob into my hands for a few fast breaths, getting ready for the waitressing job I'd picked up at a breakfast place. I'd think: *This is not me. This is not the way I am. Stop it. No more.* But in the afternoons I'd return with a wad of cash to buy another bit of heroin and I'd think: *Yes. I get to do this. I get to waste my life. I get to be junk.*

But this was not to be. Lisa called me one day and said she wanted to see me. I'd stayed in touch with her, hanging out for long afternoons at her place, telling her glimmers of what I was up to. As soon as I walked into her house this time, I knew something was up.

"So tell me about heroin," she demanded.

"Heroin?" I replied lightly. What could I possibly say? It was inexplicable, even to me. "I'm not becoming a junkie, if that's what you're worried about," I offered. I was leaning against her kitchen counter, watching her sweep the floor.

"That's what I'm worried about," she said sternly.

"Well, don't," I said. I explained it to her as rationally and playfully as I could. It had been only a couple of months. We would stop soon. Joe and I were simply messing around, doing something fun. "It's summertime!" I exclaimed. "Remember how you suggested that I come here to escape? I'm escaping." I laughed, though she didn't laugh along. I reminded her that I'd never had trouble with drugs before; that I drank alcohol with moderation and reserve. I was an experimentalist, I told her. An artist. The kind of woman who said yes instead of no.

She challenged my every statement, questioned my every rationale. She swept and swept and swept the floor as our talk turned into an argument. She eventually became so furious with me that she swatted me with the broom.

I went back to Joe's and we talked about how Lisa just didn't understand.

Then, two weeks later, Paul called.

He wanted to see me. Right now. Lisa had told him about Joe and about my using heroin, and he'd immediately driven the seventeen hundred miles straight through from Minneapolis to talk to me. I met him within the hour at Lisa's apartment. It was a warm, sunny day in late September. I'd turned twenty-six the week before. Joe hadn't remembered. It was the first birthday of my life when not one person had said happy birthday to me.

"Happy birthday," said Paul when I walked in the door.

"Thank you," I said, too formally.

"I meant to call, but I didn't have your number—I mean, Joe's."

I nodded. It was strange to see him. My husband. A phantom from my actual life. The realest person I knew. We sat at the kitchen table with the branches of a fig tree tapping on the window nearby, the broom with which Lisa had struck me propped against the wall.

He said, "You look different. You seem so . . . How can I say this? You seem like you aren't here."

I knew what he meant. The way he looked at me told me everything I'd refused to hear from Lisa. I *was* different. I wasn't there. Heroin had made me that way. And yet the idea of giving it up seemed impossible. Looking Paul squarely in the face made me realize that I couldn't think straight.

"Just tell me why you're doing this to yourself," he demanded, his eyes gentle, his face so familiar to me. He reached across the table and took my hands, and we held on to each other, locked eye to eye, tears streaming first down my face, then down his. He wanted me to go home with him that afternoon, he said evenly. Not for a reunion with him but to get away. Not from Joe, but from heroin.

I told him I needed to think. I drove back to Joe's apartment and sat in the sun on a lawn chair that Joe kept on the sidewalk outside the building. Heroin had made me dumb and distant from myself. A thought would form and then evaporate. I could not quite get ahold of my mind, even when I wasn't high. As I sat there a man walked up to me and said his name was Tim. He took my hand and shook it and told me that I could trust him. He asked if I could give him three dollars for diapers, then if he could use my phone inside the apartment, and then if I had change for a five-dollar bill, and on and on in a series of twisting questions and sorry stories that confused and compelled me to stand and pull the last ten dollars I had out of my jeans pocket.

When he saw the money, he took a knife out of his shirt. He held it almost politely to my chest and hissed, "Give me that money, sweetheart."

I packed my few things, wrote a note to Joe and taped it to the bathroom mirror, and called Paul. When he pulled up to the corner, I got into his car.

I sat in the passenger seat as we drove across the country, feeling my real life present but unattainable. Paul and I fought and cried and shook the car with our rage. We were monstrous in our cruelty and then we talked kindly afterward, shocked at each other and ourselves. We decided that we would get divorced and then that we would not. I hated him and I loved him. With him I felt trapped, branded, held, and beloved. Like a daughter.

"I didn't ask you to come and get me," I yelled in the course of one of our arguments. "You came for your own reasons. Just so you could be the big hero."

"Maybe," he said.

"Why'd you come all this way to get me?" I asked, panting with sorrow.

"Because," he said, gripping the steering wheel, staring out the windshield into the starry night. "Just because."

I saw Joe several weeks later, when he came to visit me in Minneapolis. We weren't a couple anymore, but we immediately started back up with

our old ways—getting high every day for the week he was there, having sex a couple of times. But when he left, I was done. With him and with heroin. I hadn't given it another thought until I was sitting with Aimee in Sioux Falls and I noticed the bizarre being-poked-by-sharp-edges-of-uncrushed-tortilla-chips feeling in my gut.

We left the Mexican restaurant and went to a vast supermarket in search of a pregnancy test. As we walked through the brightly lit store, I silently reasoned with myself that I probably wasn't pregnant. I'd dodged that bullet so many times—fretted and worried uselessly, imagining pregnancy symptoms so convincing that I was stunned when my period arrived. But now I was twenty-six and wizened by sex; I wasn't going to fall for another scare.

Back at the motel I shut the bathroom door behind me and peed onto the test stick while Aimee sat on the bed outside. Within moments, two dark blue lines appeared on the test's tiny pane.

"I'm pregnant," I said when I came out, tears filling my eyes. Aimee and I reclined on the bed talking about it for an hour, though there was nothing much to say. That I would get an abortion was a fact so apparent it seemed silly to discuss anything else.

It takes four hours to drive from Sioux Falls to Minneapolis. Aimee followed me the next morning in her car, in case my truck broke down again. I drove without listening to the radio, thinking about my pregnancy. It was the size of a grain of rice and yet I could feel it in the deepest, strongest part of me, taking me down, shaking me up, reverberating out. Somewhere in the southwestern farmlands of Minnesota, I burst into tears, crying so hard I could barely steer, and not only for the pregnancy I didn't want. I was crying over all of it, over the sick mire I'd made of my life since my mother died; over the stupid existence that had become my own. I was not meant to be this way, to live this way, to fail so darkly.

It was then that I remembered that guidebook I'd plucked from a shelf at REI while waiting to buy the shovel a couple of days before. The thought of the photograph of a boulder-strewn lake surrounded by rocky crags and blue sky on its cover seemed to break me open, frank as a fist to the face. I believed I'd only been killing time when I'd picked up the book while standing in line, but now it seemed like something more—a sign. Not only of what I could do, but of what I had to do.

When Aimee and I reached Minneapolis, I waved her off at her exit,

but I didn't go to mine. Instead, I drove to REI and bought *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* and took it back to my apartment and stayed up reading it all night. I read it a dozen times over the next months. I got an abortion and learned how to make dehydrated tuna flakes and turkey jerky and took a refresher course on basic first aid and practiced using my water purifier in my kitchen sink. I had to change. *I had to change* was the thought that drove me in those months of planning. Not into a different person, but back to the person I used to be—strong and responsible, clear-eyed and driven, ethical and good. And the PCT would make me that way. There, I'd walk and think about my entire life. I'd find my strength again, far from everything that had made my life ridiculous.

But here I was, on the PCT, ridiculous again, though in a different way, hunching in an ever-more-remotely upright position on the first day of my hike.

Three hours in, I came to a rare level spot near a gathering of Joshua trees, yuccas, and junipers and stopped to rest. To my monumental relief, there was a large boulder upon which I could sit and remove my pack in the same fashion I had in the van in Mojave. Amazed to be free of its weight, I strolled around and accidentally brushed up against one of the Joshua trees and was bayoneted by its sharp spikes. Blood instantly spurted out of three stab wounds on my arm. The wind blew so fiercely that when I removed my first aid kit from my pack and opened it up, all of my Band-Aids blew away. I chased them uselessly across the flat plain and then they were gone, down the mountain and out of reach. I sat in the dirt and pressed the sleeve of my T-shirt against my arm and took several swigs from my water bottle.

I'd never been so exhausted in all of my life. Part of it was due to my body adjusting to the exertion and the elevation—I was up at about 5,000 feet now, 1,200 feet higher than where I'd begun, on Tehachapi Pass—but most of my exhaustion could be blamed on the outrageous weight of my pack. I looked at it hopelessly. It was my burden to bear, of my very own ludicrous making, and yet I had no idea how I was going to bear it. I retrieved my guidebook and looked through it, holding the fluttering pages against the wind, hoping that the familiar words and maps would dispel my growing unease; that the book would convince me, in its benign four-part harmony, that I could do this, the same way it had in the months that I'd been hatching this plan. There were no

photographs of the four authors of *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California,* but I could see them each in my mind's eye: Jeffrey P. Schaffer, Thomas Winnett, Ben Schifrin, and Ruby Jenkins. They were sensible and kind, wise and all-knowing. They would guide me through. They had to.

Plenty of people at REI had told me of their own backpacking excursions, but none had ever hiked the PCT and it hadn't occurred to me to attempt to track down someone who had. It was the summer of 1995, the stone ages when it came to the Internet. Now there are dozens of online PCT hiker journals and a deep well of information about the trail, both static and ever changing, but I had none of that. I had only *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California.* It was my bible. My lifeline. The only book I'd read about hiking on the PCT, or anywhere else for that matter.

But paging through it for the first time while actually sitting on the trail was less reassuring than I'd hoped. There were things I'd overlooked, I saw now, such as a quote on page 6 by a fellow named Charles Long, with whom the authors of *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* heartily agreed, that said, "How can a book describe the psychological factors a person must prepare for . . . the despair, the alienation, the anxiety and especially the pain, both physical and mental, which slices to the very heart of the hiker's volition, which are the real things that must be planned for? No words can transmit those factors . . ."

I sat pie-eyed, with a lurching knowledge that indeed no words *could* transmit those factors. They didn't have to. I now knew exactly what they were. I'd learned about them by having hiked a little more than three miles in the desert mountains beneath a pack that resembled a Volkswagen Beetle. I read on, noting intimations that it would be wise to improve one's physical fitness before setting out, to train specifically for the hike, perhaps. And, of course, admonishments about backpack weight. Suggestions even to refrain from carrying the entire guidebook itself because it was too heavy to carry all at once and unnecessary anyway—one could photocopy or rip out needed sections and include the necessary bit in the next resupply box. I closed the book.

Why hadn't *I* thought of that? Of ripping the guidebook into sections?

Because I was a big fat idiot and I didn't know what the hell I was doing, that's why. And I was alone in the wilderness with a beast of a load to carry while finding that out.

I wrapped my arms around my legs and pressed my face into the tops of my bare knees and closed my eyes, huddled into the ball of myself, the wind whipping my shoulder-length hair in a frenzy.

When I opened my eyes several minutes later, I saw that I was sitting next to a plant I recognized. This sage was less verdant than the sage my mother had grown in our yard for years, but its shape and scent were the same. I reached over and picked a handful of the leaves and rubbed them between my palms, then put my face in them and inhaled deeply, the way my mother had taught me to do. *It gives you a burst of energy,* she'd always declared, imploring my siblings and me to follow her lead on those long days when we'd been working to build our house and our bodies and spirits had flagged.

Inhaling it now, I didn't so much smell the sharp, earthy scent of the desert sage as I did the potent memory of my mother. I looked up at the blue sky, feeling, in fact, a burst of energy, but mostly feeling my mother's presence, remembering why it was that I'd thought I could hike this trail. Of all the things that convinced me that I should not be afraid while on this journey, of all the things I'd made myself believe so I could hike the PCT, the death of my mother was the thing that made me believe the most deeply in my safety: nothing bad could happen to me, I thought. The worst thing already had.

I stood and let the wind blow the sage leaves from my hands and walked to the edge of the flat area I was occupying. The land beyond gave way to a rocky outcropping below. I could see the mountains that surrounded me for miles, sloping gently down into a wide desert valley. White, angular wind turbines lined the ridges in the distance. My guidebook told me that they generated electricity for the residents of the cities and towns below, but I was far from that now. From cities and towns. From electricity. From California, it even seemed, though I was squarely in the heart of it, of the real California, with its relentless wind and Joshua trees and rattlesnakes lurking in places I had yet to find.

As I stood there, I knew I was done for the day, though when I'd stopped I'd intended to push on. Too tired to light my stove and too exhausted to be hungry in any case, I pitched my tent, though it was only four in the afternoon. I took things from my pack and tossed them into the tent to keep it from blowing away, then pushed the pack in too and crawled in behind it. I was immediately relieved to be inside, even though *inside* meant only a cramped green nylon cave. I set up my

little camp chair and sat in the small portal where the tent's ceiling was high enough to accommodate my head. Then I rummaged through my things to find a book: not *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California,* which I should have been reading to see what lay ahead the next day, and not *Staying Found,* which I should have read before starting the trail, but Adrienne Rich's book of poems, *The Dream of a Common Language.*

This, I knew, was an unjustifiable weight. I could imagine the disapproving expressions on the faces of the authors of *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California.* Even the Faulkner novel had more right to be in my pack, if only because I hadn't yet read it and therefore it could be explained as entertainment. I'd read *The Dream of a Common Language* so often that I'd practically memorized it. In the previous few years, certain lines had become like incantations to me, words I'd chanted to myself through my sorrow and confusion. That book was a consolation, an old friend, and when I held it in my hands on my first night on the trail, I didn't regret carrying it one iota—even though carrying it meant that I could do no more than hunch beneath its weight. It was true that *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* was now my bible, but *The Dream of a Common Language* was my religion.

I opened it up and read the first poem out loud, my voice rising above the sound of the wind battering the walls of my tent. I read it again and again and again.

It was a poem called "Power."

7

THE ONLY GIRL IN THE WOODS

"Cheryl Strayed?" the woman at the Kennedy Meadows General Store asked without a smile. When I nodded exuberantly, she turned and disappeared into the back without another word.

I looked around, drunk with the sight of the packaged food and drinks, feeling a combination of anticipation over the things I'd consume in the coming hours and relief over the fact that my pack was no longer attached to my body, but resting now on the porch of the store.

I was here. I had made it to my first stop. It seemed like a miracle. I'd half expected to see Greg, Matt, and Albert at the store, but they were nowhere in sight. My guidebook explained that the campground was another three miles farther on and I assumed that's where I'd find them, along with Doug and Tom eventually. Thanks to my exertions, they hadn't managed to catch up with me. Kennedy Meadows was a pretty expanse of piney woods and sage and grass meadows at an elevation of 6,200 feet on the South Fork Kern River. It wasn't a town but rather an outpost of civilization spread out over a few miles, consisting of a general store, a restaurant called Grumpie's, and a primitive campground.

"Here you go," the woman said, returning with my box and setting it on the counter. "It's the only one that's got a girl's name on it. That's how I knew." She reached across the counter to me. "This came too."

In her hand was a postcard. I took it and read it: *I hope you made it this far,* it said in a familiar scrawl. *I want to be your clean boyfriend someday.*

I love you. Joe. On the other side was a photograph of the Sylvia Beach Hotel on the Oregon coast, where we'd stayed together once. I stared at the photograph for several moments, a series of feelings washing over me in waves: grateful for a word from someone I knew, nostalgic for Joe, disappointed that only one person had written to me, and heartbroken, unreasonable as it was, that the one person who had wasn't Paul.

I bought two bottles of Snapple lemonade, a king-sized Butterfinger, and a bag of Doritos and went outside and sat on the front steps, devouring the things I'd purchased while-reading the postcard over and over again. After a while, I noticed a box in the corner of the porch stuffed full with mostly packaged backpacker food. Above it there was a handwritten sign that said:

PCT hiker FREE box!!!
Leave what you don't want!
Take what you do!

A ski pole was propped behind the box, precisely the thing I needed. It was a ski pole fit for a princess: white, with a bubble-gum-pink nylon wrist strap. I tested it out for a few steps. It was the perfect height. It would help me across not only the snow, but also the many stream fords and rockslides that no doubt lay ahead.

I walked with it an hour later as I made my way along the dirt road that went in a loop around the campground, looking for Greg, Matt, and Albert. It was a Sunday afternoon in June, but the place was mostly empty. I passed by a man preparing his fishing gear and a couple with a cooler of beer and a boom box and eventually came to a campsite where a shirtless gray-haired man with a big tan belly sat at a picnic table reading a book. He looked up as I approached.

"You must be the famous Cheryl of the enormous backpack," he called to me.

I laughed in agreement.

"I'm Ed." He walked toward me to shake my hand. "Your friends are here. They all just caught a ride up to the store—you must have missed them as you were coming—but they asked me to watch for you. You can set up your tent right over there if you'd like. They're all camped here—Greg and Albert and his son." He gestured to the tents around him. "We were taking bets who'd arrive first. You or the two boys from back east coming up behind you."

"Who won?" I asked.

Ed thought for a moment. "No one," he said, and boomed with laughter. "None of us bet on you."

I rested Monster on the picnic table, took it off, and left it there, so when I had to put it on again I wouldn't have to perform my pathetic dead lift from the ground.

"Welcome to my humble abode," Ed said, gesturing to a little pop-up trailer that had a tarp roof extending out its side with a makeshift camp kitchen beneath it. "You hungry?"

There were no showers at the campground, so while Ed made lunch for me, I walked to the river to wash as best as I could with my clothes still on. The river felt like a shock after all that dry territory I'd crossed. And the South Fork Kern River wasn't just any river. It was violent and self-possessed, ice-cold and raging, its might clear evidence of the heavy snows higher up the mountains. The current was too fast to go in even ankle-deep, so I walked down the bank until I found an eddying pool near the river's edge and waded in. My feet ached from the cold water and eventually went numb. I crouched and wetted down my filthy hair and splashed handfuls of water beneath my clothes to wash my body. I felt electric with sugar and the victory of arriving; filled with anticipation of the conversations I'd have over the next couple of days.

When I was done, I walked up the bank and then across a wide meadow, wet and cool. I could see Ed from a distance, and as I approached I watched him move from his camp kitchen to the picnic table with plates of food in his hands, bottles of ketchup and mustard and cans of Coke. I'd known him only a few minutes and yet, like the other men I'd met, he felt instantly familiar to me, as if I could trust him with close to anything. We sat across from each other and ate while he told me about himself. He was fifty, an amateur poet and seasonal vagabond, childless and divorced. I tried to eat at his leisurely pace, taking bites when he did, the same way I'd attempted to match my steps to Greg's a few days before, but I couldn't do it. I was ravenous. I devoured two hot dogs and a mountain of baked beans and another mountain of potato chips in a flash and then sat hungrily wishing for more. Meanwhile, Ed worked his way languidly through his lunch, pausing to open his journal to read aloud poems that he'd composed the day before. He lived in San Diego most of the year, he explained, but each summer he set up camp in Kennedy Meadows in order to greet the PCT hikers as they passed through. He was what's referred to in PCT hiker vernacular as a *trail angel,* but I didn't know that then. Didn't know, even, that there was a PCT hiker vernacular.

"Look here, fellas, we all lost the bet," Ed hollered to the men when they returned from the store.

"I didn't lose!" Greg protested as he came close to squeeze my shoulder. "I put my money on you, Cheryl," he insisted, though the others disputed his claim.

We sat around the picnic table, talking about the trail, and after a while, they all dispersed to take naps—Ed to his trailer; Greg, Albert, and Matt to their tents. I stayed at the picnic table, too excited to sleep, pawing through the contents of the box I'd packed weeks before. The things inside smelled like a world far-off, like the one I'd occupied in what seemed another lifetime, scented with the Nag Champa incense that had permeated my apartment. The ziplock bags and packaging on the food were still shiny and unscathed. The fresh T-shirt smelled of the lavender detergent I bought in bulk at the co-op I belonged to in Minneapolis. The flowery cover of *The Complete Stories* by Flannery O'Connor was unbent.

The same could not be said of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying,* or rather the thin portion of the book I still had in my pack. I'd torn off the cover and all the pages I'd read the night before and burned them in the little aluminum pie pan I'd brought to place beneath my stove to safeguard against errant sparks. I'd watched Faulkner's name disappear into flames feeling a bit like it was a sacrilege—never had I dreamed I'd be burning books—but I was desperate to lighten my load. I'd done the same with the section from *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* that I'd already hiked.

It hurt to do it, but it had to be done. I'd loved books in my regular, pre-PCT life, but on the trail, they'd taken on even greater meaning. They were the world I could lose myself in when the one I was actually in became too lonely or harsh or difficult to bear. When I made camp in the evenings, I rushed through the tasks of pitching my tent and filtering water and cooking dinner so I could sit afterwards inside the shelter of my tent in my chair with my pot of hot food gripped between my knees. I ate with my spoon in one hand and a book in the other, reading by the light of my headlamp when the sky darkened. In the first week of my hike, I was often too exhausted to read more than a page or two before I fell asleep, but as I grew stronger I was reading more, eager to escape

the tedium of my days. And each morning, I burned whatever I'd read the night before.

As I held my unspoiled copy of O'Connor's short stories, Albert emerged from his tent. "Looks to me like you could stand to lose a few things," he said. "Want some help?"

"Actually," I said, smiling ruefully at him, "yes."

"All right, then. Here's what I want you to do: pack up that thing just like you're about to hike out of here for this next stretch of trail and we'll go from there." He walked toward the river with the nub of a toothbrush in hand—the end of which he'd thought to break off to save weight, of course.

I went to work, integrating the new with the old, feeling as if I were taking a test that I was bound to fail. When I was done, Albert returned and methodically unpacked my pack. He placed each item in one of two piles—one to go back into my pack, another to go into the now-empty resupply box that I could either mail home or leave in the PCT hiker free box on the porch of the Kennedy Meadows General Store for others to plunder. Into the box went the foldable saw and miniature binoculars and the megawatt flash for the camera I had yet to use. As I looked on, Albert chucked aside the deodorant whose powers I'd overestimated and the disposable razor I'd brought with some vague notion about shaving my legs and under my arms and—much to my embarrassment—the fat roll of condoms I'd slipped into my first aid kit.

"Do you really need these?" Albert asked, holding the condoms. Albert the Georgia Daddy Eagle Scout, whose wedding band glinted in the sun, who cut off the handle of his own toothbrush, but no doubt carried a pocket-sized Bible in his pack. He looked at me stone-faced as a soldier, while the white plastic wrappers of a dozen ultrathin nonlubricated Trojan condoms made a clickety-clack sound as they unfurled like a party streamer from his hand.

"No," I said, feeling as if I was going to die of shame. The idea of having sex seemed absurd to me now, though when I'd packed my supplies it had struck me as a reasonable prospect, back before I had a clue of what hiking the Pacific Crest Trail would do to my body. I'd not seen myself since I was at the motel in Ridgecrest, but after the men had gone off to nap, I'd taken the opportunity to gaze at my face in the mirror attached to the side of Ed's truck. I looked tan and dirty, despite my recent dunk in the river. I'd become remotely leaner and my dark blonde

hair a tad lighter, alternately flattened and sprung alive by a combination of dried sweat, river water, and dust.

I didn't look like a woman who might need twelve condoms.

But Albert didn't pause to ponder such things—whether I'd get laid or not, whether I was pretty. He pushed on, pillaging my pack, inquiring sternly each time before tossing another item I'd previously deemed necessary into the get-rid-of pile. I nodded almost every time he held an item up, agreeing it should go, though I held the line on both *The Complete Stories* and my beloved, intact copy of *The Dream of a Common Language*. I held the line on my journal, in which I recorded everything I did that summer. And when Albert wasn't looking, I tore one condom off the end of the fat roll of condoms he'd tossed aside and slid it discreetly into the back pocket of my shorts.

"So what brought you out here?" Albert asked when his work was done. He sat on the bench of the picnic table, his broad hands folded in front of him.

"To hike the PCT?" I asked.

He nodded and watched as I pushed the various items we'd agreed I could keep back into my pack. "I'll tell you why I'm doing it," he said quickly, before I could answer. "It's been a lifelong dream for me. When I heard about the trail I thought, 'Now there's something I'd like to do before I go to meet the Lord.'" He rapped his fist gently on the table. "So how about you, girly-o? I've got a theory that most folks have a reason. Something that drove 'em out here."

"I don't know," I demurred. I wasn't about to tell a fifty-something Christian Georgia Eagle Scout why I decided to walk alone in the woods for three solid months, no matter how kindly his eyes twinkled when he smiled. The things that compelled me to hike this trail would sound scandalous to him and dubious to me; to both of us, they'd only reveal just how shaky this whole endeavor was.

"Mainly," I said, "I thought it would be something fun."

"You call this fun?" he asked, and we both laughed.

I turned and leaned into Monster, threading my arms into the straps. "So let's see if it made a difference," I said, and buckled it on. When I lifted it from the table, I was amazed at how light it felt, even fully loaded with my new ice ax and a fresh supply of eleven days' worth of food. I beamed at Albert. "Thank you."

He chuckled in response, shaking his head.

Jubilant, I walked away to take my pack on a trial run on the dirt road that made a loop around the campground. Mine was still the biggest pack of the bunch—hiking solo, I had to carry things that those who hiked in pairs could divvy up, and I didn't have the ultralight confidence or skills that Greg did—but in comparison to how my pack had been before Albert helped me purge it, it was so light I felt I could leap into the air. Halfway around the loop I paused and leapt.

I made it only an inch off the ground, but at least it could be done.

"Cheryl?" a voice called out just then. I looked up and saw a handsome young man wearing a backpack walking toward me.

"Doug?" I asked, guessing right. In response he waved his arms and gave out a joyous hoot, and then he walked straight up to me and pulled me in for a hug.

"We read your entry in the register and we've been trying to catch up to you."

"And here I am," I stammered, taken aback by his enthusiasm and good looks. "We're all camped over there." I gestured behind me. "There's a bunch of us. Where's your friend?"

"He'll be coming up soon," Doug said, and hooted again, apropos of nothing. He reminded me of all the golden boys I'd known in my life—classically handsome and charmingly sure of his place at the very top of the heap, confident that the world was his and that he was safe in it, without ever having considered otherwise. As I stood next to him, I had the feeling that any moment he'd reach for my hand and together we'd parachute off a cliff, laughing as we wafted gently down.

"Tom!" Doug bellowed when he saw a figure appear down the road. Together we walked toward him. I could tell even from a distance that Tom was Doug's physical and spiritual opposite—bony, pale, bespectacled. The smile that crept onto his face as we approached was cautious and mildly unconvinced.

"Hello," he said to me when we got close enough, reaching to shake my hand.

In the few short minutes it took for us to reach Ed's camp, we exchanged a flurry of information about who we were and where we were from. Tom was twenty-four; Doug, twenty-one. *New England blue bloods,* my mother would have called them, I knew almost before they told me a thing—which meant to her only that they were basically rich and from somewhere east of Ohio and north of D.C. Over the course of

the coming days, I'd learn all about them. How their parents were surgeons and mayors and financial executives. How they'd both attended a tony boarding school whose fame was so great even I knew it by name. How they'd vacationed on Nantucket and on private islands off the coast of Maine and spent their spring breaks in Vail. But I didn't know any of that yet, how in so many ways their lives were unfathomable to me and mine to them. I knew only that in some very particular ways they were my closest kin. They weren't gearheads or backpacking experts or PCT know-it-alls. They hadn't hiked all the way from Mexico, nor had they been planning the trip for a decade. And even better, the miles they'd traversed so far had left them nearly as shattered as they'd left me. They hadn't, by virtue of their togetherness, gone days without seeing another human being. Their packs looked of a size reasonable enough that I doubted they were carrying a foldable saw. But I could tell the instant I locked eyes with Doug that, despite all his confidence and ease, he had *been through something.* And when Tom took my hand to shake it, I could read precisely the expression on his face. It said: *I'VE GOT TO GET THESE FUCKING BOOTS OFF MY FEET.*

Moments later, he did, sitting on the bench of Ed's picnic table, after we arrived at our camp and the men gathered around to introduce themselves. I watched as Tom carefully peeled off his filthy socks, clumps of worn-out moleskin and his own flesh coming off with them. His feet looked like mine: white as fish and pocked with bloody, oozing wounds overlaid with flaps of skin that had been rubbed away and now dangled, still painfully attached to the patches of flesh that had yet to die a slow, PCT-induced death. I took off my pack and unzipped a pocket to remove my first aid kit.

"Have you ever tried these?" I asked Tom, holding out a sheet of 2nd Skin—thankfully, I had packed more into my resupply box. "These have saved me," I explained. "I don't know if I could go on without them, actually."

Tom only looked up at me in despair and nodded without elaborating. I set a couple of sheets of 2nd Skin beside him on the bench.

"You're welcome to these, if you'd like," I said. Seeing them in their translucent blue wrappers brought to mind the condom in my back pocket. I wondered if Tom had packed any; if Doug had; if my bringing them had been such a dumb idea after all. Being in Tom and Doug's presence made it seem slightly less so.

"We thought we'd all go up to Grumpie's at six," Ed said, looking at his watch. "We've got a couple hours. I'll drive us all up in my truck." He looked at Tom and Doug. "Meanwhile, I'd be happy to get you boys a snack."

The men sat at the picnic table, eating Ed's potato chips and cold baked beans, talking about why they chose the pack they chose and the pros and cons of each. Someone brought out a deck of cards, and a game of poker started up. Greg paged through his guidebook at the end of the table near me, where I stood beside my pack, still marveling at its transformation. Pockets that had been bursting full now had tiny cushions of room.

"You're practically a Jardi-Nazi now," said Albert, in a teasing tone, seeing me gazing at my pack. "Those are the disciples of Ray Jardine, if you don't know. They take a highly particular view about pack weight."

"It's the guy I was telling you about," added Greg.

I nodded coolly, trying to conceal my ignorance. "I'm going to get ready for dinner," I said, and ambled to the edge of our campsite. I pitched my tent and then crawled inside, spread out my sleeping bag, and lay on top of it, staring at the green nylon ceiling, while listening to the murmur of the men's conversation and occasional bursts of laughter. I was going out to a restaurant with six men, and I had nothing to wear but what I was already wearing, I realized glumly: a T-shirt over a sports bra and a pair of shorts with nothing underneath. I remembered my fresh T-shirt from my resupply box and sat up and put it on. The entire back of the shirt I'd been wearing since Mojave was now stained a brownish yellow from the endless bath of sweat it had endured. I wadded it up in a ball and put it at the corner of my tent. I'd throw it away at the store later. The only other clothes I had were those I brought for cold weather. I remembered the necklace I'd been wearing until it got so hot that I couldn't bear to have it on; I found it in the ziplock bag in which I kept my driver's license and money and put it on. It was a small turquoise-and-silver earring that used to belong to my mother. I'd lost the other one, so I'd taken a pair of needle-nose pliers to the one that remained and turned it into a pendant on a delicate silver chain. I'd brought it along because it had been my mother's; having it with me felt meaningful, but now I was glad to have it simply because I felt prettier with it on. I ran my fingers through my hair, attempting to shape it into an attractive formation, aided by my tiny comb, but eventually I gave up and pushed it behind my ears.

It was just as well, I knew, that I simply let myself look and feel and smell the way I did. I was, after all, what Ed referred to somewhat inaccurately as *the only girl in the woods,* alone with a gang of men. By necessity, out here on the trail, I felt I had to sexually neutralize the men I met by being, to the extent that was possible, one of them.

I'd never been that way in my life, interacting with men in the even-keeled indifference that being one of the guys entails. It didn't feel like an easy thing to endure, as I sat in my tent while the men played cards. I'd been a girl forever, after all, familiar with and reliant upon the powers my very girlness granted me. Suppressing those powers gave me a gloomy twinge in the gut. Being one of the guys meant I could not go on being the woman I'd become expert at being among men. It was a version of myself I'd first tasted way back when I was a child of eleven and I'd felt that prickly rush of power when grown men would turn their heads to look at me or whistle or say *Hey pretty baby* just loudly enough that I could hear. The one I'd banked on all through high school, starving myself thin, playing cute and dumb so I'd be popular and loved. The one I'd fostered all through my young adult years while trying on different costumes—earth girl, punk girl, cowgirl, riot girl, ballsy girl. The one for whom behind every hot pair of boots or sexy little skirt or flourish of the hair there was a trapdoor that led to the least true version of me.

Now there was only one version. On the PCT I had no choice but to inhabit it entirely, to show my grubby face to the whole wide world. Which, at least for now, consisted of only six men.

"Cheryllllll," Doug's voice called softly from a few feet away. "You in there?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"We're going down to the river. Come hang with us."

"Okay," I said, feeling flattered in spite of myself. When I sat up, the condom made a crinkling sound in my back pocket. I took it out and slid it into my first aid kit, crawled out of my tent, and walked toward the river.

Doug, Tom, and Greg were wading in the shallow spot where I'd cleaned up a few hours before. Beyond them, the water raged in torrents, rushing over boulders as big as my tent. I thought of the snow I'd soon be encountering if I continued on with the ice ax I didn't yet know how to use and the white ski pole with its cute little pink wrist strap that had come to me only by chance. I hadn't yet begun to think about what

was next on the trail. I'd only listened and nodded when Ed told me that most of the PCT hikers who'd come through Kennedy Meadows in the three weeks he'd been camped here had opted to get off the trail at this point because of the record snowpack that made the trail essentially unpassable for most of the next four or five hundred miles. They caught rides and buses to rejoin the PCT farther north, at lower elevations, he told me. Some intended to loop back later in the summer to hike the section they'd missed; others to skip it. He said that a few had ended their hikes altogether, just as Greg had told me earlier, deciding to hike the PCT another, less record-breaking year. And fewer still had forged ahead, determined to make it through the snow.

Grateful for my cheap camp sandals, I picked my way over the rocks that lined the riverbed toward the men, the water so cold my bones hurt.

"I got something for you," said Doug when I reached him. He held his hand out to me. In it was a shiny feather, about a foot long, so black it shone blue in the sun.

"For what?" I asked, taking it from him.

"For luck," he said, and touched my arm.

When he took his hand away, the place where it had been felt like a burn—I could feel how little I'd been touched in the past fourteen days, how alone I'd been.

"So I was thinking about the snow," I said, holding the feather, my voice raised over the rush of the river. "The people who bypassed? They were all here a week or two before us. A lot more snow has melted by now, so maybe it'll be okay." I looked at Greg and then at the black feather, stroking it.

"The snow depth at Bighorn Plateau on June first was more than double what it was the same day last year," he said, tossing a stone. "A week isn't going to make much of a difference in that regard."

I nodded, as if I knew where Bighorn Plateau was, or what it meant for the snowpack to be double what it was a year ago. I felt like a fraud even having this discussion, like a mascot among players, as if they were the real PCT hikers and I was just happening through. As if somehow, because of my inexperience, my failure to read even a single page written by Ray Jardine, my laughably slow pace, and my belief that it had been reasonable to pack a foldable saw, I had not actually hiked to Kennedy Meadows from Tehachapi Pass, but instead had been carried along.

But I had walked here, and I wasn't ready to give up on seeing the

High Sierra just yet. It had been the section of the trail I'd most anticipated, its untouched beauty extolled by the authors of *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* and immortalized by the naturalist John Muir in the books he'd written a century before. It was the section of mountains he'd dubbed the "Range of Light." The High Sierra and its 13,000- and 14,000-foot-high peaks, its cold, clear lakes and deep canyons were the *point* of hiking the PCT in California, it seemed. Plus, bypassing it would be a logistical mess. If I had to skip the High Sierra, I'd end up in Ashland more than a month before I intended to.

"I'd like to push on, if there's a way," I said, waving the feather with a flourish. My feet didn't hurt anymore. They'd gone blissfully numb in the icy water.

"Well, we do have about forty miles to play with before the going gets seriously rough—from here up to Trail Pass," said Doug. "There's a trail there that intersects the PCT and goes down to a campground. We can hike at least that far and see how it goes—see how much snow there is—and then bail out there if we want to."

"What do you think of that, Greg?" I asked. Whatever he would do was what I'd do.

He nodded. "I think that's a good plan."

"That's what I'm going to do," I said. "I'll be okay. I have my ice ax now."

Greg looked at me. "You know how to use it?"

The next morning he gave me a tutorial.

"This is the shaft," he said, running his hand up the length of the ax. "And this is the spike," he added, touching a finger to the sharp end. "And on the other end there's the head."

The shaft? The head? The spike? I tried not to crack up like an eighth grader in sex ed class, but I couldn't help myself.

"What?" asked Greg, his hand around the shaft of his ax, but I only shook my head. "You've got two edges," he continued. "The blunt edge is the adze. That's what you use to chop your steps. And the other edge is the pick. That's what you use to save your ass when you're sliding off the side of the mountain." He spoke in a tone that assumed I knew this already, as if he were just reviewing the basics before we got started.

"Yep. The shaft, the head, the spike, the pick, the ad," I said.

"The *adze*," he corrected. "There's a *z*." We were standing on a steep bank along the river, the closest thing we could find to simulate an icy slope. "Now let's say you're falling," said Greg, throwing himself down the incline to demonstrate. As he fell, he jammed the pick into the mud. "You want to dig that pick in as hard as you can, while holding on to the shaft with one hand and the head with the other. Like this. And once you're anchored in, you try to get your footing."

I looked at him. "What if you can't get your footing?"

"Well, then you hold on here," he answered, moving his hands on the ax.

"What if I can't hold on that long? I mean, I'll have my pack and everything and, actually, I'm not strong enough to do a single pull-up."

"You hold on," he said dispassionately. "Unless you'd rather slide off the side of the mountain."

I got to work. Again and again I threw myself against the increasingly muddy slope, pretending that I was slipping on ice, and again and again I planted the pick of my ice ax into the soil while Greg watched, coaching and critiquing my technique.

Doug and Tom sat nearby pretending they weren't paying attention. Albert and Matt were lying on a tarp we'd spread out for them beneath the shade of a tree near Ed's truck, too ill to move anywhere but to the outhouse several times an hour. They'd both woken in the middle of the night sick with what we were all beginning to believe was giardia—a waterborne parasite that causes crippling diarrhea and nausea, requires prescription medication to cure, and almost always means a week or more off the trail. It was the reason PCT hikers spent so much time talking about water purifiers and water sources, for fear they'd make one wrong move and have to pay. I didn't know where Matt and Albert had picked up whatever they had, but I prayed I hadn't picked it up too. By late afternoon we all stood over them as they lay pale and limp on their tarp, convincing them it was time they got to the hospital in Ridgecrest. Too sick to resist, they watched as we packed their things and loaded their packs into the back of Ed's truck.

"Thank you for all your help with lightening my pack," I said to Albert when we had a moment alone before he departed. He looked wanly up at me from his bed on the tarp. "I couldn't have done it myself."

He gave me a weak smile and nodded.

"By the way," I said, "I wanted to tell you—about why I decided to hike the PCT? I got divorced. I was married and not long ago I got divorced, and also about four years ago my mom died—she was only forty-five and she got cancer suddenly and died. It's been a hard time in my life and I've sort of gotten offtrack. So I . . ." He opened his eyes wider, looking at me. "I thought it would help me find my center, to come out here." I made a crumpled gesture with my hands, out of words, a bit surprised that I'd let so many tumble out.

"Well, you've got your bearings now, haven't you?" he said, and sat up, his face lighting up despite his nausea. He rose and walked slowly to Ed's truck and got in beside his son. I clambered into the back with their backpacks and the box of things I no longer needed and rode with them as far as the general store. When we reached it, Ed stopped for a few moments; I jumped out with my box and waved to Albert and Matt, hollering *good luck*.

I felt a stinging rush of affection as I watched them drive away. Ed would return in a few hours, but most likely I'd never see Albert and Matt again. I would be hiking into the High Sierra with Doug and Tom the next day, and in the morning I'd have to say goodbye to Ed and Greg too—Greg was laying over in Kennedy Meadows another day, and though he would certainly catch up to me, it would likely be a fleeting visit, and then he too would pass out of my life.

I walked to the porch of the general store and put everything but the foldable saw, the special high-tech flash for my camera, and the miniature binoculars into the PCT hiker free box. Those I packed into my old resupply box and addressed it to Lisa in Portland. As I sealed my box with a roll of tape Ed had loaned me, I kept having the feeling that something was missing.

Later, as I walked the road back to the campground, I realized what it was: the fat roll of condoms.

Every last one was gone.

16

MAZAMA

Crater Lake used to be a mountain. Mount Mazama, it was called. It was not so unlike the chain of dormant volcanoes I'd be traversing on the PCT in Oregon—Mount McLoughlin, the Three Sisters peaks, Mount Washington, Three Fingered Jack, Mount Jefferson, and Mount Hood—except that it was bigger than them all, having reached an elevation that's estimated at a little under 12,000 feet. Mount Mazama blew up about 7,700 years ago in a cataclysmic eruption that was forty-two times more voluminous than the eruption that decapitated Mount St. Helens in 1980. It was the largest explosive eruption in the Cascade Range going back a million years. In the wake of Mazama's destruction, ash and pumice blanketed the landscape for 500,000 square miles—covering nearly all of Oregon and reaching as far as Alberta, Canada. The Klamath tribe of Native Americans who witnessed the eruption believed it was a fierce battle between Llao, the spirit of the underworld, and Skell, the spirit of the sky. When the battle was over, Llao was driven back into the underworld and Mount Mazama had become an empty bowl. A caldera, it's called—a sort of mountain in reverse. A mountain that's had its very heart removed. Slowly, over hundreds of years, the caldera filled with water, collecting the Oregon rain and snowmelt, until it became the lake that it is now. Reaching a maximum depth of more than 1,900 feet, Crater Lake is the deepest lake in the United States and among the deepest in the world.

I knew a little something about lakes, having come from Minnesota, but as I walked away from Ashland, I couldn't quite imagine what I would see at Crater Lake. It would be like Lake Superior, I supposed, the lake near which my mother had died, going off blue forever into the horizon. My guidebook said only that my first view of it from the rim, which rose 900 feet above the lake's surface, would be "one of disbelief."

I had a new guidebook now. A new bible. *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 2: Oregon and Washington,* though back at the co-op in Ashland, I'd ripped off the last 130 of the book's pages because I didn't need the Washington part. My first night out of Ashland, I paged through the book before falling asleep, reading bits here and there, the same as I had with the California guidebook in the desert on my first night on the PCT.

As I walked during those first days out of Ashland, I caught a couple of glimpses of Mount Shasta to the south, but mostly I walked in forests that obscured views. Among backpackers, the Oregon PCT was often referred to as the "green tunnel" because it opened up to far fewer panoramas than the California trail did. I no longer had the feeling that I was perched above looking down on everything, and it felt odd not to be able to see out across the terrain. California had altered my vision, but Oregon shifted it again, drew it closer in. I hiked through forests of noble, grand, and Douglas fir, pushing past bushy lakes through grasses and weedy thistles that sometimes obscured the trail. I crossed into the Rogue River National Forest and walked beneath tremendous ancient trees before emerging into clear-cuts like those I'd seen a few weeks before, vast open spaces of stumps and tree roots that had been exposed by the logging of the dense forest. I spent an afternoon lost amid the debris, walking for hours before I emerged onto a paved road and found the PCT again.

It was sunny and clear but the air was cool, and it grew progressively cooler with each day as I passed into the Sky Lakes Wilderness, where the trail stayed above 6,000 feet. The views opened up again as I walked along a ridgeline of volcanic rocks and boulders, glimpsing lakes occasionally below the trail and the land that spread beyond. In spite of the sun, it felt like an early October morning instead of a mid-August afternoon. I had to keep moving to stay warm. If I stopped for more than five minutes the sweat that drenched the back of my T-shirt turned icy cold. I'd seen no one since I left Ashland, but now I encountered a few day hikers and overnight backpackers who'd climbed up to the PCT on one of the many trails that intersected it, which led to peaks above

or lakes below. Mostly I was alone, which wasn't unusual, but the cold made the trail seem even more vacant, the wind clattering the branches of the persevering trees. It felt colder too, even colder than it had been up in the snow above Sierra City, though I saw only small patches of snow here and there. I realized it was because back then the mountains had been moving toward summer, and now, only six weeks later, they were already moving away from it, reaching toward autumn, in a direction that pushed me out.

One night I stopped to camp, stripped off my sweaty clothes, dressed in every other piece of clothing I had, and quickly made dinner, zipping myself into my sleeping bag as soon as I finished eating, chilled to the bone, too cold even to read. I lay curled into myself in a fetal position with my hat and gloves on all night long, barely able to sleep. When the sun rose at last, it was 26 degrees and my tent was covered in a thin layer of snow; the water in my bottles was frozen, though they'd been beside me inside the tent. As I broke camp without a sip of water, eating a protein bar instead of my regular granola mixed with Better Than Milk, I thought again of my mother. She'd been looming for days, riding low and heavy in my mind since Ashland, and now finally, on the day of the snow, she was undeniably here.

It was August 18. Her birthday. She'd have been fifty that day, if she'd lived.

She didn't live. She didn't get to be fifty. She would never be fifty, I told myself as I walked under the cold and bright August sun. *Be fifty, Mom. Be fucking fifty,* I thought with increasing rage as I forged on. I couldn't believe how furious I was at my mother for not being alive on her fiftieth birthday. I had the palpable urge to punch her in the mouth.

Her previous birthdays hadn't brought up the same rage. In past years, I'd been nothing but sad. On the first birthday without her—on the day that she'd have been forty-six—I'd spread her ashes with Eddie, Karen, Leif, and Paul in the little rock-lined flowerbed we'd made for her in a clearing on our land. On her three subsequent birthdays, I'd done nothing but cry as I sat very still listening with great attention to the entire Judy Collins album *Colors of the Day,* its every note seeming to be one of my cells. I could bear to listen to it only once each year, for all the memories of my mother playing it when I was a child. The music made it feel like my mother was right there with me, standing in the room—only she wasn't and would never be again.

I couldn't allow even a line of it now on the PCT. I deleted each and every song from the mix-tape radio station in my head, pressing an imaginary rewind in a desperate scramble, forcing my mind to go static instead. It was my mother's not-fiftieth birthday and there would be no song. Instead, I passed by high lakes and crossed over blocky volcanic rocks as the night's snow melted on the hardy wildflowers that grew among them, hiking faster than ever while thinking uncharitable thoughts about my mother. Dying at forty-five had only been the worst thing she'd done wrong. As I hiked, I made a catalogue of the rest, listing them painstakingly in my head:

1. She'd gone through a phase during which she'd smoked pot on an occasional but regular basis and had no qualms about doing it in front of my siblings and me. Once, stoned, she'd said, "It's only an herb. Like tea."

2. It hadn't been uncommon for my brother, sister, and me to be left alone when we lived in the apartment buildings full of single moms. She told us we were old enough to look after ourselves for a few hours because she couldn't afford a babysitter. Plus, there were all those other moms we could go to if something went wrong, she said. But we needed *our* mom.

3. During this same period, when she became really mad, she often threatened to spank us with a wooden spoon, and a few times, she'd followed through.

4. Once she said it was perfectly okay with her if we wanted to call her by her first name instead of calling her Mom.

5. She could be cool and often distant with her friends. She loved them, but she kept them at arm's length. I don't think she truly let any one of them all the way in. She held to her belief that "blood was thicker than water," in spite of the fact that my family was rather short of blood relations who didn't live hundreds of miles away. She maintained an air of insularity and privacy, participating in the community of friends, but also sealing off our family from it. This was why no one had swooped in when she died, I supposed, why her friends had left me in peace in my inevitable exile. Because she had

not held any of them very close, none of them held me. They wished me well, but they didn't invite me to Thanksgiving dinner or call me up on my mom's birthday to say hello after she died.

6. She was optimistic to an annoying degree, given to saying those stupid things: *We're not poor because we're rich in love!* or *When one door closes, another one opens up!* Which always, for a reason I couldn't quite pin down, made me want to throttle her, even when she was dying and her optimism briefly and desolately expressed itself in the belief that in fact she wouldn't die, so long as she drank a tremendous amount of wheatgrass juice.

7. When I was a senior in high school, she didn't ask where I would like to go to college. She didn't take me on a tour. I didn't even know people went on tours until I went to college and others told me they'd gone on them. I was left to figure it out on my own, applying to a single college in St. Paul for no reason whatsoever other than it looked nice on the brochure and it was only a three-hour drive away from home. Yes, I had slacked a bit in high school, playing the dumb blonde so I wouldn't be socially ostracized because my family lived in a house with a honey bucket for a toilet and a woodstove for heat; and my stepfather had long hair and a big bushy beard and drove around in a demolished car that he'd made into a pickup truck by himself with a blowtorch, a chain saw, and a few two-by-fours; and my mother opted not to shave under her arms and to say things to the red-blooded gun-loving locals like *Actually, I think hunting is murder.* But she knew I was secretly smart. She knew I was intellectually avid, devouring books by the day. I'd scored in the upper percentiles on every standardized test I ever took, to everyone's surprise but hers and mine. Why hadn't she said, *Hey, maybe you should apply to Harvard? Maybe you should apply to Yale?* The thought of Harvard and Yale hadn't even crossed my mind back then. They seemed to be utterly fictitious schools. It was only later that I realized that Harvard and Yale were real. And even though the reality is they wouldn't have let me in—

I honestly wasn't up to their standards—something inside me was smashed by the fact that there'd never even been the question that I could give them a shot.

But it was too late now, I knew, and there was only my dead, insular, overly optimistic, non-college-preparing, occasionally-child-abandoning, pot-smoking, wooden-spoon-wielding, feel-free-to-call-me-by-my-name mom to blame. She had failed. She had failed. She had so profoundly failed me.

Fuck her, I thought, so mad that I stopped walking.

And then I wailed. No tears came, just a series of loud brays that coursed through my body so hard I couldn't stand up. I had to bend over, keening, while bracing my hands on my knees, my pack so heavy on top of me, my ski pole clanging out behind me in the dirt, the whole stupid life I'd had coming out my throat.

It was wrong. It was so relentlessly awful that my mother had been taken from me. I couldn't even hate her properly. I didn't get to grow up and pull away from her and bitch about her with my friends and confront her about the things I wished she'd done differently and then get older and understand that she had done the best she could and realize that what she had done was pretty damn good and take her fully back into my arms again. Her death had obliterated that. It had obliterated me. It had cut me short at the very height of my youthful arrogance. It had forced me to instantly grow up and forgive her every motherly fault at the same time that it kept me forever a child, my life both ended and begun in that premature place where we'd left off. She was my mother, but I was motherless. I was trapped by her but utterly alone. She would always be the empty bowl that no one could fill. I'd have to fill it myself again and again and again.

Fuck her, I chanted as I marched on over the next few miles, my pace quickened by my rage, but soon I slowed and stopped to sit on a boulder. A gathering of low flowers grew at my feet, their barely pink petals edging the rocks. *Crocus,* I thought, the name coming into my mind because my mother had given it to me. These same flowers grew in the dirt where I'd spread her ashes. I reached out and touched the petals of one, feeling my anger drain out of my body.

By the time I rose and started walking again, I didn't begrudge my mother a thing. The truth was, in spite of all that, she'd been a spec-

tacular mom. I knew it as I was growing up. I knew it in the days that she was dying. I knew it now. And I knew that was something. That it was a lot. I had plenty of friends who had moms who—no matter how long they lived—would never give them the all-encompassing love that my mother had given me. My mother considered that love her greatest achievement. It was what she banked on when she understood that she really was going to die and die soon, the thing that made it just barely okay for her to leave me and Karen and Leif behind.

"I've given you everything," she insisted again and again in her last days.

"Yes," I agreed. She had, it was true. She did. She did. She did. She'd come at us with maximum maternal velocity. She hadn't held back a thing, not a single lick of her love.

"I'll always be with you, no matter what," she said.

"Yes," I replied, rubbing her soft arm.

When she'd become sick enough that we knew she was really going to die, when we were in the homestretch to hell, when we were well past thinking any amount of wheatgrass juice would save her, I'd asked her what she wanted done with her body—cremated or buried—though she only looked at me as if I were speaking Dutch.

"I want everything that can be donated to be donated," she said after a while. "My organs, I mean. Let them have every part they can use."

"Okay," I said. It was the oddest thing to contemplate, to know that we weren't making impossibly far-off plans; to imagine parts of my mother living on in someone else's body. "But then what?" I pressed on, practically panting with pain. I had to know. It would fall on me. "What would you like to do with . . . what's . . . left over. Do you want to be buried or cremated?"

"I don't care," she said.

"Of course you care," I replied.

"I really don't care. Do what you think is best. Do whatever is cheapest."

"No," I insisted. "You have to tell me. I want to know what you want done." The idea that I would be the one to decide filled me with panic.

"Oh, Cheryl," she said, exhausted by me, our eyes meeting in a grief-stricken détente. For every time I wanted to throttle her because she was too optimistic, she wanted to throttle me because I would never ever relent.

"Burn me," she said finally. "Turn me to ash."

And so we did, though the ashes of her body were not what I'd expected. They weren't like ashes from a wood fire, silky and fine as sand. They were like pale pebbles mixed with a gritty gray gravel. Some chunks were so large I could see clearly that they'd once been bones. The box that the man at the funeral home handed to me was oddly addressed to my mom. I brought it home and set it in the cupboard beneath the curio cabinet, where she kept her nicest things. It was June. It sat there until August 18, as did the tombstone we'd had made for her, which had arrived the same week as the ashes. It sat in the living room, off to the side, a disturbing sight to visitors probably, but it was a comfort to me. The stone was slate gray, the writing etched in white. It said her name and the dates of her birth and death and the sentence she'd spoken to us again and again as she got sicker and died: *I'm with you always.*

She wanted us to remember that, and I did. It felt like she was with me always, metaphorically at least. And in a way it was literal too. When we'd finally laid down that tombstone and spread her ashes into the dirt, I hadn't spread them all. I'd kept a few of the largest chunks in my hand. I'd stood for a long while, not ready to release them to the earth. I didn't release them. I never ever would.

I put her burnt bones into my mouth and swallowed them whole.

By the night of my mother's fiftieth birthday, I loved her again, though I still couldn't bear to let the Judy Collins songs come into my head. It was cold, but not as cold as the night before. I sat bundled in my tent wearing my gloves, reading the first pages of my new book—*The Best American Essays 1991.* I usually waited until morning to burn whatever pages I'd read the night before, but on this night, when I was done reading, I crawled out of my tent and made a fire of the pages I'd read. As I watched them ignite, I said my mother's name out loud as if it were a ceremony for her. Her name was Barbara, but she'd gone by Bobbi, so that was the name I spoke. Saying *Bobbi* instead of *Mom* felt like a revelation, like it was the first time that I truly understood that she was my mother, but also more. When she'd died, I'd lost that too—the Bobbi she'd been, the woman who was separate from who she was to me. She seemed to come at me now, the full perfect and imperfect force of her humanity, as if her life was an intricately painted mural and I could

finally see the whole thing. Who she'd been to me and who she hadn't. How it was she belonged to me profoundly, and also how she didn't.

Bobbi hadn't been granted her last wish, that her organs be used to help others, or at least not to the extent that she had hoped. When she died, she was ravaged with cancer and morphine, her forty-five-year-old body a toxic thing. In the end, they could use only her corneas. I knew that part of the eye was nothing but a transparent membrane, but when I thought of what my mother had given, I didn't think of it that way. I thought of her astounding blue, blue eyes living on in someone else's face. A few months after my mom died, we'd received a thank-you letter from the foundation that facilitated the donation. Because of her generosity someone could see, the letter said. I was mad with desire to meet the person, to gaze into his or her eyes. He or she wouldn't have to say a word. All I wanted was for whoever it was to look at me. I called the number on the letter to inquire, but was quickly brushed aside. Confidentiality was of the utmost importance, I was told. There were the recipient's rights.

"I'd like to explain to you about the nature of your mother's donation," the woman on the phone said in a patient and consoling voice that reminded me of any number of the grief counselors, hospice volunteers, nurses, doctors, and morticians who had addressed me in the weeks during which my mother was dying and in the days after she died—a voice full of intentional, almost overstated compassion, which also communicated that in this, I was entirely alone. "It wasn't the entire eye that was transplanted," the woman explained, "but rather the cornea, which is—"

"I know what the cornea is," I snapped. "I'd still like to know who this person is. To see him or her if I can. I think you owe me that."

I hung up the phone overcome with grief, but the small reasonable core that still lived inside of me knew that the woman was right. My mother wasn't there. Her blue eyes were gone. I'd never gaze into them again.

When the flames from the pages I'd burned had gone out and I'd stood to return to my tent, the sound of high and frenzied barks and howls

came to me from the east—a pack of coyotes. I'd heard that sound in northern Minnesota so many times it didn't scare me. It reminded me of home. I looked up at the sky, the stars everywhere and magnificent, so bright against the dark. I shivered, knowing I was lucky to be here, feeling that it was too beautiful to go back into my tent just yet. Where would I be in a month? It seemed impossible that I wouldn't be on the trail, but it was true. Most likely I'd be in Portland, if for no other reason than that I was flat broke. I still had a small bit of money left over from Ashland, but nothing that wouldn't be gone by the time I reached the Bridge of the Gods.

I let Portland roll around in my mind through the days, as I passed out of the Sky Lakes Wilderness into the Oregon Desert—a high dusty flat plain of lodgepole pines that my guidebook explained had been smattered with lakes and streams before they were buried beneath the tons of pumice and ash that had fallen on them when Mount Mazama erupted. It was early on a Saturday when I reached Crater Lake National Park. The lake was nowhere in sight. I'd arrived instead at the campground seven miles south of the lake's rim.

The campground wasn't just a campground. It was a mad tourist complex that included a parking lot, a store, a motel, a little coin laundromat, and what seemed to be three hundred people revving their engines and playing their radios loud, slurping beverages from gigantic paper cups with straws and eating from big bags of chips they bought in the store. The scene both riveted and appalled me. If I hadn't known it firsthand, I wouldn't have believed that I could walk a quarter mile in any direction and be in an entirely different world. I camped there for the night, showering blissfully in the bathhouse, and the next morning made my way to Crater Lake.

My guidebook had been correct: my first sight of it was one of disbelief. The surface of the water sat 900 feet below where I stood on the rocky 7,100-foot-high rim. The jagged circle of the lake spread out beneath me in the most unspeakably pure ultramarine blue I'd ever seen. It was approximately six miles across, its blue interrupted only by the top of a small volcano, Wizard Island, that rose 700 feet above the water, forming a conical island upon which twisted foxtail pines grew. The mostly barren, undulating rim that surrounded the lake was dotted with these same pines and backed by distant mountains.

"Because the lake is so pure and deep, it absorbs every color of visible

light except blue, so it reflects pure blue back to us," said a stranger who stood beside me, answering the question I'd nearly uttered out loud in my amazement.

"Thanks," I said to her. Because the water was so deep and pure it absorbed every color of visible light except blue seemed like a perfectly sound and scientific explanation, and yet there was still something about Crater Lake that remained inexplicable. The Klamath tribe still considered the lake a sacred site and I could see why. I wasn't a skeptic about this. It didn't matter that all around me there were tourists taking pictures and driving slowly past in their cars. I could feel the lake's power. It seemed a shock in the midst of this great land: inviolable, separate and alone, as if it had always been and would always be here, absorbing every color of visible light but blue.

I took a few photographs and walked along the lake's rim near a small gathering of buildings that had been built to accommodate tourists. I had no choice but to spend the day because it was a Sunday and the park's post office was closed; I couldn't get my box until tomorrow. It was sunny and finally warm again, and as I walked, I thought that if I'd continued with the pregnancy I'd learned about in that motel room in Sioux Falls the night before I decided to hike the PCT, I'd be giving birth to a baby right about now. The week of my mother's birthday would've been my due date. The crushing coalescence of those dates felt like a punch in the gut at the time, but it didn't compel me to waver in my decision to end my pregnancy. It only made me beg the universe to give me another chance. To let me become who I needed to before I became a mother: a woman whose life was profoundly different than my mother's had been.

Much as I loved and admired my mother, I'd spent my childhood planning not to become her. I knew why she'd married my father at nineteen, pregnant and only a tiny bit in love. It was one of the stories I'd made her tell when I'd asked and asked and she'd shaken her head and said, *Why do you want to know?* I'd asked so much that she finally gave in. When she'd learned she was pregnant, she'd pondered two options: an illegal abortion in Denver or hiding out in a distant city during her pregnancy, then handing over my sister to her mother, who'd offered to raise the baby as her own. But my mother hadn't done either of those things. She decided to have her baby, so she'd married my dad instead. She'd become Karen's mother and then mine and then Leif's.

Ours.

"I never got to be in the driver's seat of my own life," she'd wept to me once, in the days after she learned she was going to die. "I always did what someone else wanted me to do. I've always been someone's daughter or mother or wife. I've never just been me."

"Oh, Mom," was all I could say as I stroked her hand.

I was too young to say anything else.

At noon I went to the cafeteria in one of the nearby buildings and ate lunch. Afterwards, I walked through the parking lot to the Crater Lake Lodge and strolled through the elegantly rustic lobby with Monster on my back, pausing to peer into the dining room. There was a smattering of people sitting at tables, handsome groups holding glasses of chardonnay and pinot gris like pale yellow jewels. I went outside to the long porch that overlooked the lake, made my way along a line of grand rocking chairs, and found one that was set off by itself.

I sat in it for the rest of the afternoon, staring at the lake. I still had 334 miles to hike before I reached the Bridge of the Gods, but something made me feel as if I'd arrived. Like that blue water was telling me something I'd walked all this way to know.

This was once Mazama, I kept reminding myself. This was once a mountain that stood nearly 12,000 feet tall and then had its heart removed. This was once a wasteland of lava and pumice and ash. This was once an empty bowl that took hundreds of years to fill. But hard as I tried, I couldn't see them in my mind's eye. Not the mountain or the wasteland or the empty bowl. They simply were not there anymore. There was only the stillness and silence of that water: what a mountain and a wasteland and an empty bowl turned into after the healing began.

off the PCT and onto the alternate route the authors of my guidebook recommended, which would lead me down to Eagle Creek and into the Columbia River gorge and eventually to the river itself that ran alongside the town of Cascade Locks.

Down, down, down I went on that last full day of hiking, descending four thousand feet in just over sixteen miles, the creeks and streams and trailside seeps I crossed and paralleled going down and down too. I could feel the river pulling me like a great magnet below and to the north. I could feel myself coming to the end of things. I stopped to spend the night on the banks of Eagle Creek. It was five o'clock and I was only six miles away from Cascade Locks. I could have been in town by dark, but I didn't want to finish my trip that way. I wanted to take my time, to see the river and the Bridge of the Gods in the bright light of day.

That evening I sat next to Eagle Creek watching the water rush over the rocks. My feet were killing me from the long descent. Even after all this way, with my body now stronger than it had ever been and would likely ever be, hiking on the PCT still hurt. New blisters had formed on my toes in places that had gone soft from the relatively few extreme descents throughout Oregon. I put my fingers delicately to them, soothing them with my touch. Another toenail looked like it was finally going to come off. I gave it a gentle tug and it was in my hand, my sixth. I had only four intact toenails left.

The PCT and I weren't tied anymore. The score was 4–6, advantage trail.

I slept on my tarp, not wanting to shelter myself on that last night, and woke before dawn to watch the sun rise over Mount Hood. It was really over, I thought. There was no way to go back, to make it stay. There was never that. I sat for a long while, letting the light fill the sky, letting it expand and reach down into the trees. I closed my eyes and listened hard to Eagle Creek.

It was running to the Columbia River, like me.

I seemed to float the four miles to the little parking area near the head of the Eagle Creek Trail, buoyed by a pure, unadulterated emotion that can only be described as joy. I strolled through the mostly empty parking lot and passed the restrooms, then followed another trail that would take me the two miles into Cascade Locks. The trail turned sharply to

the right, and before me was the Columbia River, visible through the chain-link fence that bordered the trail to set it off from Interstate 84 just below. I stopped and grasped the fence and stared. It seemed like a miracle that I finally had the river in my sights, as if a newborn baby had just slipped finally into my palms after a long labor. That glimmering dark water was more beautiful than anything I'd imagined during all those miles I'd hiked to reach it.

I walked east along a lush green corridor, the roadbed of the long-abandoned Columbia River Highway, which had been made into a trail. I could see patches of concrete in places, but the road had mostly been reclaimed by the moss that grew along the rocks at the road's edge, the trees that hung heavy and low over it, the spiders who'd spun webs that crossed its expanse. I walked through the spiderwebs, feeling them like magic on my face, pulling them out of my hair. I could hear but not see the rush of automobiles on the interstate to my left, which ran between the river and me, the ordinary sound of them, a great whooshing whine and hum.

When I emerged from the forest, I was in Cascade Locks, which unlike so many towns on the trail was an actual town, with a population of a little more than a thousand. It was Friday morning and I could feel the Friday morningness emanating from the houses I passed. I walked beneath the freeway and wended my way along the streets with my ski pole clicking against the pavement, my heart racing when the bridge came into view. It's an elegant steel truss cantilever, named for a natural bridge that was formed by a major landslide approximately three hundred years ago that had temporarily dammed the Columbia River. The local Native Americans had called it the Bridge of the Gods. The human-made structure that took its name spans the Columbia for a little more than a third of a mile, connecting Oregon to Washington, the towns of Cascade Locks and Stevenson on either side. There's a tollbooth on the Oregon side and when I reached it the woman who worked inside told me I could cross the bridge, no charge.

"I'm not crossing," I said. "I only want to touch it." I walked along the shoulder of the road until I reached the concrete stanchion of the bridge, put my hand on it, and looked down at the Columbia River flowing beneath me. It's the largest river in the Pacific Northwest and the fourth largest in the nation. Native Americans have lived on the river for thousands of years, sustained by its once-bountiful salmon for

most of them. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had paddled down the Columbia in dugout canoes on their famous expedition in 1805. One hundred and ninety years later, two days before my twenty-seventh birthday, here I was.

I had arrived. I'd done it. It seemed like such a small thing and such a tremendous thing at once, like a secret I'd always tell myself, though I didn't know the meaning of it just yet. I stood there for several minutes, cars and trucks going past me, feeling like I'd cry, though I didn't.

Weeks before, I'd heard on the trail grapevine that once I reached Cascade Locks I had to go to the East Wind Drive-In for one of their famously large ice-cream cones. For that reason, I'd saved a couple of dollars when I was at Timberline Lodge. I left the bridge and made my way along a busy street that ran parallel to the river and the interstate; the road and much of the town were sandwiched between the two. It was still morning and the drive-in wasn't open yet, so I sat on the little white wooden bench in front with Monster by my side.

I would be in Portland later that day. It was only forty-five miles away, to the west. I'd sleep on my old futon beneath a roof. I'd unpack my CDs and stereo and listen to any song I liked. I'd wear my black lace bra and underwear and blue jeans. I'd consume all the amazing foods and drinks that could be had. I'd drive my truck anywhere I wanted to go. I'd set up my computer and write my novel. I'd take the boxes of books I'd brought with me from Minnesota and sell them the next day at Powell's, so I'd have some cash. I'd have a yard sale to see me through until I got a job. I'd set out my thrift store dresses and miniature binoculars and foldable saw on the grass and get for them anything I could. The thought of it all astounded me.

"We're ready for you," a woman called, poking her head out of the sliding window that fronted the drive-in.

I ordered a chocolate-vanilla twist cone; a few moments later she handed it to me and took my two dollars and gave me two dimes in change. It was the last money I had in the world. Twenty cents. I sat on the white bench and ate every bit of my cone and then watched the cars again. I was the only customer at the drive-in until a BMW pulled up and a young man in a business suit got out.

"Hi," he said to me as he passed. He was about my age, his hair gelled back, his shoes impeccable. Once he had his cone, he returned to stand near me.

"Looks like you've been backpacking."

"Yes. On the Pacific Crest Trail. I walked over eleven hundred miles," I said, too excited to contain myself. "I just finished my trip this morning."

"Really?"

I nodded and laughed.

"That's incredible. I've always wanted to do something like that. A big journey."

"You could. You should. Believe me, if I can do this, anyone can."

"I can't get the time off of work—I'm an attorney," he said. He tossed the uneaten half of his cone into the garbage can and wiped his hands on a napkin. "What are you going to do now?"

"Go to Portland. I'm going to live there awhile."

"I live there too. I'm on my way there now if you want a ride. I'd be happy to drop you off wherever you'd like."

"Thanks," I said. "But I want to stay here for a while. Just to take it all in."

He pulled a business card from his wallet and handed it to me. "Give me a call once you settle in. I'd love to take you out to lunch and hear more about your trip."

"Okay," I said, looking at the card. It was white with blue embossed letters, a relic from another world.

"It was an honor to meet you at this momentous juncture," he said.

"Nice to meet you too," I said, shaking his hand.

After he drove away, I leaned my head back and closed my eyes against the sun as the tears I'd expected earlier at the bridge began to seep from my eyes. *Thank you,* I thought over and over again. *Thank you.* Not just for the long walk, but for everything I could feel finally gathered up inside of me; for everything the trail had taught me and everything I couldn't yet know, though I felt it somehow already contained within me. How I'd never see the man in the BMW again, but how in four years I'd cross the Bridge of the Gods with another man and marry him in a spot almost visible from where I now sat. How in nine years that man and I would have a son named Carver, and a year and a half after that, a daughter named Bobbi. How in fifteen years I'd bring my family to this same white bench and the four of us would eat ice-cream cones while I told them the story of the time I'd been here once before, when I'd finished walking a long way on something called the Pacific Crest Trail.

And how it would be only then that the meaning of my hike would unfold inside of me, the secret I'd always told myself finally revealed.

Which would bring me to this telling.

I didn't know how I'd reach back through the years and look for and find some of the people I'd met on the trail and that I'd look for and not find others. Or how in one case I'd find something I didn't expect: an obituary. Doug's. I didn't know I'd read that he'd died nine years after we'd said goodbye on the PCT—killed in a kite-sailing accident in New Zealand. Or how, after I'd cried remembering what a golden boy he'd been, I'd go to the farthest corner of my basement, to the place where Monster hung on a pair of rusty nails, and I'd see that the raven feather Doug had given me was broken and frayed now, but still there—wedged into my pack's frame, where I placed it years ago.

It was all unknown to me then, as I sat on that white bench on the day I finished my hike. Everything except the fact that I didn't have to know. That it was enough to trust that what I'd done was true. To understand its meaning without yet being able to say precisely what it was, like all those lines from *The Dream of a Common Language* that had run through my nights and days. To believe that I didn't need to reach with my bare hands anymore. To know that seeing the fish beneath the surface of the water was enough. That it was everything. It was my life—like all lives, mysterious and irrevocable and sacred. So very close, so very present, so very belonging to me.

How wild it was, to let it be.