# THE LAST ENGLISHMAN

## A 2640 MILE HIKING ADVENTURE ON THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL

OUTDOOR BOOK OF THE YEAR

TGO MAGAZINE SHORTLIST

KEITH FOSKETT

# THE LAST ENGLISHMAN

A 2,650-mile hiking adventure on the Pacific Crest Trail

**KEITH FOSKETT**

**The Last Englishman**
A 2,650-mile hiking adventure on the Pacific Crest Trail
By Keith Foskett

Produced by Createspace.com

**www.keithfoskett.com**

ISBN: 978-1480169111

Copyright © 2015 Keith Foskett. All rights reserved.
First edition printed 2014. This edition 2015.

The right of Keith Foskett to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988

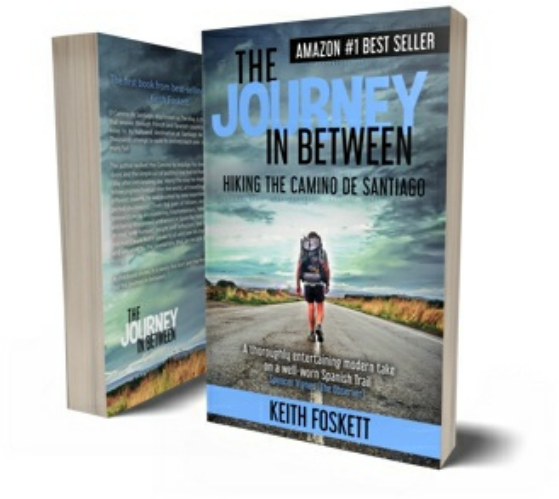
This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the authors prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is produced and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

Back cover portrait by Jeremy Rowley
Cover photo by Josh ‘Pockets’ Myers
www.trekkingphotography.com

**In memory of my Nan**

**FREE DOWNLOAD FOR A LIMITED TIME!**

***FIND OUT WHERE IT ALL STARTED...***




**1000s of downloads - a consistent #1 bestseller on Amazon**

★★★★★

***'A thoroughly entertaining modern take on a well-worn Spanish trail.'***
**Spencer Vignes (The Observer)**

FIND OUT MORE

# Chapter 1

Escaping Volcanoes

*There's no sense in dreaming small, moderation is for monks.*
**Charlie 'HoJo' Mead**

Few things in life are certain. I can tell you that the Pope is Catholic, that NASA did fake the moon landings and that Tottenham Hotspur is the greatest football team ever to grace the playing field. What's also certain is that I don't like cold weather and I get grouchy when it gets too hot. I have an aversion to rain and if there is even the slightest chance of snowfall, I head south. Getting dirty makes me uncomfortable and I become grumpy if I don't have enough to eat. Sleeping well in tents doesn't come naturally. I get scared in the woods after dark, too.

Hardly impressive credentials, then, to hike the 2,650 or so miles that make up America's Pacific Crest Trail, otherwise known as the PCT. So why attempt it? It was a question that I was asked many times before, during and after my hike and at some point later on in this book, I promise I'll tell you.

Before I explain why, allow me to explain what. The PCT is arguably the greatest long-distance hiking trail on Earth. It's not the longest, but the PCT is not about length, it's about variety. Starting under a searing Californian sun just south of a small cluster of houses known as Campo near the Mexican border, it winds its way north (and indeed east, west and frustratingly even south) through scorching desert, the magnificent Sierra Nevada Mountains, the volcanic landscapes of Oregon and Washington, the northern Cascade mountains and finishes at the border with Canada. The route was first explored in the 1930s by members of the YMCA. Once its feasibility became apparent, Clinton Clarke and Warren Rogers lobbied the federal government. Because of the sheer amount of work involved, they had to settle for several trails that already existed but were disconnected. During the ensuing years, hikers and equestrians worked to link these routes together and fill in the gaps. Eventually, in 1968 it was designated a scenic trail by Congress and in 1993 it was dedicated.

A thru-hike of the PCT means an attempt to hike its entirety in one attempt. 40% of those drop out in the first month alone. As the months pass, those that are still on the trail dwindle further, until you are left with the small

number who finish the challenge. Some sources claim 85% of those who start will not finish. Take it on and there is a very real chance that you will not make it.

I need to enlighten you all regarding the pitfalls and dangers because some of you reading this are probably stupid enough to go and try it, so it would be remiss of me if I didn't try and put you off.

First, more people have climbed Mount Everest than have hiked the PCT. That would suggest it is easier to climb the world's highest mountain. You have to negotiate over sixty major mountain passes. Think about that for a second. Most of us have not even been up a single mountain pass. At best, it involves at least a day's hard walking with an early start and a late finish. You'll probably get wet, undoubtedly get cold and spend most of the day cursing yourself for making the attempt in the first place. So, try and do it sixty times – and that just refers to the 'major' passes, not all of them.

If you like quality and variety in your diet then make the most of it before you go. You can still have the variety, sort of, it's just that everything you eat will probably be dehydrated. You can't just pop in the supermarket and do your usual shop of fresh meat, fruit, veg and some cans. It's more a case of preserved food where the water has been removed, which is necessary to lighten your load.

Alcohol will also be restricted by what you can carry. Forget your six-pack of beer and bottles of Chardonnay. Most walkers make do with spirits like whisky or rum that come in smaller and therefore lighter sizes and require less volume to produce the desired effect. We only ever left a town stop with one bottle, more often with none at all, given that we had to carry it.

Inseparable from your bathroom cabinet? Make do with a toothbrush and toothpaste, toilet paper and maybe a small piece of soap. It's pointless taking anything else. You won't be able to wash your hair in the wild and deodorant is begging for forgiveness mid-way through the first morning; you'll stink whether you spray or not.

I apologise for all the negatives but you need to be aware of what you're up against. Attempting a thru-hike of the PCT is no holiday; it is a physical and psychological minefield. OK, 95% of the time it's just a case of putting one foot in front of the other but the other 5% can beat you into submission. In truth, if you make it, or even make a half-decent attempt, you'll be rewarded with the most amazing experience of your life.

So, negatives aside, allow me lift you back up with the positives. The draw

of being able to spend several months in the great outdoors and indeed pristine wilderness is what lures most people on to the trail. Leave your mundane job, kiss your bills goodbye and experience life at its simplest and most uncluttered. Trail life educates you. It becomes apparent that we don't need most of our luxuries, we can live without shopping, TV becomes a distant memory, and realising how uncomplicated life can truly be is an absolute revelation.

You rise on the trail when it feels right, crawl out of your tent, rub your eyes and acquaint yourself with a rough location. Put some water on the boil and sit down with a coffee and bowl of oats. The only sounds are those that nature has laid on: birdsong, the rustling of the pines as a gentle breeze negotiates a way through them and possibly the nearby tinkle and babble of a creek. No alarm clock, no mobile phone and no car horns.

I became detached – gladly separated from the life that I had become accustomed to. Detachment out on the trail is a good thing. It imparts an understanding and a yearning to learn more about the outdoors. At times I wanted to be back in civilisation for a day or so but in the main I relished being lucky enough to have witnessed the wilderness at its most pristine and for a duration that most people will only ever dream of.

Human beings have spent the vast majority of their existence in the wild – the *vast* majority. Towns and cities are a relatively recent concept and, although they make us feel secure, we are not meant to be there. They are not our natural surroundings. You will realise pretty quickly that the outdoors is where we were nurtured, where we spent our infancy and where we were raised. It is embedded in us and is as natural as it is comforting.

There's camaraderie on the trail that you won't find anywhere else. Don't be put off attempting this hike on your own; there are many others, a lot of them soloing. You'll soon find like-minded people you may want to walk with and will probably make friends for life. On the other hand, if you value your independence, you can spend time alone as well.

Having been raised to appreciate the outdoors and walking, it's always been part of my make-up. I have photos taken by my parents of my sister and I walking in the countryside when I was just a toddler: I was literally learning to walk before I could properly walk. Other activities have come and gone but heading out into the green open spaces has always been second nature to me. I have no need to question it. Walking seems as natural, enjoyable and instinctive as sipping a cup of Earl Grey.

The anticipation of throwing some gear into a backpack for the weekend and venturing out who knows where curls my mouth into a smile. Escaping the annoyances of everyday life and instead discovering the energising, invigorating quality of the countryside sends me into an ecstasy of contentment. The restless rush and needless stresses of the working week get trodden into a carpet of auburn-coloured softness, muted by a blanket of leaves.

In my life so far, I have explored a variety of interests and pastimes, by studying, training and taking part in them. If it turns out that they are not for me, I move on. Other interests and activities seem to come to us so easily, to require so little effort and to offer so much enjoyment that they seem to be made for us, and we for them.

I work to earn enough money to go and immerse myself in that wholly natural and familiar activity of putting one foot in front of the other. I usually receive one of two reactions to my lifestyle.

“Fozzie, you’re weird,” is a confused comment I hear regularly, usually after explaining my latest adventure. My reply is, “Really? Do you think so? Thanks!” Alternatively, people react with envy.

I do not subscribe to the idea that life is about leaving school, breaking my back to progress in a career, having two kids, accepting the standard four weeks’ holiday a year (and pretending to be grateful) and handing over my hard-earned cash to a financial company to be put into an annuity that they deem profitable. It’s just not for me, that’s all. The statement that you either live to work or work to live holds great truth. I believe life is for living and to hell with the consequences; I’ll deal with them when they occur.

I have a recurring dream in which I am 85 years old, sitting in my living room, swaying back and forth in a rocking chair, studying the newspaper. I pause, look up and think of all the adventures I could have experienced and say to myself, “Shit, I should have done that.” That is a scene I am determined will not happen in real life.

So, a weekend camping and walking recharges my batteries. A week, maybe two, provides an opportunity to get lost in the outdoors and completely wind down. Occasionally, though, every two or three years, my yearning for something a little more rewarding starts to gnaw away at me. If I were your normal average bloke, I would probably ignore these feelings, but I’m not and so I don’t. I sit up and take notice. I get excited about the prospect of what I could do. At any given moment, I have numerous plans

rolling around upstairs: cycling around the world, taking a year out to explore the canals of Great Britain on a boat, restoring a campervan and travelling around Europe for the summer or – and this is always the idea that takes centre stage – walking a stupid distance through a part of the world that beckons to me.

The PCT grabbed my attention about five years before I made the decision to go and try it. I had completed a thousand-mile walk through France and Spain, and the long-distance hiking experience had not so much bitten me, more ripped out a healthy chunk of flesh. As with all challenges, we do one and then look at what we can do to surpass it. In walking terms, this usually means increasing the distance.

Apart from the length and difficulty of the PCT, the other factor nibbling away at my sanity was its location and with it my longing to let its remote wilderness engulf me. I love walking in the UK but it lacks large areas of backcountry – and, although it can, with some planning, provide routes of insane length, I couldn't have both distance and wilderness there.

Talk to anyone who has been involved in walking long distances and they will probably tell you that the three most renowned routes in the world are all in North America. The Appalachian Trail (2,181 miles), the Pacific Crest Trail (2,650 miles) and the Continental Divide Trail (3,100 miles) are fine objectives for any serious long-distance walker. Walk all three and you can call yourself a Triple Crowner.

There is no standard order of completing these three masterpieces but most attempts start with the AT because it is the shortest, progress to the PCT and finish with the CDT. To me, not known for conformity or following trends, the PCT appealed primarily because of its climate. You could quite possibly walk its entirety and never get rained on, although you will definitely experience extremes of heat and cold. I discounted the AT because of its reputation for high precipitation and also because I didn't want to be like most people and do it first. The CDT is a serious undertaking. It's obviously long, still not completely finished and it's not at all unlikely that, in spite of the scores of walkers who tackle the route each year, you could go for days without seeing a soul. I wouldn't have particularly minded this but I did feel the PCT was a more well-worn trail in terms of numbers of walkers attempting it, which could be an aid to logistical planning en route. The towns along the way are well accustomed to strange-looking people with backpacks, weird-looking footwear, crusty hair, soiled clothes and potentially

lethal body odour aimlessly wandering around, muttering either ‘food’ or ‘shower’. The vast majority of them always made us feel welcome and special.

Having made the decision to go a year in advance, I had spent the time playing an anxious waiting game. I had needed that year to nurture the bank balance into something a little healthier and, although I didn’t realise it at first, also to plan. A year may seem a little excessive but I was surprised at how much preparation went into organising such an expedition.

I had spent most evenings glued to my PC trying to find equipment sponsors, start a blog of my trip and arrange flights, medical insurance, gear and logistics. I spent hours forming kit lists, looking at each piece of equipment that should be up to the task, noting weights, durability, reliability and recommendations. I did already own walking gear but most of it was either too old or too heavy.

As D-Day dawned, I had everything packed and was checking last-minute details when a newsreader on the radio caught my ear. ‘Flights are being cancelled from the UK due to a volcanic eruption in Iceland…’ I jumped at the radio and turned it up, hoping it was April Fool’s Day. The news reports were sketchy at best and for the four days preceding my flight no-one in the UK, including the airlines, seemed to know what the hell was going on. The TV news either showed a plume of white ash rising from Eyjafjallajökull or pictures of Gordon Brown trying to remember to smile and wondering whether he’d win the next election or not. I remember posting on my blog:

**Volcano – What volcano?**

This is clearly a conspiracy theory. The English Tourist Board has dreamt this tale up to prevent us from flying to foreign destinations and thus force people to holiday in the UK. It’s very frustrating and I was going to write to my MP about it but he’s out all the time. Something to do with an election?

Eventually I received an email from the airline saying the flight had been cancelled. Now I was starting to get annoyed. Events were conspiring against me to end my hike before it had even begun. You may ask what the hurry was to get out to California. The answer is the ADZPCTKO. Before somebody thinks I’ve sneezed, this stands for Annual Day Zero Pacific Crest Trail Kick Off. Lake Morena campground, a short drive from the start of the PCT, is the destination for most of the year’s thru-hikers, section hikers,

previous hikers, organisers, equipment stalls and all manner of general misfits. It usually takes place around the end of April, which is generally considered to be the optimum time to start the hike, taking into account receding snow levels in the High Sierra and getting to Canada before the winter grips. No way in hell was I missing it.

In common with most people, I don't particularly like problems. I hate going through the mechanics of trying to solve something that has gone wrong, so I just sit down, look at the situation and spend as little time as possible coming up with an easy and logical solution. The reports from the media were advising that the dust cloud causing the problem to aircraft did not affect airports in southern Europe. Rome, Madrid, Athens and others were throwing up 747s like they were going out of fashion. 'Simple,' I thought, 'just get down to Madrid airport.'

I quickly flicked around the Eurostar web page and watched, amazed, as seats were disappearing every time I refreshed the page. It was time for a decision, so I made a reservation to leave that evening. The rest of the afternoon was spent running around the house saying goodbyes on my mobile, spilling coffee on the carpet, looking at my packing list in one hand and tripping over my sleeping bag that was dangling from the other. It wasn't quite panic, more a sketch from Laurel and Hardy who'd got themselves into a nice fix.

I arrived in Paris just past 9pm and took stock. Somehow I needed to get to Madrid overland and get a flight to San Diego, via my Uncle Tony and Aunty Jillian's place near San Francisco – my 'HQ' for the hike, where I was dumping excess gear. The Gare du Nord station was strangely tranquil. Coffee machines hissed from a couple of snack bars catering for insomniac late travellers. Damp footprints from the drizzle outside wove in from the entrance and gradually faded, the tannoy crackled occasionally and a sweeping machine hummed from a distant corner. I went outside for some air and sheltered under a shop front from the rain. Paris was alive, humid and noisy and as I returned to the station the cacophony of the city abruptly ceased, as though I had just closed the door on a crowded pub.

The only attendant I could find advised that I needed to get to the Gare de Lyon station to get a train to Madrid. I cringed when he added that the underground would be the best option. London Underground I can deal with but the Paris Métro is notoriously unreliable and confusing, not to mention being signposted in what was for me a foreign language.

A suspicious-looking character was loitering by the ticket machine, watching travellers buy their tickets and occasionally trying to make conversation. It transpired that he had made it his business to help those unfortunate souls, like me, decipher the train system and work the machine. Within two minutes he had provided a welcome tutorial on finding the correct route. He did not ask for payment nor indicate that he expected it, but I passed him a couple of Euros and a grateful ‘Merci’.

The Gare de Lyon was deserted, save some homeless; and I ambled round a stark terminal, a prison of cold, lifeless white tiles. I decided against a hotel on the grounds of cost and that I needed to be at the ticket office as soon as it opened in case half the population of Europe had also decided to converge on Madrid. Seeing some unsavoury-looking men peering at me from behind pillars, I also decided against sleeping on a bench. For eight hours I tried to amuse myself, waiting for 6am, when I hoped to be able to buy an onward ticket. I eventually gave in to my drooping eyelids and curled up on the floor by a row of fourteen glass windows displaying ‘Fermé’ signs. Somehow I managed to get four hours’ sleep, despite a hard floor half-crippling my left side. I woke up to the hum of chatter, cracked open my left eye and peered out at a student wearing, somewhat appropriately, a red T-shirt with the slogan ‘All is not lost’ contrasting in yellow across her chest. She was giggling at me – and for good reason. As I winched open the other eye, I realised I had been lovingly spooning my rucksack in my sleep, while a long string of drool stretched down to my shoulder.

As I queued, the omens did not look good. Ticket vendors shook their heads gravely and, although I spoke no French, I could tell from the pained expressions and outstretched palms that those queuing were discussing onward travel options. I inched forward to window number 7 and held my breath.

“Bonjour, madame,” I stuttered anxiously. “Avez-vous une ticket to Madrid? Please … I mean, sivous plaît.”

She smiled shyly, displaying one tooth with an alarming slant trying to break free from the others, and pushed a pair of orange spectacles back up her nose.

“Please, I speak enough English to help you. Probably a little better than your French?”

It sounded like a question but her tone suggested otherwise, so I just smiled.

“Madrid is no problem; the next train is at ten.”

I spilt my change on the counter in a rush to pay her before she either changed her mind or gave the ticket to someone else. Relieved, I made a beeline for the coffee shop.

After a long day sitting on trains watching a green countryside flash by, I eventually hit Madrid airport at 1am the following morning. This airport was deserted too, which I found confusing. I had expected hordes of people who had followed the same logic to get here, but it was not so. A solitary woman sat at a help desk and seemed glad of someone to talk to. Most of the airline desks, she told me, opened at 6am and she suggested I either wait until then or go to an internet terminal and try and book a ticket online. Not wanting to take any chances, as my progress to Madrid had been smooth, I went online but got irritated when the computer kept swallowing my money and its connection speed was slower than a tortoise taking a nap. I spent my time tapping my feet or fingers and growling at the screen.

Enter a chap called Adonis who was sitting nearby with his laptop, making the use of the free Wi-Fi.

“You need help?” he asked.

“I need to book a flight to the States for tomorrow, sorry, today. This connection speed is killing me,” I replied, just on the verge of kicking the machine.

“Let me know what you need and I’ll do the searching for you.”

I paused, cautious as always about anyone offering me something when I haven’t asked for it, especially whilst travelling. He couldn’t exactly take anything from me, I thought, but the process would entail taking my credit card details. I decided to let him have a go and see what happened when it came to the booking stage.

For an hour we sat propped up against a vending machine. Adonis couldn’t have been more helpful. He had page after page open and his hands floated over the keyboard so quickly I got tired just trying to keep up.

My initial flight that had been cancelled had cost me only £240, a favour from a friend who worked for one of the airlines. I winced when most of the opportunities for flights departing that morning were £800 but there was nothing I could do about it. It annoyed me that the carriers had obviously increased their fares in the aftermath of the volcano.

After we had whittled it down to one option, Adonis explained that he would erase the browsing history and left me for a minute while I entered my

credit card details. He then showed me he had done what he had promised. I took him to McDonald's, the only place open, and told him to eat whatever he wanted. The poor bloke wolfed down three hamburgers, fries, a milkshake and an apple pie as if he hadn't eaten for days. He thanked me profusely and then wandered off to the machine again to help someone else.

Smiling contentedly, I felt the plane lurch as it hit the Californian tarmac and the tyres squealed the welcome confirmation that finally, 54 hours after leaving England, my destination was within striking distance. At least I was in the right country.

A bleary-eyed Uncle Tony completely missed me at Arrivals, as I did him, but we found each other and used the hour's drive to catch up. I had last seen him ten years earlier, when I had spent a few months bumming around America. After my head hit the pillow, I slept solidly for ten hours, emerging refreshed to hugs from Aunty Jillian and introductions to their grandchildren, Rudy and Hayley.

Several parcels were waiting for me, containing gear that I had ordered, and I spent the day organising final logistics. A shop for the first week's food on the trail was trial and error, as I could only guess how much I would need. This was followed by a ritual that I would repeat many times over the next few months to remove all excess packaging and decant the contents into Ziploc bags, discarding an astonishing amount of card and plastic. After a few weeks on the trail, I tired of this process because it wasted precious time on my day off. Some of the supermarkets sold provisions from stores in long plastic tubes, from which you just measured out your requirements and placed them into bags, saving the time of repacking and sparing the actual packaging as well.

That evening Tony and Rudy dropped me off at the San Jose Greyhound station for the final leg to San Diego and the ADZPCTKO, four days after leaving England. I was tired and not looking forward to an overnight bus ride but I was proud of the determination I had shown to get even this far. Determination and a stubborn refusal to quit were traits that I was to nurture during my time on the PCT, and I needed to.

* * *

The hardest part of the PCT, and indeed any long-distance path, is actually making the decision to attempt it in the first place. The second hardest is the waiting. Once you've made both commitments it becomes surprisingly

obvious that you should have done it a long time ago. The apprehension you felt at making such a big decision suddenly becomes insignificant and your goal becomes clear and lucid. Make the choice and everything starts to fall into place.

# Chapter 2

The Five-Minute Hobble

*The time you spend out here is worth more than the time it takes, so take your time.*
**Michael Thomas 'Lion King' Daniel**

I walked aimlessly out of the San Diego Greyhound station, confused about where I was and what my intentions were. It was 5.30am; beams of sunlight from a cloudless blue sky sliced and ricocheted among the glass buildings all around me. A cluster of birds took flight, startled by a passing lorry, and I watched as they lifted skyward, swerving and changing direction quickly as if calculating the best bearing. A street cleaner stopped and cupped his hands to light his cigarette, illuminating his face as he propped himself on his broom. A shop door rattled open rudely, startling me as a businessman hurried out, trying to balance a briefcase, laptop, coffee and bagel, and promptly dropped the coffee. Like me, the city was struggling to wake up, a bit scruffy but full of potential.

I rubbed my eyes, tired from having endured the overnight bus ride from San Jose, and looked around for possible onward transport options to Lake Morena. Being Sunday and early morning, public transport was a little limited.

A driver was leaning against his cab with his arms folded on the roof, resting his chin on his hands. He looked bored and lost in his own thoughts.

"Hi," I offered, becoming distracted by the smell of coffee from a nearby café. "I need a ride to Lake Morena."

"Where?" he asked, looking bemused and scratching his chin with one hand while the cigarette in the other hovered hesitantly near his mouth.

"Lake Morena. It's east on the main highway out of town."

"Donny!" he called over to his mate. "You heard of … what was it called again?"

"Lake Morena," I reminded him. I had a familiar feeling of unease in the pit of my stomach that bubbles up sometimes when events are not going to pan out too well.

"Where?" replied Donny.

"Lake Morena," I answered, almost shouting so they both heard me. "It's

about thirty miles east out of town on the main highway, I think."

"Never heard of it, but I can try the satnav. We can get you there."

"How much?" I asked. Wise from previous travel experience, I had learned to agree a price before accepting a service, especially with taxis.

"Thirty miles you say, about a hundred bucks."

Previous experience had also taught me never, ever, to accept the first price.

"How does $60 sound, for cash? I don't need a receipt."

Donny walked over and had a short discussion with his mate while I kept peering over at the café, longing to taste the espresso that a woman had just walked by with.

"We can take you there for $80, cash." The look on Donny's face suggested that the money would end up in his back pocket.

"Fine, let's go. Give me five minutes to grab a coffee."

We headed east on the 94. Donny slouched in the driver's seat, one hand on the wheel, the other switching between a breakfast burrito and the satnav. The highway was quiet as we left the city but became gridlocked on the other side. Glum-faced commuters stuck in the jam tried to peer round the car in front of them to see what the holdup was. I didn't envy them – despondent people with another day at work ahead of them – but realised that just two weeks earlier I'd been one of them, gazing out of my car on the dull and frustrating commute. The odd car horn sounded. This was my first inkling that I was leaving the fast pace of life behind and winding down for the backcountry.

"How far did you say this place was?" Donny asked. His narrowed eyes in the mirror suggested distrust.

"I think it's about thirty miles, but I'm not sure."

"Well, we're on thirty-five now and I haven't seen the turn-off yet."

I grimaced as I saw the meter hit $120 but remembered our agreed deal.

"You mean that turn-off there?" I replied, smiling, as I pointed to the right at a blurred sign displaying 'Lake Morena'.

"Oh, shit," Donny said and then cursed again as he dropped the last portion of breakfast burrito on his trousers. "I got another five miles before I can turn around … shit."

Thirty minutes later we pulled up at the campsite at Lake Morena.

"$225 please."

"You gotta be having a laugh or something! We agreed on $80."

“Yeah, but it was more mileage than you said it was. Man, I gotta charge you or I’m in trouble with the office.”

“Don’t feed me a line, Donny,” I said, that little feeling creeping back into the pit of my stomach. “We agreed on $80, a deal is a deal where I come from and the money’s going in your back pocket anyway. You’re the bloody cab driver with the satnav here – why are you asking me the mileage? You can sing for the other $145.”

I handed him four twenty-dollar bills, which he counted.

“I gotta charge you as the meter says,” he sneered. “Pay or your backpack stays in the trunk.”

Ah yes. I cursed myself silently for not keeping my pack with me. After ten minutes of arguing, we settled on $120 and Donny roared off in a cloud of gravel.

The ADZPCTKO is held at the Lake Morena campground towards the end of April each year. The entire place is devoted to the registration, entertainment, feeding and watering of many potential thru-hikers, plus a lot of others associated with the PCT as well.

The place was buzzing and hikers had crammed the area to bursting point. Tents were jammed into plots too small for them, guy lines were tripped over, marshals milled around. The atmosphere was one of anticipation and excitement. Strangers said hi and smiled at me. I felt at ease straight away.

I made my way towards the registration area, winding along the track and taking it all in. Past volunteers who had hiked the trail in previous seasons had returned to give something back. Some of them toiled away in the numerous food preparation areas, peeling spuds, lighting barbecues and chopping vegetables. Gear manufacturers were setting up their stalls and placing their tantalising merchandise on view. Brand-new sleeping bags hung from canopies and the latest tents lined up in rows from the tallest to the smallest, resembling a mountain ridge. Boxes were strewn everywhere waiting to be unpacked.

“Hi, good morning,” said the elderly woman in the checking-in tent. “Have you registered?”

“Yes,” I replied. “The name is Foskett. Keith Foskett.”

“Oh, we dispense with formalities here. What’s your trail name?”

“Oh, sorry, it’s Fozzie.”

Over the next few months, I’d hardly ever use my real name. Everyone on the PCT goes by their trail name. This is usually pinned on you by other

hikers and reflects how you look, what you have done or how you act. Each trail name has a story behind it, often humorous in nature, and if you are offered a trail name then you usually have to accept it, although not everyone does. I had registered with the nickname that stretched back to my school days, which was derived loosely from my surname. This was partly because I was fond of it and also because I did not want to be landed with some bizarre label such as ‘Irregular Banana’, ‘Curtains’, ‘Shits Skyward’ or ‘Shave your arse and walk backwards’, as some had. You can understand my eagerness to nip this one in the bud quickly.

“OK, Fozzie, I have you down as a thru-hiker from England and you’re camping. You’re one of only a handful of English here this year,” she said, checking the long list of names on the desk in front of her.

She handed me a name badge, which she insisted I pin on my shirt, and gave me the much sought-after PCT bandana. The bestowing of the bandana was started by the PCT class of 2002, who made the first design available to hikers in 2003 and the tradition has continued every year since. It sports the same layout each time, namely a map of the route with major place names, the year and the phrases ‘Hiker to Town’ and ‘Hiker to Trail’ printed boldly near the edges, to be used when hitching a ride. The only change each year was the colour of the material. I cringed when she handed me the latest incarnation in a rather fetching shade of pink.

There was so much going on that I didn’t know where to turn. A waft of bacon floated over and I made a beeline for the food area. One of the many advantages of a being a thru-hiking virgin at the kick-off each year is that all the food is free. Hungry souls formed an orderly line, licking their lips in anticipation and getting into practice for the next few months, when everyone would be trying to increase their energy intake to catch up with their energy expenditure. I took more coffee than I needed and slurped it up, in between mouthfuls of scrambled egg, tomatoes and bacon, while trying to maintain a conversation with Bob, one of the organisers.

I found my tent plot squeezed between three others who had nabbed more than their fair share of ground space, then went about setting up what was to be home for the next couple of nights.

“Hey, this plot was for someone who isn’t showing after all, so you can set up here if you like.” John, one of the volunteers gestured to a far more spacious area with a look that suggested I should take it before someone else did.

“Thanks, I would have struggled to get in there.” I shook his hand and we exchanged a few pleasantries.

One of the few items of gear that I had not sorted out before leaving was a backpack. Logic and experience suggest this is the one piece of equipment that is vital to try on before you buy. I had tried but had not managed to find anything suitable. The volume was either too big or too small, some were uncomfortable, some too heavy and some just basically rubbish. During my research, I had heard good things about a company called ÜLA. I needed a light pack but also with a built-in frame to stiffen the whole unit. Many of the packs available shed the frame to save weight and the end result is a limp sack that dangles off the shoulders like a half-full sack of potatoes. ÜLA’s proprietor, Chris, turned down my request for sponsorship.

“I don’t need the advertising, Fozzie. Nearly half the hikers this year have my packs.”

He was right; the familiar green fabric models named Catalyst and Circuit were bobbing around on shoulders all over the campground. He had, however, told me to make sure I went over to see him, as he had made the trip down to set up stall.

“Chris, Fozzie from…”

“Fozzie!” He interjected and started laughing. “This guy sends me email after email from England wanting a freebie,” he said, motioning others to look at me. “You’re a persistent guy, Fozzie. You get the pack OK?”

“Yeah, fine, thanks. It seems to fit well but I said I’d come over to meet you and get that expert fitting you offered.”

“Sure, hoist her up and let’s take a look.” He studied the pack and me for a while, suggesting I lift the hip belt up a touch. We talked shop for a while and as I walked away I turned to him again and said, chuckling,

“I still want the next one for free, though!”

I woke the following morning to the realisation that this was the day my PCT thru-hike was to start. I opened one eye and peered out through a slit in my sleeping bag at the dim light struggling to illuminate the green tent fly sheet. It was cold, moisture clung to the roof of my little haven and I could see the ground outside was white with a crisp frost; not the sort of temperature I had associated with southern California. Escaping the confines of a warm sleeping bag and getting into cold clothing is not one of my favourite experiences and I shivered as I slid on my hiking gear and jumped out of the tent, flapping my arms and jumping up and down, trying to warm

up.

“I definitely don’t recommend this.”

I looked over at the guy next to me: yes, he was talking to me, his face contorted into an expression of sheer disgust.

“Don’t recommend what?” I asked.

“Well, I thought I’d save time and washing up by putting coffee in with the porridge. I don’t recommend it.”

A few hikers were already up and the steam from boiling water atop cooking stoves looked like chimneys puffing smoke in an industrial landscape. People cocooned in hats and gloves stood around waiting for hot water to make a brew, while chatting and smiling at the prospect of their virgin day on the PCT. Grass peeped through where footprints had broken the frost. The atmosphere was so full of an intoxicating enthusiasm I could almost smell it.

Lake Morena looked glorious, having apparently saved her best for the day. A weak mist covered her, but as a gentle breeze wafted past I glimpsed pockets of clear air and sunlight bouncing off her waters, as if she were a birthday surprise gently unwrapping herself.

The start point at the Mexican border actually lies a few miles south and several visitors to the kick-off were laying on transport. I jumped into Shrek’s car with Gabe and Cara, two hikers I had become acquainted with the previous day. The familiar sight of the PCT start monument appeared, flanked by an imposing black steel fence separating us from Mexico. It was a view I had seen countless times in photos. A few hikers were leaving, having had their starting snaps taken; and we did the same, handing our cameras to Trailbird, who obligingly clicked away for us.

I watched as those hikers set off and wondered how many of them would make the cut. Four or five out of every ten potential thru-hikers quit in the first month alone and even more would not last the distance. I looked at Cara and Gabe, who both looked confident and fit. Were they wondering the same about me? Averages dictated that one or two of us would not make the finish. As it transpired, in the ensuing weeks both of them unfortunately fell foul of the drop-out statistics.

The morning cold soon surrendered to a magnificent day. This was to become the norm for California, as one would expect. The sky was a flawless blue; winds occasionally ruffled my hair, and before long I had replaced my down jacket with shorts and T-shirt as sweat trickled down the valley

between my back and pack. We found our own pace that first morning, sometimes walking with others and sometimes on our own. Space Blanket and Dicentra joined me and we idly chatted away most of the twenty-odd miles back to Lake Morena, itself situated right on the trail. I was surprised at the abundance of plants. The first 700 miles are classed as desert, although not the typical sand dunes and searing heat that one might imagine. Strictly, it is known as chaparral, consisting of waist-high scrubby vegetation clinging on to a mix of grit and rock, which gives a satisfying crunch underfoot. An occasional yucca plant towered over me, its flowers looking like a thousand dangling white bells. Over time I learned these flowers were edible and regularly grabbed a handful to supplement my dried provisions. They provided a satisfying crispness in the mouth and tasted a bit like lettuce leaves. I made my way through sections of lush grass that moistened my legs from the lingering dew. Memories of England entered my head as I pulled off pieces of rye grass and threw them like darts.

Gabe and I stopped under a low tree for lunch, trying to squeeze back in the shade. Dicentra soon joined us and sat down next to me. Her long hair was tucked under a green sun hat with her white-rimmed sunglasses perched on the brim. The dust gaiters on her shoes were made from a colourful fabric and I had watched her modelling them to admirers earlier. She seemed happy-go-lucky, smiled a lot and made frequent arm gestures when excited about a topic, her favourite being nutrition. I learned she had written a book extolling the tricks, virtues and delights of eating well on the trail. This book, *One Pan Wonders*, was proving a success with those who were looking for something more exciting than the usual supermarket offerings. I thought I was doing pretty well with some tuna and tomato stuffed in a tortilla, until saliva started trickling from the corner of my mouth as I watched her prepare her lunch. Gabe's eyes were also twitching enviously in her direction. She placed three tortillas on her lap and prepared the fillings. She rehydrated fried beans with cold water, added fresh avocado and topped it all off with taco sauce.

I'm quite proud of the fact that I can convey hunger, admiration and envy, all in one facial expression. Once they have seen it, recipients generally relent and are forced to offer me some of whatever they're having. If I could also display what meagre rations I had into the bargain, I generally didn't even have to trade for anything – although I should say that I suffer from a karmic guilt complex and would always repay any favour when I could, such as

buying them a beer in the next town.

Gabe was also in on the act and doing splendidly, but Dicentra, being a kind-hearted soul, merely made us a tortilla each without blinking an eye and smiled.

“I’m happy to make you one,” she said. “There’s more stuff in my book.”

I walked on my own for most of the afternoon and stopped at Hauser Creek for water. The desert had been blessed with abundant rainfall over the winter and I had several opportunities each day to re-stock, which in the temperatures was a godsend. Motor joined me as I filtered a couple of litres for the remaining five or so miles back to Lake Morena. She asked if I had seen any snakes, which I hadn’t, and went on to tell me she had encountered three already.

“How many?! Where?” I enquired, gulping.

“Well, the last one was only about five minutes back up the trail. I saw it slide off as I came round a corner. It was a rattler, for sure. I saw its tail.”

I grimaced. I have a deep fear, bordering on a phobia, of snakes and bears – hardly ideal for the PCT, which boasts a varied selection of both. The rattlesnake was the most common. I think I inherited my anxiety from my father, whom I have seen executing six-foot jumps on sighting a grass snake, one of our completely harmless native English varieties.

“You know, there is a simple way of dealing with snakes,” Motor said.

“I’m all ears.”

“Well, you have to make sure you’re walking with two others and you’re not the last in line.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, the first person wakes the rattler up. The second one pisses it off and the third one gets the bite.”

“Right, thanks for that,” I said drily, raising my eyebrows slightly to let her know I had been hoping for better.

For the first few weeks I walked in perpetual fear of *Crotalus atrox*, the western diamond-backed rattlesnake, and other species. It scared me because it ticked all the right boxes – or, rather, all the wrong boxes. First, it grew to silly sizes. Second, its bite was pretty nasty, although not lethal if one received medical attention. Mainly, however, it scared the crap out of me because it just looked terrifying. I’m not suggesting any snake looks exactly ‘cuddly’, but the rattler’s eyes are just evil. Its brows slant diagonally from a high point of the outside of the eye to a low point on the inside, giving the

appearance that it is relentlessly pissed off, which, if you come across one, it generally is.

I had received a lot of advice about snakes. I was told that I probably wouldn't see one, which always makes me nervous because it's a sure-fire way of ensuring that I will. Others told me that it can only strike as far as its body length and I read that if you do get bitten the best thing to do is lie down! This priceless piece of wisdom originates from the Aborigines. The theory is that lying down relaxes the victim, slows the blood flow and hence delays the poison getting into the bloodstream. Excuse me, but if I did get bitten by a reptile, I would be more likely to be screaming my bloody head off, jumping around like someone who had just stepped on a campfire and screaming, "I'm gonna die, somebody help me!"

I also read somewhere that the bite is rarely fatal and at worst I would only experience the most excruciating pain, similar to liquid fire being pumped around my arteries. Right, then, thanks for that.

I was on 'rattler alert' when I thought I was in prime snake territory, which in California is pretty much everywhere except the local 7 Eleven. I would scan the trail up to fifty feet ahead of me, making visual and mental notes of anything that could be a snake. From a short distance, sticks that scattered the trail could easily resemble one. I imagined myself sweeping the environment through the eyes of a Terminator machine: anything that looked potentially dangerous would be flashed up in red with three alert beeps and margined over the left-hand side of my vision for verification as I moved closer.

As there was such a lot of natural debris scattered about, my head beeped like a microwave with a short circuit and so many potentially lethal objects were margined in my eye that my left field of vision reduced to a hazy shade of crimson.

As with most natural predators, however, once I had actually seen a few, I started to evaluate and eventually understand what little danger they actually posed. The positive thing about rattlers is that they let you know where they are by rattling (which incidentally sounds something like air escaping under high pressure from a pipe) and then all you have to do is give them a wide berth. I saw many during my hike and came to have a healthy respect for them.

Snake count: 1
False alarms: 27

I walked the final five miles back to Lake Morena on my own. Gabe was behind me because I had increased my speed to get away from a local called Andrew, out for a day hike and intent on holding a conversation with anyone who would last more than five minutes in his dreary company.

Twenty-one miles is not a huge distance by thru-hiking standards, but for a first day, with a full pack and in those temperatures, those final miles seemed to last an eternity – but an enjoyable eternity it was. The temperature fell a little with the approach of another cold night and the sinking sun painted stripes of shadow across the trail. With the last high point of 3,000 feet under my belt, I descended the two miles back to camp just as dusk was falling, almost willing Lake Morena to appear before me. Eventually I saw countless head torches moving around like fireflies and the laughter and chatter of happy hikers.

As I crossed over the last dirt track towards the others, I was met by a standing ovation and around a hundred people cheering. At first I looked around, expecting to see someone famous behind me, but then realised they were cheering me, just as they welcomed back every successful hiker on that first day. It honestly brought a tear to my eye and I cockily bowed and then raised my trekking poles above my head in salute.

As I stumbled in, I was greeted by Terrie Anderson. I was to meet her later in my hike – she and her husband Joe open their house to hikers every year. Thrusting a gigantic plate of Mexican stew into my hand and a beer in the other, she kissed me on the cheek and said, “Sit, stay!”

The hikers were in good spirits that evening thanks to good food, beer and great company. I ate, rested, chatted and laughed for a couple of hours and then, succumbing to tired limbs and too much beer, wove my way through the rolling mist back to my tent.

Sliding into my sleeping bag and placing a weary head on my rolled-up jacket, I smiled, took a very big breath and told myself that all I had to do to become a Pacific Crest Trail thru-hiker was to repeat that first day … about another 180 times.

* * *

I have never had any problems with my own company and can happily spend a whole week, or longer, walking on my own. This obviously is a positive attribute for a thru-hiker. I hadn’t expected to have company straight away, preferring to find my own feet and socialise in small bouts as I met different

hikers each day to figure out which ones I clicked with. So, it goes to show what a sterling bloke Gabe is that we ended up walking together for most of the first week.

We were both pretty laid back and preferred to take it easy those first few days, so we had no problems agreeing on when to take breaks, where to camp and how far to walk. On the final few miles of the approach to Mt Laguna campground at 6,000 feet, we were taking lunch and comparing our food supplies. Hikers experiment a lot with mixing food. We have to, as our favourite stuff depletes quickly, leaving the less tempting options, which get livened up by being mixed in with something else. Gabe proudly offered me his simple concoction of a flour tortilla generously smeared with Nutella and scattered with banana chips, exclaiming:

"Foz, it tastes just like a pastry!"

He declined my offer of a fair trade, turning his nose up at my tortilla with peanut butter, shaved parmesan and chocolate M&M's. I can't say I blamed him.

Gabe was 26 and attempting the PCT "to try something exciting before I start medical school". He hailed from Orange County and was also keen to escape the hustle and grind of city life. A little taller than me and well-built, he was someone you wouldn't pick an argument with, but if you ever did, he'd probably shrug it off and make a joke of it anyway.

For the first week we concentrated on finding our feet. All our gear was being worn in and we were still learning how to use it. We honed our skills in packing and unpacking our bags, pitching our tents, cooking our food, hygiene (or rather lack of it) and finding water to treat. Searing heat meant that this was one area we could not skimp on: we had to drink or become dehydrated. Our maps indicated where the sources were and thankfully most of them were flowing well. Gabe carried a gravity filter, which entailed filling a small bag, hanging it on a branch or something similar and letting the fluid seep through an attached hose at the bottom and through a filter. Other than lifting the bag, it required no effort; but it took a little longer than my water filter, which looked something like a small bicycle pump that I pulled out to suck in water and then forced back in again to filter. It kept clogging up, so it had to be dismantled, the rubber valves reversed and water forced through again to wash out any dirt and debris. It seemed for every two litres I was treating, I needed to backwash a further litre, a process I soon found frustrating. There was Gabe, sitting and munching on a snack while his bag

did all the work, grinning as I crouched, elbows stretched out to my sides, exerting so much effort that my face looked as if someone was pumping air into my head and it was about to explode.

The gurgle and splutter of sweet, cold water was a beautiful sound to hear as we rounded a corner or topped out on a hill. Not only could we drink but we could also down our packs and sit for a while. To save weight in my pack, I usually treated a litre and drank it straight away, feeling the cool liquid tumble down my throat. Then I would take another litre with me to last an hour or two until the next creek. On one particularly hot day I worked my way through seven litres, as well as all the confrontation with my filter that went hand in hand with it.

As we walked the half mile or so on the road to the store at the summit of Mount Laguna, we could see several hikers sitting outside in the shade eating ice cream. Mojave and Cheeks, whom I was to encounter many times on my hike, told us that the store owner was forecasting a fierce storm. After quickly discussing the options, we decided to hunker down for the night in a cabin at the rear of the store. Mojave and Cheeks, being a married couple, took the separate room, Gabe got the main single bed and I was lumbered with the famous ‘cot’. This American institution, common in motels, hotels and other establishments, is what we English refer to as a ‘put-you-up’ or fold-away bed. It is stored vertically and folds down, usually leaving some sort of uncomfortable ridge in the middle. The hard frame sinks into your arms (so by morning my biceps had red stripes across them), the twanging springs keep you awake, and one particular model even tried to spring back upright with me still in it.

At 3am I parted the curtains and peered out to see horizontal rain whipping debris across the parking lot. By the time we rose, it had subsided a little and the store owner persuaded us to stay put till lunch, when he assured us it would die down.

Gabe and I left shortly after and bumped into a steady stream of hikers backtracking to the store to dry out and get warm, a couple of them borderline hypothermic. We later learnt that, before the first week had even finished, nine people had decided enough was enough and got off trail that day.

We continued on through vicious gusts of wind to the water supply at Penny Pines, where Ben, glad of some company, joined us. Being constantly blown back, forwards or sideways, we stumbled into the picnic site at the

Pioneer Mail Trail Head late afternoon and decided that we should camp there – mainly on my insistence, because there were picnic tables. The availability of tables may seem a strange reason for choosing a camping spot, but they were high on my checklist on the trail. After spending days sitting on the ground to eat and do simple tasks such as journal writing, they were a blessing. An occasional added bonus was meeting a family who had stopped off during a long drive, with whom I could perfect my 'I want your food' expression, usually producing excellent results.

We all helped pitch the others' tents, two sitting on the canvas while the other went round and pegged them out. Despite some great tables, we couldn't help noticing that we had camped a hundred or so feet down from a col, which was funnelling the wind through with frightening ferocity. Mojave and Cheeks arrived an hour later and retreated back to a more sheltered position to set up their camp.

The wind howled frighteningly all night, making my tent billow and shake. I unzipped and poked my head through the opening in the morning to take stock of the mayhem. Twigs and large branches scattered the area and upturned litter cans spilled refuse. I laughed as I looked over at Ben's tent: at some point during the night, he'd cleverly anchored two of his guy lines to an adjacent table that was firmly cemented to the ground. The warden arrived and surveyed the scene, taking off his hat with one hand and scratching his head with the other, amazed we had managed to ride out the storm. In theory, camping is not allowed at picnic sites but after we promised to pack up and be on our way quickly, he accepted that the circumstances were unusual. Mojave and Cheeks sauntered in, looking slightly battered, and explained their tent was wrecked and they had to get a new one or at least a replacement under guarantee.

We were soon joined by the Mad Hatter, an English guy living and working in Saudi Arabia. I had seen him at the kick-off with an impressive top hat straight out of Alice in Wonderland, which he told us he had ditched as it kept blowing off in the wind. Having bought a house in Oregon, he was essentially walking 'home'. Up to the point where we met him, he had been walking with a guy called Upchuck and sharing a tent, as he hadn't thought it necessary to bring his own, but a personality clash meant he had left him behind.

"Upchuck is like herpes," he said, grinning. "I can deal with him but only in very small doses."

At that precise moment, Upchuck came careering round the corner like a runaway train. Mojave and Cheeks had to jump off trail as he ploughed straight through our group, with a feeble ‘excuse me’ and muttering something about a forty-mile day.

After the storm, the trail – strewn with pine needles and cones – alternated between dry and damp sections, which I started to refer to as either a milk or plain chocolate path. We dipped in and out of shade before returning to the chaparral as we descended. Gabe and I were suffering from blisters, which subsided as usual when we were walking but were excruciating for the first ten minutes or so after we had sat down to rest.

“It’s called the five-minute hobble,” I explained.

“Yeah,” he replied. “So this is how it feels to be ninety!”

I used to think about how my body was dealing with the onslaught. I conjured up an imaginary woman called Angela in my feet, sending signals up to the nerve centre HQ, run by a chap called Reginald.

“We’ve got problems down here,” Angela would say. “I don’t know what the hell is going on but I’m trying to deal with three blisters, impact problems, muscle sprains and a potential abrasion on the third toe of the right foot. You gotta send me some backup; I can’t hold it together much longer!”

“You idiot!” Reginald replied. “We’ve got six months of this! He’s on another one of his walking adventures, isn’t he? You think I haven’t got other problems up here? There’s lower backache, sunburn to the ears, I’m trying to sort out grit in the left eye and if we don’t take on board more water, we’re in for some serious overtime tonight! I’ve got no resources! You hear me? No resources to work with! I’m in desperate need of nutrients up here and I can’t get those from chicken ramen! Just pray he stops in the fruit and veg aisle in the next supermarket. You’ll just have to shore up the defences in the meantime and work with what you got!”

We hobbled on down to the Rodriguez Spur road, where a local called Wayne had set up camp with some welcome amenities for hikers. I got very excited when I saw some chairs and even a table. Solar showers provided an unexpected but sorely needed wash. The Mad Hatter set up camp in one of the shower tents (as he still didn’t have a tent of his own) and soon began to realise that the uneven floor and cramped space weren’t boding well for a good night’s sleep. When he then spilled most of the contents of his water bottle, he wasn’t in the best of moods.

The blisters were really troubling Gabe. I knew how he felt; no matter

what action or precautions I took, I always fell foul to them. I had a few but was managing to cope. Trying my best to lift his spirits, I kept reminding him that the first month on the trail was always going to be the hardest and blisters were inevitable, but he was despondent and a little withdrawn. Before we turned in, I urged him to get to the next town stop, Julian, and maybe take a day's rest. Good food and a warm bed always worked wonders for morale.

* * *

"A life has to have purpose. A life with no purpose is meaningless and a meaningless life has no purpose." The Mad Hatter was lavishing profound sayings on me as we worked our way down from the hills towards Road 78, where we hoped to get a lift into the town of Julian. He was hankering after a hotel bed and I for the pie shops that I had heard so much about. Zigzagging down the switchbacks, I could already feel the slight crunch of pastry in my mouth as the crust gave way and my teeth sank into the coolness of a cherry pie. I also needed meat, chips, ice cream, beer and coffee. I think Reginald, up in nerve centre HQ, was getting a little stressed out when he realised that the fruit and veg aisle may not be a high priority.

We stumbled on to our first water cache. These are maintained by local people and are found especially in dry areas or sections of trail where there is a long distance between water sources. This first one set a high standard. There must have been 160 litres nestling in wooden shelving, along with several cool boxes harbouring Cokes and other soft drinks. Even though the road was only a quarter of a mile away and a lift to Julian beckoned, we sat in the shade for thirty minutes and drank our fill.

Julian impressed me the moment I arrived, but I was not planning on staying. I needed only to re-stock on food and get a couple of good meals inside me. My walking was going well and progress seemed positive, so I wanted to make the most of it. I left Hatter at the hotel and got a quick ride back to the trailhead to put in some more miles as the sun began to sink.

I was barely 50 feet up the 2,000-foot climb that led into the San Felipe Hills when I noticed someone waving at me from a couple of hundred feet away. I didn't recognise her but she kept waving, so I waved back.

"Hi," I said, upon reaching her.

"I'm a bit freaked out," she greeted me with. "There's a couple of Mexicans and I'm sure they're following me. Every time I look round, they duck behind a bush. I'm walking on my own and it's making me

uncomfortable. Sorry, hi, I'm Brittany."

We shook hands.

"I'm Fozzie. Look, it's getting dark," I said. "There are some trees with cover from the road down there and I think a creek as well. If you like, we can set up camp there. I think Ben is literally just behind me as well, so I'm sure he'd join us."

"I'd like that, thanks."

We intercepted Ben on the way, who again was glad of some company for the night, and we pitched tents. We cooked and I hopped about on one leg for a while trying to wash one foot at a time.

"I killed a scorpion!" screamed Ben triumphantly. "I killed a scorpion!"

So far, I had become fond of every single person I had walked with. Such a mix of characters, but with a common love and respect for the outdoors. I nodded off with a contented smile and an ear cocked for escaped Mexicans.

Journal entry:

All good! The ADZPCTKO party is fantastic; lots of like-minded people there to give and exchange advice. 350 or so thru-hikers registered this year, lots of free food, great people and great fun.

I start at 7am on Sunday 25 April, at the Mexican border. Blue skies, temperature around 25C and a cool breeze. I am with two thru-hikers, Cara and Gabe. We sign the register at the official start monument, take photos, pause for a moment to contemplate what we are about to do, and start to walk north 2,650 miles.

The first 400 miles (about three to four weeks) is essentially desert walking. Not as hot as I expected. For a thru-hiker, long sleeves, trousers, sun hat and a bandana over the neck are the norm. The PCT gains in elevation, from 2,200 feet at the start to 6,000 feet in the Laguna mountains, in the first few days. Very few trees, but generous rainfall over the winter means that there is greenery, including spring flowers.

Occasional shade is welcome, and I can feel the sometimes-damp ground on my skin and smell its sweetness. There is more than the average amount of water for this time of year, but it's not much. Most of the water sources are flowing; little creeks and streams of clear, sweet water gurgle past. I have to use the water filter to drink, but it's tempting just to dunk my head in. Now and again I soak my bandana and squeeze it under my hat, to give some respite.

Within two hours Gabe and I receive our first greeting from the resident rattlesnake population. We round a bend in the trail, and suddenly this chap rears back. The rattler is coiled and ready to strike, tasting the air and shaking its tail. A few well-aimed sticks fail to move it on its way, so we skirt around it, about twelve feet away. Twenty minutes later – another one! "Great," I think. Two snakes in as many hours. Now I've encountered them, though, I think my phobia has been cured. Rattlesnakes just do their own thing and won't strike unless you get too close.

We climb slowly up to Mt Laguna at 6,000 feet, and arrive late on Tuesday 27th. Awe-inspiring panoramas all around, and this is only the first few days. There is still the occasional small patch of snow, and we have been warned there is more to come.

The wind is so strong sometimes that we can't move forward. Ben joins us and together we somehow reach the Pioneer Mail trailhead. Forced to a halt by the worsening wind and cold, we hastily cook a hot meal and pitch tents. Slightly to our surprise, we survive the night, albeit without any sleep. I have never experienced such winds, and the way they slammed into my tent and buffeted me all night was frightening.

Physically I'm good. The knee is solid and no problem at all. My right calf aches from time to time, though, and I massage it each night. I have some minor blisters, but nothing compared to what I experienced on El Camino a few years ago, so I'm happy. Every night I pierce each blister with a needle, squeeze out the fluid and sterilise with alcohol. My face is a little dry, though that's to be expected, and I smell like a skunk who's taken a vacation in the local sewer. I am now in a charming little village called Julian, having hitched a ride from a local lady called Sandra. I am in the company of the only other English man on the trail, who goes by the name of the Mad Hatter. We have eaten at Buffalo Bills Burgers, and I have a few things to buy before heading back out on the trail later today. I will camp again tonight, unlike the Mad Hatter who can't resist the lure of the hotel.

Having the time of my life!

# Chapter 3

The Art of Hitching a Ride

*Spam; it's pure energy condensed to a slow vibration.*
**Mahmood 'Cedar Elk' Mokhayesh**

Sweltering under the Californian sun, I continued to knock miles off the desert section. Unlike some trails such as the Appalachian, the PCT deals with hills by employing switchbacks like you would find driving a car up a mountain pass. The Appalachian Trail takes the direct approach, steep but straight up and over. I often thought about which I'd prefer. Switchbacks drive you insane: a direct two-mile up and over can increase to six when all the twists and turns are taken into account. On the other hand, because the incline is kinder, generally the ascent is not too severe. I kept reminding myself of this but it still became a little frustrating. Imagine your hand laid flat on a table, fingers apart. Take a line directly over the knuckles, go up and down four times and you're over the hills. Fingers represent foothills decreasing in height from the knuckles down to the fingertips, or the valley floor. The PCT would climb up the base of the first finger, work its way down to the nail, back again to the knuckle and then up the second finger and so on and so forth, until reaching the base of the little finger. Every time I saw the elevation increase in my handbook, I would be met by images of countless hands and fingers stretching as far as the eye could see.

I surveyed valley floors and saw green lines of trees meandering as they kept in touch with a creek for a drink. Minerals would glisten and wink at me as I looked down at the trail, like infinite stars splattering a night sky. Dead trees dotted the way, bleached stark and white by the sun and long since stripped of bark. The branch remnants towered over me, clawing and grasping at me like a giant's hands. Hummingbirds would occasionally buzz around my head, at times stopping a mere couple of feet away from my face, and hover miraculously, almost motionless, their wings humming, their iridescent plumage changing colour in a pearlescent blur. They seemed to be watching me, trying to work me out. I was absolutely mesmerised and bewitched, awestruck at their sheer beauty. I passed the 100-mile mark, where someone had carefully laid out '100' in a neat stone pile. Most major mileage targets were signified this way and I praised myself for making it this

far. “Just do all that again twenty-six times,” I thought.

At another water cache I found hikers contorted and squeezed in any morsel of shade they could find. Bob was sitting under his umbrella and I was introduced to Stumbling Norwegian, Sugar Moma, Dinosaur and Swayze. As I sat down and reversed, cheek by cheek on my bum, until I was under a low hanging bush among them, the conversation picked up from where it had left off.

“Did you go today?” Dinosaur’s remark was aimed at Bob.

“Yeah,” he replied, smirking.

“Are we already on the poo topic?” Sugar Moma enquired.

“It would appear so,” I joined in, thinking it was like my first day at school when I wanted to be part of everything.

“How about you, Fozzie, you keepin’ regular?”

“Very much so. I may miss the odd day but that’s to be expected with a lack of fruit and veg out here. M&M’s, jerky and cheese have a habit of bunging me up a little. You know? A lack of fibre?”

“I agree,” Bob offered. “Nevertheless, a good colour, nice consistency?”

“Yes, I didn’t have any complaints, thanks.”

Apart from Julian, the small town of Warner Springs heralds the first main stop. There’s not an awful lot there save a petrol station with some meagre rations to restock, a golf club serving a great breakfast and the actual Warner Springs Resort. PCT hikers enjoy a reasonable discount at the thermal hot spring, which can be reduced even further by pitching in with a few others to share the cost of a cabin. I had agreed en route to split with Brittany and Ben and in anticipation of a rest day had left myself merely thirteen miles to walk before I arrived. I often left small distances to arrive at a town stop. Arriving late means that as soon as you have checked in it’s time for bed, and as most establishments chuck guests out at around 10am, you don’t get much chance to enjoy the room. At the latest I aimed to arrive at midday but usually I would camp a couple of miles from town, get in early morning and have the whole day to chill out.

After a night when I’d camped in a dry stream bed at 5,000 feet, the PCT descended to 2,000 feet on the approach to Warner Springs. From a damp, misty and cold start, the trail welcomed me with open arms at the end of an extraordinary first week. I spent the day weaving through woods that provided dappled shade, passed Eagle Rock and listened to the tinkle of the San Ysidro Creek as it kept the trail company for a short while. Trees merged

into meadows bursting and overflowing with spring flowers in all shades of lilac, blue, red, and pink. Vibrant orange poppies peered over tall grass. Mice peeked at me from their burrows; lizards ran for cover; rabbits hopped about. After the cold, the wind, the aches, the blisters and the hunger, it felt as though I had proven myself over week one and in return the PCT just gave me a huge welcome hug.

I passed Hojo, Jess and Tradja and admired the way they had camped the previous night, 'cowboy-style', as the Americans call it, in a sleeping bag but no tent. It's a great way to save time pitching and taking down your tent but the real reward is gazing up at beautiful skies every night and feeling the breeze tickle your cheeks. I regularly used this method back home in England but was reluctant out here because of the large variety of wildlife that could bite, sting, claw or just plain kill me. OK, so a flimsy piece of tent canvas isn't going to save you from a bear or mountain lion, but when you are inside that little haven, it feels like a castle. There's something remarkably (if falsely) comforting about being cocooned in a tent: you think you're safe from anything. I vowed to cowboy-camp more often regardless.

Hojo caught up with me as I was checking in and took up my offer of sharing, as there was a spare bed in the room. Ben and Brittany were already there, revelling in the opportunity to take a shower, lie on a bed and walk barefoot on a carpet. The resort was well cared for and, although old, very well run.

The others left earlier than I did the following morning and I made the most of the great American breakfast with Tradja, Jess, Brittany and Burnie.

"How would you like your eggs, sir?" the waiter enquired.

"Er … erm…" I looked at the others. "How the hell do you order eggs over here?"

The table giggled.

"Fozzie, I'll give you the American breakfast tutorial," Tradja replied, sounding as though it was going to take much longer than it actually did.

"First, eggs. Sunny side up, just cooked on the bottom and not flipped over. Tends to be somewhat raw on the top. Next, over easy. Flipped for a few seconds to cook out those raw bits. Finally, well done. As the name suggests, turned over until the yolk is cooked through. Potatoes, either hash browns, which are shredded and cooked on a hot plate, or home fries, little cubes, sometimes with onion and garlic. Finally, toast. You can have white, which is self explanatory, wheat, which I believe is the same as your brown

bread, and finally rye, which is kinda like sourdough with rye seeds in it."

"Thanks very much," I said. "I feel fully confident now."

The waiter hovered as I perused the menu.

"OK, two eggs over easy. Bacon, well done, hash browns, also well done and wheat toast. Orange marmalade if you have it, orange juice, no ice, and coffee, strong, black and keep it coming."

There was silence around the table and heads nodded in approval, confirming I had passed the breakfast-ordering initiation ceremony.

I headed out just before midday, taking advantage of the lower, flatter terrain. It was hotter down there and the grass was turning from greens to browns as the summer strolled on. I passed Cheeks resting under a tree, who explained that Mojave had returned to Warner Springs to check if their new tent had arrived at the Post Office. I stopped and chatted with Alex, who was from Scotland, although his accent had been diluted a little with what sounded like English private school overtones. He walked in a white, collared shirt, soiled as one would expect after days of grime and sweat. He had removed the hip belt from his pack, to save weight, and I was astonished to learn that his budget for the entire PCT was £400.

I have the fondest memories of the camp spot that evening at Lost Valley Spring. Water was on hand, albeit half a mile down a side track. A small plateau commanded a great view over the valley below us and the blue of the sky merged into maturing reds and oranges. Stumbling Norwegian, Sugar Moma, Bob, Brittany, Elk and Burnie were in various stages of setting up camp, cooking or playing impromptu guitar. Giggles floated through the air and aromas of mac and cheese, coffee and Elk's pop tarts mingled with the scent of spring flowers. Burnie was eyeing my hot sauce to spice up her dinner and Elk was trying to sell the benefits of spam to me as he made inroads into his fourth pop tart. Early starts and early bedtimes, or 'hiker midnight', meant we went to bed at dark and got up at light. Most of us were therefore asleep just after 9pm.

The food topic continued over breakfast. Porridge, or just plain 'oatmeal' as it is called in America, took pride of place. I go through phases with porridge: sometimes it turns my nose and at other times I can merrily knock it back for weeks. I researched our friendly grain and among the information I managed to gather was the suggestion to cook it for at least eight hours. I regularly did this at home although not, I hasten to add, every morning. I would knock up a pot to keep in the fridge and just reheat what I required

each time. The lengthy cooking time really brings out the flavour and the consistency is wonderful. Additions of sultanas or other dried fruit, nuts, spices such as cinnamon and nutmeg and even chocolate had me experimenting for weeks. I became an oataholic.

The trail limits your food options but I usually settled on adding powdered milk to the mix, water obviously, sultanas and honey powder, which I found in a hiker box (I'll come on to hiker boxes later). I would mix this all up in the evening and let it steep overnight, which meant less cooking time and a superior texture once cooked for a couple of minutes.

"They're a good respite from depression," claimed Cedar Elk (referred to by everyone as 'Elk'), watching my recipe as he cooked his.

"Does that explain why you're so freakin' happy all the time?" Brittany asked.

Pop tarts were also a heated subject of debate. I'm not a fan: there are too many ingredients, for starters, which always makes me suspicious; they're heavy; but mainly I didn't think they tasted very nice. Cedar Elk was converted, along with a few others, and he used to munch on a couple to solve the immediate hunger crisis before his main cooked meal was ready. Marshall Walker Lee referred to eating pop tarts as his 'morning ritual of self-loathing'.

The San Jacinto Mountains started peeking at me every time I crested a high point, their flanks still dressed in snow. I was becoming acclimatised to the high temperatures more quickly than I had imagined and the heat wasn't affecting me greatly. As long as I concentrated on drinking at least half to one litre of water an hour on average, and covering any bare skin with trousers, long sleeves and a Sahara hat, then I was OK. This made me sweat more but my Smartwool layers remained comfortable. The ascents produced more perspiration as my body strained and my breathing rate increased, and as I wiped my hand over my forehead, a mixture of SPF50, sweat, sand and grit grated and rasped against my brow. I was working towards my next stop and re-supply at Idyllwild, a regular haunt of hikers due to relatively good hitching chances on a busy road, a variety of eating establishments, a half-decent store and a gear shop. There was also a good campsite with showers. I had camped near the highway in the company of Hojo, Charmin, Stumbling Norwegian and Sugar Moma. Hojo and I were on the road at 7.30am in the hope of hitching a ride, a ritual I was to repeat many times over the following months.

Sometimes there is no rhyme or reason to getting a ride, but I did try to follow some basic tips I had picked up over the years to increase my chances. First, always put your pack by the side of the road where drivers can see it. This advertises the fact that you're a hiker and not an axe-wielding madman. Choose a straight stretch of road so you can be seen, but preferably a short stretch so vehicles can't pick up much speed; a speeding car is less likely to stop than one moving more slowly. Try finding a layby so any potential rides can pull in off the road, and stand a good couple of hundred feet before it so it presents an opportunity for them to get off the road quickly. If this is just before a corner, even better as they have to slow down. Junctions were perfect spots as vehicles had to actually stop and then be faced with my wry smile and well-honed pleading look. Any driver caught in my foolproof gaze would be rendered completely helpless.

My worst effort at hitching a ride was when I waited by the roadside just outside Etna for three hours. I eventually resorted to collaring a day-hiker who came off trail to his parked car. The best? Reaching a dead-end road just outside Wrightwood, where cars had to turn around to go back down the hill. I approached, still on trail, as a car was doing just this and as I stuck out my thumb, the driver came out of the manoeuvre and started to accelerate. She saw me, stopped, reached round and opened her back door, which enabled me to walk straight off the trail without so much as breaking my stride. It couldn't have been quicker or easier. Being with a female increases your odds substantially, presumable because motorists find a woman less intimidating. Sometimes, to improve our prospects, I would hide off road in a bush and shout advice.

"Pull your skirt up a bit," or "Toss your hair about. SMILE."

The expression of many blokes changed from delight at having picked up a good-looking girl to disappointment as they saw me walk out from my hiding place.

"Oh, fancy that," I used to exclaim as I emerged from the bushes. "I mean, what are the chances of reaching the road just as you stopped? Thanks very much."

Lastly, if just standing there isn't producing good results then do something stupid. I used to jump up and down, dance or open my umbrella and spin it round in front of me. This makes drivers slow down and look because it's different. Once you have their attention, get eye contact, then smile and look sorry for yourself. If the driver is female, a quick, suggestive

rise of the eyebrows also works wonders.

After an hour outside Idyllwild of dancing, umbrella spinning and enough eyebrow raises to make my forehead ache, I eventually received a reciprocal smile from a young lady and she took us both into town.

The campsite was excellent and I set about my day-off routine. First came my body and the important task of ridding it of dirt, grime, sweat and odour. I cringed at the violent stench that assaulted my nose as I removed my shoes, leaving a clear sock line between a white ankle and a brown mix of congealed dust on my lower legs. I gingerly peeled off my socks with two fingers and placed them with other soiled clothing in a bag as I put on the only spare clothing I had that wasn't heading for the tumble drier: waterproofs. You can always spot a thru-hiker in the launderette because they will be sitting there, waiting for the machine to run its course whilst they drip inside a Gore-Tex jacket and bottoms. I liked to wash my clothes first because it meant I had something clean to wear when I emerged from the shower later.

While waiting, I would sit and read a magazine, lifting the machine lid now and then to see just how brown the water actually was. A quick tumble dry and back to the showers.

Never before in my life had I been so grateful to take a wash. Watching a tawny-coloured murk swirl down the plug hole, I loved the invigorating feeling of water and soap against skin.

I hadn't been bothering with shaving as there was no need for it. Most of the male hikers also dispensed with this chore and, as the walk progressed, so did our beards. After a few months there were some impressive clumps of hair adorning most of our faces. My ability to grow bristles doesn't rank up there with the greats such as Grizzly Adams. I end up with a nice goatee merging into my cheeks, where it just sort of gives up. That said, further into the PCT, even I was proud of my beard. The amount of facial hair is a sure way to distinguish a thru-hiker from a day-tripper.

Washed and laundered, I'd catch up with emails, update my blog, check all my gear was OK, and replace, repair or upgrade if necessary. The main call, however, was food. American breakfasts are incredible affairs and I was salivating at the thought of them, even days before hitting town. Eggs, bacon, pancakes, hash browns, beans, mushrooms, sausages, patties, toast and coffee. Not necessarily in that order. I made my way over to the Red Kettle, which was teeming with hikers, and was invited over to a corner table with Elk and Brittany.

Elk was a true outdoorsman and completely at home in the wild. He knew a lot about plants and was soon to provide me with my first taste of rattlesnake, which he had dispatched after it had been hit by a car. I aspired to match his enviable beard. He strode effortlessly along on two tree trunks for legs. He smoked a pipe and the conversations I enjoyed with him always made me laugh, often to the point of hysterics, thanks to the sheer preposterousness of his obscure angles on various subjects. If you look at the quote at the beginning of this chapter, you'll get the idea.

Brittany was married with a daughter and was only attempting part of the PCT but loving it. She had shaved off her long hair before starting and it framed an attractive face, which was always dressed in a big, cheeky smile, whether she was battling or not. I was immensely fond of her; her infectious cheer rubbed off on me every time I spent time with her, and she always lifted my day.

I returned to the campsite, pondering lunch options on the way, and found Burnie had set up her tent near to mine. She was my other favourite girl, although at first I was unsure of her. She had a sweet voice with the slightest hint of a squeak and when she laughed it made her sound like a seven-year-old witch, if you can imagine such a tone. I often tried to amuse her just so I could hear her giggle. She also had some sinus problems, which meant she had to blow her nose loudly and often. I remember one particular night camped with her and a few others in the forest and she had gone off for a pee. As she returned, she was clearing her nose.

"What the hell is that noise? Is that a moose?" I had asked the others, who were also listening intently, trying to figure out what sort of creature could produce such a bellowing. Closer and closer it got, to the point where torches came out to illuminate the scene. Most of camp fell about laughing as Burnie eventually emerged from behind a bush with a handkerchief in one hand. After a few days, tired of carrying an endless supply of tissues, she started employing the method most of us used: holding one nostril shut with a finger and blowing out hard to remove any debris, and then repeating on the other side. Burnie referred to this as 'snot rocketing out my boogers'.

Burnie was in her mid-twenties. She already had the Appalachian Trail under her belt and the long-distance walking bug had taken hold. When trying to use her MSR WhisperLite stove during the early days of the AT, she couldn't seem to get the timing right and the burner kept going up in flames (anyone who has owned a WhisperLite can surely relate to this). After

melting the sleeve of her synthetic jacket, burning a hole in her wool hat and nearly burning down Springer Mountain shelter, she was issued her trail name. With me, she seemed at first unsure and hesitant; for that reason I tended not to spend time with her, but then realised that I exhibited the same trait. People often find me difficult to get to know and perhaps unapproachable. This is not something I do intentionally; I think it's just some sort of subconscious warning signal. The result is that I find the people who do make the effort are genuinely worth knowing. So, after we had both broken down each other's barriers, I enjoyed her company.

"Apache Peak still has snow, apparently," she said to me.

"Yes, I heard."

"My ice axe and crampons have been mailed up trail for the Sierras, so I don't have them."

"I don't think there'll be that much up there," I said, trying to reassure her. "Even if there is, I'm sure it's negotiable with care."

"Hmm," she said uncertainly. She looked worried.

"Look, if it will make you feel safer you can walk with me and we can watch each other's back."

"No, it's fine – I don't want to impose."

"Burnie, you're not imposing. If you want me to walk with you, then it's not a problem, really."

"But I don't walk very fast, I'll hold you up."

"Look, think about it. It makes sense. I don't want to force you into something you don't want to do, but I don't mind. Really, I don't mind. I leave tomorrow, so give it some thought."

In the morning I got an easy ride back to the trailhead with her, employing the road junction tactic, coupled with female company. Twenty feet back on trail and we stopped before we had even properly got moving, thanks to some trail magic in the car park. Trail magic is the term used to describe an act of kindness or generosity taking place – usually by the side of the trail or where it crosses a road. It normally takes the form of food and drink in abundance or somewhere to rest in shade, and is laid on by previous thru-hikers who realise its value, having been on the PCT themselves. Meat was grilling, cold drinks adorned the interior of the coolers and I met Grey Fox, Spiller, Flashlight, Vader and Pyjamas all taking a well-earned break in the shade.

We passed Upchuck sitting by a pile of beer cans on the trailside and smoking something that made him talk at speed about nothing interesting for

ten minutes. We didn't sit down but just leaned on our trekking poles, pretending to be interested, and made our escape as quickly as possible.

"What's he going to do?" Burnie asked afterwards. "Hallucinate his way to Canada?"

Burnie did walk more slowly than me, but remembering my reasons for taking on the PCT in the first place, namely to be completely open to events and circumstances, I didn't mind. I was to walk with several others during the hike and rarely found someone who walked naturally at my pace, or I at theirs. One had to consciously slow down, speed up or just walk ahead and rest once in a while for them to catch up, which is what I did with Burnie. Having offered to accompany her, I felt I had a duty to see her safely over Apache Peak – or at least the snow-bound sections – and it was equally reassuring to have her watch my back as well.

In any case, she was good company, in no hurry and had a relaxed aura about her that rubbed off on me. There were, again, rumours of storms coming in and we were both aware that we could be up there in the thick of it between 6,000 and 7,000 feet. On reaching Fobes Saddle (in America they refer to a col, which is a pass or depression in a mountain range or ridge, as a saddle), I noticed a side trail marking a water source half a mile down and decided it would make a suitable early camp spot, mindful of the imminent storm. A quick scout down the trail proved a good idea: there was indeed a well-flowing spring and a flat area to set up tent, it was 500 feet below the saddle and abundant trees should provide some wind break. I remembered how Gabe and I had wisely chosen to shelter on Mount Laguna, and as the trail went up to 9,000 feet I was keen not to increase our altitude any more. I walked back up and left a note for Burnie, who was catching up, by the side of the trail:

"Storm coming in. Camped half mile down track in good shelter with water. Take side trail and turn immediately right and follow down. Fozzie."

She arrived shortly after and we both started to set up camp. It was still only 4pm but the winds were increasing. The spring provided excellent water and there was also miner's lettuce growing in abundance. Also known as winter purslane, it is named after the Gold Rush miners who used to eat it to stave off scurvy. Brittany had shown me this edible plant a few days earlier and it was common in shade and near water. As the name suggests, it tastes just like a salad leaf and I used to fill up my pan with it and sprinkle with grated parmesan, olive oil and pepper for a tasty starter. Several people had

warned me not to make a habit of eating too much because it has a reputation for – how shall I say? – loosening up one's movements a little. Burnie was very excited to find a free food source and tucked in as well.

By dusk, the storm seemed to be racing over our heads a mere hundred feet up. There was no rain but sand was being kicked about, blasting everything in its path, including us. As each successive deafening blast ripped across the valley below, we braced ourselves for the impact. As soon as we could, we retreated to our tents, where I spent most of the night unable to sleep until it abated around 2am. Frustrated by the lack of rest, I resorted to snacking after a raging hunger kicked in and worked my way through a large proportion of my supplies. Despite restocking in Idyllwild, I would have to go down the Devil's Slide, another exit point down a steep ascent and long walk, to make up the food deficit.

We climbed up the following day, hoping to reach Saddle Junction and the Devil's Slide. The early morning heat melted the last remnants of snow clinging to branches over the trail and I felt the occasional slap of meltwater on my head. Little puffs of dust erupted on the trail as the drips landed. Eventually we rounded the north side of Apache Peak, where we had been warned about lingering snow. It was worse than I had anticipated but by no means impassable. Sections of the trail were still obscured by snow banks covering the steep sides of the hill but there were plenty of dry sections poking through. It was vital to keep an eye on the track and a firm footing, as it kept disappearing and reappearing. One slip would have sent us tumbling down an infinite Andreas Canyon Gorge. Post-holing was also a problem. I had heard a lot about post-holing – it doesn't sound that dangerous but can end a hike. The first souls to walk over fresh snow on the PCT each year leave footprints for others to follow, assuming they are going in the right direction. The best way is to follow these prints as the snow under them is compacted and therefore more solid; also, breaking trail is hard work where sinking up to your waist is not uncommon. The problems start as the summer wears on and the snow becomes slushy and unstable; then, hikers can break through the surface and a stray leg can hit the ground underneath, which is often rock. It usually results in nothing more than a graze but bruises, sprains, breaks and cuts are common. The worst scenario is if you are walking quickly downhill and a whole leg breaks through. The momentum carries you forward while the leg stays in place, leading to inevitable horrors.

We climbed and dipped relentlessly like leaves on a fluctuating breeze,

one minute gasping and sweating, the next pulling on extra clothing because of the cold. From Fobes Saddle to Saddle Junction, we tentatively made our way through the six-foot snow drifts that littered the trail, making an average of a mile an hour (normal walking speed is three miles per hour). I, too, had mailed my ice axe and spikes up to the start of the Sierra, so it was a balancing act as we gingerly tiptoed through, supported by our trekking poles.

By the time we had got to the bottom of the Devil's Slide, it was getting dark and we still had three miles further to go on the road to town, the previous twelve miles having taken us eleven hours. I stumbled into the campsite again, too tired from effort and lack of sleep after the storm even to cook or shower, and fell immediately into a deep slumber.

Journal entry:

Vistas to die for. I was expecting hot, arid and dry desert in southern California, but it continues to surprise me. Sand gives way to scrub, surrendering to rocky outcrops, which remind me of old Western movies. Then, I climb to 8,000 feet and walk through pine forest resplendent with flowers. I strain to make out a horizon that is many days away. Heat that I have never experienced before changes to a chill in the mountains, as I put on a hat, gloves and a down jacket and wake up to ice on the tent. It's a constantly changing scene that continues to catch me out.

For the last two days I have walked from highway 74 (not the most romantic of locations; I apologise for that), to a place called Saddle Junction in the San Jacinto mountains. I have been warned by some of the park rangers that there is still snow in places, mainly on the north-facing slopes.

However, some fellow hikers and I decide to walk, rather than wait three or so days for my ice axe and crampons to be sent here. The first night at Fobes Saddles (around 6,000 feet), I am with an American woman called Burnie and several other guys as we watch a cloud bank roll towards us like a charging bull. The guys decide (foolishly) to continue on and up. Burnie and I retreated down a couple of hundred feet, to the relative safety of a woodland clearing.

At 8pm I stand outside the tent and watch, dumbstruck at the roaring storm flying past a few hundred feet above me, like a torrent of water at rapids. At 2am it finally abates and I manage to get some sleep. Surveying my tent and equipment that I had left under the fly sheet, in the morning I find everything

covered in a fine layer of dust and grit. Storms, it would appear, are part of the deal here.

I walk eleven miles the following day, climbing and dipping. One minute I gasp and sweat in heat, the next I pull on extra clothing to ward off the cold. From Fobes Saddle to Saddle Junction, I tentatively make my way through six-foot snow drifts that litter the trail. For the last two miles the PCT appears and vanishes under the snow as the sun begins to set. Twelve miles take eleven hours. At 8pm I finally stagger down the Devil's Slide Trail to Idyllwild, somehow managing to erect my tent and climb, exhausted, filthy and too tired even to wash, into my sleeping bag.

I'm loving every single second of it.

# Chapter 4

Blisters

*Hiking is my addiction. The PCT is my dealer.*
**Patti ‘Sugar Moma’ Kulesz**

I hadn’t seen Gabe for days but at breakfast the following morning I learnt he had ended his hike shortly after I last saw him at the Rodriguez Spur Road. He sent me an email citing blisters as the main problem but also saying that he felt he should have prepared more in terms of fitness and gear. “I wasn’t ready for a thru-hike, Fozzie,” it read.

The Red Kettle was buzzing and I sat with Brittany, Burnie and Elk. Brittany, wearing an orange top with white trousers, was bouncing up and down to the piped music, looking like a bobbing buoy lost on choppy seas. She also had an alarming habit of smothering everything she ate with tomato ketchup, so that her breakfast looked as if she had lost a limb in some freak accident.

I was never too fond of ketchup but I did have a small bag where I kept condiments to spice up my trail food. Salt and pepper were staples, along with a few herbs (curry powder, cumin and oregano) and sugar. I would occasionally buy a cup of tea at a petrol station and ‘accidentally’ slip a couple of tea bags in my pocket as well; after all, an Englishman must have his Earl Grey. I was also developing a fondness for hot sauce, which is commonplace on American restaurant tables. It’s uneconomical to buy these items because they are packaged in large quantities, so I used to procure them in eating establishments along the route. I didn’t class it as stealing, as I was eating there anyway, so my conscience was untroubled. Elk always said ‘stolen condiments taste better’.

Once the attention of the waiting staff was diverted (the perfect time was just after the food was delivered, because they’d then leave us alone for a while), I used to unscrew the top of the salt and pepper shakers and pour some into a little receptacle kindly given to me by Hojo at Warner Springs. I also added to my sugar container and tipped some hot sauce into a little screw-top plastic bottle with a flip-top spout. This top-up would see me through a week or so.

My favourite was a brand called Cholula but I was also partial to Tapatio,

the ever-popular Tabasco and lots of other varieties. The further I made inroads into the PCT, the more different types of hot sauce found their way into my bottle, which varied in taste from one week to the next. Sometimes it was a little sweet, sometimes salty, on occasion really fiery, at other times mellow. I used to say, when others teased me about refilling, that at some point the taste would be perfect and I would have found the ideal hot sauce. When, after a few weeks, I eventually realised that I had reached that moment, it dawned on me that the secret was lost forever, as I had only a rough idea of which brands were in the bottle and in what quantities. I had reached hot sauce enlightenment, but was unable to preserve it for posterity.

The Red Kettle chatter centred on Fuller Ridge, which we would be crossing that day. It was still covered in snow and known for often being the first snow section encountered on the route. I got a lift back to the bottom of Devil's Slide, where a group had formed, keen to have company and reassurance over this section. Stumbling Norwegian, Sugar Moma, Burnie and Pigpen were all there, checking packs and preparing for the slog up the slide and then Fuller itself. A couple of day-hikers sporting beer bellies smiled at us as they passed us on the way up, remarking that it was easier to walk with a day pack than our loads bursting with several days' food supply. Twenty minutes later, we caught up with them sitting beside the trail in a pool of sweat and trying to catch their breath.

"It's also far easier to walk when you're fit," I remarked and winked at them as I passed.

Pony and Your Mom joined us and we all teamed up to navigate our way over Fuller. As I have mentioned, one of the problems over snow was navigation. With the trail buried a few feet under us and, at times, the actual PCT signs buried as well, it wasn't easy. Occasionally we could pick up footprints but this was no guarantee we were on the correct trail. Obviously we couldn't go too far off course as we were walking on a ridge, so we only needed to keep on or near the top, but it involved a lot of GPS checking, scouting around and general discussion. Slips, slides and falls were the order of the day as we picked a route through the white. Trying to obtain some sort of purchase on angled banks of snow meant that our walking speed plummeted. Every step was taken gingerly and with a healthy fear that at any moment our feet could be whipped from underneath us as if someone had tied a rope to our ankle and pulled sharply sideways.

I was bringing up the rear of the pack at one point and watched in horror

as Pony slipped and started falling down the slope to our right, gaining momentum quickly towards a steepening drop-off. Under other circumstances she could have self-arrested (plunged an ice axe into the snow to stop the slide). However, none of us had our ice axes with us, as we had not been expecting snow this early in the hike. In a flash, Pigpen dived over the side and slid down to catch her up, arresting both of them with his feet and any other part that would bring them to a stop. I wouldn't have attempted such a risky manoeuvre, but Pigpen threw caution to one side and acted completely on impulse. Having only known Pigpen for one morning, I already had a strong respect for him. Pony was understandably thankful, as well as shaken.

I expect a few of you are shaking your heads at this point because we were negotiating a snow ridge with no ice axe, no crampons and no rope. In mountaineering terms this is a no-no and I have to say I agree with you, but allow me some defence, albeit a weak one. If a thru-hiker had to carry every piece of equipment that was needed, we would all be struggling under a towering rucksack weighing 50 kilos. It's just not possible. Also, we put weight a long way before safety. If we can get through a section with 100ml of stove fuel, then we risk it. If we're buying a jacket, the first thing we check is not whether it's waterproof but how many grams it weighs. One pair of socks is fine for a week because two pairs would make our packs heavier.

Lightening the load is a series of small steps that make an overall improvement. We would not notice whether we were carrying one pair of socks instead of two, but if you make several small improvements, the bigger picture emerges. Buy the lightest gear possible you know will work, carry the smallest amount you're comfortable with and make a lot of minor sacrifices.

Failing that, learn the hard way. Take more and then walk for a week. Every year, somewhere around Warner Springs, you'll see a lot of hikers throwing stuff out of their packs and mailing it back home.

When we arrived at Black Mountain Road, we were all fatigued although in good spirits. We also realised that not one of us had remembered to fill up with water for camp, and had it not been for Your Mom, Pigpen and Pony, who graciously offered to walk two miles back up trail and then back, we would have gone thirsty and hungry.

The following morning, I walked with Stumbling Norwegian down the endless switchbacks on Fuller Ridge's east side. We stopped for a break and some shade under an overhanging rock. I reached for my spork (a plastic

eating utensil with a spoon one end and a fork the other), only to discover it had somehow disintegrated into four little pieces. Norwegian laughed at my forlorn expression as I realised I had nothing to spoon out my peanut butter with.

“Don’t worry, Fozzie, the trail will provide,” he said reassuringly.

I reached the bottom on my own and made my way across a dry, featureless flatland to a promised water cache under the bridge where the trail met Interstate 10. Marker poles stuck in the sand every quarter mile or so guided me through. Dry creek beds crossed the trail, their surfaces etched with ripple patterns that looked like tree bark where the water had once flowed. A huge gopher snake whipped out from beneath a bush, making me stop abruptly in mortal terror. It was longer than I was tall and flew across the terrain at a speed faster than any human could run.

I reached the underpass and water cache just as the local trail angel who looked after it came sliding down on his quad bike. Dr No stopped in front of me and, without even asking, reached round to the cooler strapped on the bike and handed me the coldest beer ever. As I took the bottle, a sliver of ice gently slid off the top and glided down the side, where it melted and dripped down my finger.

“Thanks,” I said. “Great timing.”

“No problem, here to help,” he replied.

We chatted for a while, and as I put my rubbish in the bin, I noticed something sticking out of the sand. Bending down to pick it up, I couldn’t believe my luck. An antique spoon, black with tarnish, nestled in my hand. On the handle it bore the inscription ‘MBL’ and on the underside there was a silver hallmark and the engraved letters ‘Pat 1907’.

Dr No explained that the highway had been built over a hundred years ago and, although he doubted if it was a worker’s spoon, as they would not have eaten with silver cutlery, it may have been left by someone picnicking under the bridge to get some shade. I remembered Stumbling Norwegian saying, “The trail will provide”, and smiled. I spent a few minutes rubbing it in the sand, which removed the tarnish, and it came up like new. That spoon stayed with me for the rest of the PCT and I still use it when I go hiking now. Despite weight penalties, we all have to have one item of luxury.

I was tempted to get a ride into Cabazon for a hot meal, five miles up the Interstate, but mileage was not meeting my expectations. I was managing around fifteen miles a day and I wanted to be putting in twenties. Besides,

hitching a ride on the Interstate is nigh on impossible, as the vehicles are travelling too fast – and it's also illegal. Not that this would have stopped me trying. "I'm sorry, I'm English, I had no idea" got me out of a few scrapes with the authorities.

I carried on through knee-high grass to get to the Mesa Wind Farm. Lizards ran for cover and startled me after my snake encounter earlier. Even my trekking poles kept catching the grass and rustling, so I was a bit of a nervous wreck. Stumbling Norwegian had told me that the workers at the wind farm welcome hikers into their canteen and even keep their freezers stocked full of goodies, asking no more than the actual cost of what is eaten by way of payment. It was shut when I arrived and I hoped some of them would be working overtime the next day, as it was Sunday. Burnie, Stumbling Norwegian, Pigpen, Your Mom and Pony arrived shortly afterwards with the same plan.

Excited by the rare opportunity to get a hot breakfast on trail, most of us were up and in the canteen by 7.30am, rummaging through the freezer and microwaving burritos, burgers and croissants, drinking loads of coffee and washing it all down with ice cream. I said I'd cover the cost to return the favour of the water collection mission the previous evening.

The heat was intense which, coupled with the ups and downs of the trail, left us all dripping. I still couldn't believe how much water was about. It wasn't exactly abundant, but there was a creek every five miles or so. It made me laugh when I remembered back in England that we get a drought warning after two weeks of sunshine. Out here they rarely see rain for weeks, even months, but still we could fill up.

We made the steep descent through the Whitewater Canyon to the Whitewater River. It was only midday but everyone was so hot that the chance to cool down was irresistible. For two hours we splashed about, did some laundry, built dams to create pools and washed off our accumulated grime. The canyon walls plunged diagonally into the ground, striped in different shades of brown, like a huge slice of chocolate layer cake that had been rammed into the earth. It felt wonderful to be clean again and I took a short siesta in the shade. Keen for a little solitude, I left before the others, progressed over to the next valley and picked up the trail weaving from one side to the other of Mission Creek. Blisters were still plaguing me and I figured it must have been the sand and grit working through the mesh on my shoes.

I jumped down on to the banks of the creek, ready for another crossing, and as I landed another blister burst, making me shout and hobble to a painful halt. Enough was enough for one day. I pitched tent among some scary-looking holes in the ground that I hoped did not house a tarantula or something equally creepy. I checked the tent for holes and made sure my zip was well and truly sealed before sleeping.

I woke early, cooked some porridge and was just on the verge of leaving when I noticed someone approaching from downstream, jumping nimbly from one side of the creek to the other like a mountain goat. Yvo had started on the trail at 6.30am and I walked with him for most of the day. He hailed from Switzerland and bore a striking resemblance to John Lennon, with scruffy hair meeting an unkempt beard, interrupted only by wiry spectacles. I half expected him to whip out a guitar and play a rendition of Hey Jude or similar. He walked quickly and apparently effortlessly. Gliding along without even breaking sweat, he would stop every thirty minutes, comment on the view and carry on, with me gasping somewhere behind him, leaving a trail of perspiration in the grit. It was like trying to keep up with a pacemaker. If you needed to be somewhere quickly, and if you could keep up, Yvo was the man to stick with.

We fumbled our way aimlessly along Mission Creek, hemmed in by towering cliffs either side of us as they narrowed like a huge funnel, feeling the heat of the sun when we walked out of the shade and a chill when we returned to it. With the constant gurgle of water as a companion, we must have crossed the creek thirty times, hopping from one side to the other. Sometimes we balanced our feet on one side ready to leap over and the weak soil gave way beneath us, the icy water chilling our toes. Straining our eyes, we tried, sometimes in vain, to locate an elusive trail. A rattlesnake glided casually across the path, startling me. Normally they would signal a warning but this one was silent, seemingly without malice or intent to confront, and my fear subsided. A forest fire had left trees stark and white, stripped of their bark and twisted into bizarre shapes at the trail edge. We climbed up, and up, and up, praying for an end to unrelenting hills.

The end did not come until ten hours later. Yvo, who had long since pulled away from me, had camped under the fir trees at 8,000 feet. I nodded a greeting and gestured I was carrying on, and he signalled that he understood. Two miles further on, after walking twenty-one miles and climbing 4,500 feet that day, I pulled off the trail. It was 7.30pm. I laid down my pack, set up the

tent and watched the sun sink over the mountains to the west and a crescent moon rise. Stars slowly began to pierce the black as my saucepan lid rattled, letting me know that my food was ready. It was the only sound in the mountains.

I reached Onyx Summit the following morning and managed to get a ride into Big Bear with a fireman after just a couple of minutes. I was planning on staying at the hostel, which I'd heard good things about; and after a bus ride, which I swore circled the same route twice, I finally arrived. Grayson, a very hospitable host, checked me in and told me to make myself at home. A sombre Sugar Moma was already there, explaining that she had got off the trail at the top of Devil's Slide because of fatigue and some dietary problems. She didn't look happy and I sensed something a little deeper was simmering.

I wasn't taken with Big Bear. It was just far too spaced out, a phenomenon I encountered a few times at town stops. It sounds crazy that you're walking from Mexico to Canada and then complaining about having to walk everywhere once in town, but rest was important to me on my days off. I concentrated on the usual tasks of showering, laundry, food shopping and emails as quickly as I could so I could just sit down, grab a beer and chill out. But it never happened that way. My plan to take one day a week out always extended to a day and a half or, more often, two days, just to fit everything in that I wanted to do.

The main time drain was sitting at the computer. My hike was gaining momentum. I was receiving more and more communications from people I had never heard of and the blog was doing well. Most were wishing me well, which was heartening, but it took an ever-increasing amount of time to answer them all, which I felt obliged to do. I was constantly frustrated as well by the lack of internet facilities. The library usually had several computers but they came with a stingy one-hour time limit, which was nowhere near enough.

My appetite in town was massive. On the trail I was hungry, but no more than I would be on a normal day at home. Once I was resting, however, my body seemed to sense I had time on my hands and decided it should be spent making inroads into my calorie deficit. I always had a huge breakfast and the wait for lunch was so long that I had to eat mid-morning as well. By the time I had eaten again just after midday, I had already put away 4,000 calories and I would snack mid-afternoon and then indulge in a huge feast in the evening. Of course, ice cream was a must an hour or so before bedtime as well. I

estimated I was packing away 6,000 to 7,000 calories a day and was still constantly thinking about where and when I was going to eat next.

Grayson took me back to the trailhead after two days and I set off again alone. Classic single-track had me wishing I was on my mountain bike. The way was dusted with pine needles, which cushioned the feet and suppressed the dust. The air was ripe with the sweet smell of butterscotch leaching from the trees and I kicked the occasional pine cone, pretending I was taking the winning penalty in the World Cup. Huge fallen tree trunks sometimes blocked my passage and as I approached I would size them up, calculating whether it was best to climb over, squeeze under or walk round.

I fell into daydreams and miles would pass without my realising it. I sometimes missed turns or splits in the path and I had to remind myself to concentrate more on where I was going, as well as watching the surface for rocks, snakes and obstacles that could result in a twisted ankle. I felt angry at having to scan the ground immediately in front of me, because it denied me the chance to look up and around at my surroundings, so I would stop once in a while and just gaze about. I tried to look behind me as well – sometimes the best views were staring me in the back. Some days went by in a blurred trance as the repetitive rhythm of footfall lured me into another world. Hours passed without seeing another soul or even hearing another sound except the crunch of my feet on the ground, the regular stab of my poles either side and my breathing.

Passing some hot springs, I was tempted to plunge in but it was Friday evening and they were teeming with people from town. Beers cans littered the banks and hoarse shouts disturbed me as I walked past graffiti scrawled on the rocks. Fairly innocuous slogans like ‘I love Kate’ or ‘Alcohol forever’ were interspersed with lewd sexual suggestions, which reminded me why I had come to the PCT in the first place.

The peace and ambience of the wilderness were often rudely shattered on the approach to civilisation and I started to resent the human race, sometimes retreating further into myself and forgoing company for fear of being dragged out of the very solace I had discovered, and savoured. To preserve my selfish tranquillity, I often waited if I saw hikers ahead so I could remain alone, or if I knew people were behind me I might speed up. I camped well off trail to prevent being disturbed. For days I just yearned for nothing more than to get lost in the desert, pretending I was a sole apocalyptic survivor and could roam at will. I begrudged roads, cars and buildings their existence and even

aircraft started to grate.

I became addicted to a self-imposed loneliness and started to savour the prospect of the remote Sierra Nevada, where I could indulge my desire to become even more detached from the life I had become used to. I tried to berate myself for allowing such feelings, convincing myself they were too negative, but I couldn't. I was happy in my solitary meanderings and dreamt up ways to stay infinitely detached.

Then, suddenly, I would snap out of it and be eager to walk with others. I liked company but equally I relished being on my own and I used to flit between the two according to my mood changes.

Snake count: 3
False alarms: 62

After 350 miles I was already in need of new shoes. The trail surface was rasping away my footwear like sandpaper, but even taking that into account I was surprised. On that sort of average I would be getting through eight pairs by the end of the hike. An English company called Inov-8 had sponsored me with Gore-Tex boots but I had only intended using them when and if the weather became wet or cold. In the desert, as comfortable as they were, my feet would have fried. Philip Carcia, otherwise known as Lo, pointed me in the direction of some Montrails, which he swore by. I had discovered that my feet were wide and suited to this type of fit. After a day of wearing them they also appeared to be blocking out much more of the sand, as the fabric was a tighter weave, but my blisters still persisted regardless.

Wrightwood, better known as a ski resort, immediately made a good impression on me. It was compact and everywhere was in walking distance. The Evergreen and Grizzly cafés knocked out an admirable breakfast, the large supermarket made my re-supply easy and the Evergreen Bar was popular with hikers in the evening.

Many had stopped here for a few days waiting for snow to clear on top of Baden-Powell, which, at 9,400 feet, was still sporting an impressive coating. A similar backlog was due to occur at the start of the Sierras but I did not want to linger waiting for snow to melt. An extra day or so would make no discernible difference and I was still not happy with my mileage. I had pulled in a few twenty to twenty-five-milers but, after taking town stops into account, the actual daily average over a week was a dismal fifteen. I had to get moving; less time in town and more hours on the trail.

The main problem with this was that my blisters were limiting my mileage. If I pushed too hard, then either I made the existing ones worse or new ones appeared, so I had no choice than to stick below twenty a day. The days I had exceeded this I, or rather my feet, ended up paying for it.

It was to be weeks before my feet eventually sorted themselves out. The body is the best judge of what to do during a thru-hike and will generally heal itself, albeit over time. I had always suffered from blisters, whether on the PCT or shorter adventures. They normally appear after a couple of days, which makes a week's walking a somewhat painful experience. I had learnt over the years to accept them as part of the walking deal but I had to pay them attention to make sure infection didn't take hold.

Every night I religiously washed my feet in a creek (trying to make sure I was downstream of anyone else!). Then I would dry and inspect them. I didn't enjoy having to look after them because it made inroads into my time chilling out in the evening, but I had little choice. The new ones required the most attention: this entailed sterilising my pen knife and needle in a lighter flame and piercing them to squeeze out the liquid, then cutting the loose skin away. The excruciating part of the proceedings was dabbing rubbing alcohol on the exposed, raw skin underneath, which had me rocking back and forth like a baby, gritting my teeth and stifling a scream that would probably have been heard over in the next valley. I never dressed them, preferring instead to let the air do its work and, although this proved painful the following day, my feet got the message and they healed more quickly.

Despite this care, I did get an infection near the town of Agua Dulce. The soft pad at the base of the big toe was looking alarmingly red under the skin and a little tender. I had tried to pierce it several times but the soles of my feet were becoming astonishingly hard (when hiking the skin eventually toughens to the point where it is so thick it can be tapped like a piece of wood). I couldn't get the needle to penetrate but on the third evening I decided enough was enough: the pain was getting worse and the red area was changing to white and even shades of blue. I inserted the needle, broke through the hard skin and kept pushing, probing and testing each area and pushing as one would a toothpaste tube. I eventually watched, disgusted, as a thick, congealed mixture of pus and blood oozed out and a nasty smell hit me. Even Stumbling Norwegian held his nose, and he was twenty feet away.

I have tried nylon socks, wool socks, sock liners (a thin pair worn under the main pair), waterproof boots, non-waterproof boots, washing, not

washing and wearing blister patches, but nothing seems to work. However, I become immune to the pain and once I am on the move it disappears anyway after the first ten hobble-inducing minutes.

The grit wasn't helping but neither was the heat, which was making my feet sweat. I used to remove my shoes at breaks and lunch to air them out but my feet still looked all wrinkled, as though I had been sitting in a hot bath for thirty minutes. I hadn't done my research properly to start with either. I had always walked in Gore-Tex (or similar) lined footwear because I don't like getting wet feet, but in the desert this was inviting problems; so, just a week before leaving, I switched to a low-cut trail runner with mesh inserts for ventilation, which is what was recommended. However, I had not had a chance to wear them in. That, I figured, was the main cause of my problems. Now that the first pair had worn out, I had to trust Lo's advice and buy a pair from a manufacturer that I had not tried before, although he did say they were ideal for wider feet and his Hardrocks, amazingly, had covered 2,500 miles. They weren't too pretty to look at, though.

Stumbling Norwegian walked in shoes that were designed to be used and get wet during water sports. They were open to the air and highly breathable. Elk used full-blown leather boots, Burnie the same but fabric, some wore sandals and I even saw a couple of pairs of Crocs. Blisters healed at different times for different people and some were lucky not to suffer at all. After the first few weeks, the complaints and moans died down as the feet healed or their owners dealt with the problem psychologically.

I was downing a couple of espressos in Mountain Grinds Coffee Shop the morning of my departure from Wrightwood. A sign on the wall made me chuckle: 'Unattended children will be given an espresso and a free kitten.' Stocking up on breakfast afterwards at the Grizzly Café with Borders, we discussed our plans for tackling Mount Baden-Powell. Hojo, Vicki and Dennis had retreated from their attempt, having nearly been blown off trail again, as well as wet from what turned out to be the last of the bad weather. This was due to clear, so I left shortly after with Borders, Grey Fox, Spiller, Jake and Upchuck. Despite the weather, those who had made it were reporting that, despite lots of snow higher up, it was easier than Fuller Ridge.

For the early part of the day I walked with Jake, who proved to be good company. Descending down to the road at Vincent Gap, we were suddenly face to face with an apparently never-ending stream of Japanese walkers out on a day hike. Trail etiquette suggests that you should give way to those

ascending a hill, so we stepped to one side. Patiently, time after time, we waited on the edge as they filed up, one by one, ignoring us, making no eye contact and offering no thanks.

After about forty had passed us, displaying no manners whatsoever, we decided to throw politeness to the winds, increased our throttles and stormed down the hill, making each climber yelp and jump off the trail to get out of our way.

We snacked with the rest of the group at the car park while several tourists came over to us and offered congratulations for our endeavours to date and wished us well for Baden-Powell and the rest of our thru-hike. Some were back from the summit and left us their surplus food, which we gladly wolfed down.

Switchback after switchback coiled up the north flank of the mountain. Despite the elevation and the snow, we were all sweating copiously and drinking water to stay hydrated. It was four miles, all uphill, and on each turn in the path the snow became deeper until eventually we lost it altogether. From there on, we drifted apart, finding our own pace. Before long I was playing a guessing game as to my location. I did not have a GPS but the map told me the gradient was steady, if steep, to the top, with no serious contours that suggested dangerous drop-offs. I followed a compass bearing north and aimed for the high point. Snow eventually came up to my thighs and, gasping for air, I took one lunging step at a time, breathed deeply and then repeated the manoeuvre. The sun glared from the crisp, white surface, reducing my eyes to narrow slits behind my sunglasses. Eventually I stumbled onto the path, saw the crest of a hill and then heard laughter. The group had all made it to the summit, apart from Upchuck, who was nowhere to be seen. I assumed he was catching up with his beer hydration therapy.

The views were stunning. To the north the mountain sloped down to meet flat plateaus as far as I could see. The east, south and west were a collection of more mountains and ridges, some capped with snow and some not. We looked back to Fuller Ridge where we had been eight days earlier, its classic triangular silhouette still visible, commanding the surrounding hills.

I left the others, vaguely suggesting we may meet again at camp, and followed a rollercoaster ridge, skipping around and over snow banks, trying to stay away from the edge and surveying the best line to take. Somehow I inadvertently veered right at Dawson’s Saddle before realising my mistake when the trail filtered into nothing and started to steepen. I could hear traffic

on a road and decided to aim for that, as it would give a better indication of my position and the chance to correct my direction, as opposed to wasting energy returning to the top. The loose soil and steep slope made any sort of purchase extremely difficult and I spent the best part of two hours either sliding or falling on my arse. Finally I reached a creek at the bottom as dusk moved in and the highway finally appeared. Camping near to this was not ideal but the availability of water, my fatigue and the chance to get a bearing in the morning from the road decided the spot for me.

As I looked back up towards Dawson's Saddle, I could make out several figures at varying positions progressing down. I figured it must have been Jake, Spiller, Grey Fox and Borders, who had either followed me down or made the same mistake themselves. With daylight fading fast, I placed my head torch on a rock pointing towards them and turned it on to the flashing strobe setting, while I hurriedly built a fire to act as a homing beacon. Either side of me, rock faces shot up from the road. I didn't want any of them falling over the edge.

One by one they emerged, glad to have a fire already going and water at hand. They too had all somehow made the same navigational error as I had. We commandeered a corner of a small off-road parking area and busied ourselves making evening meals, rehydrating and relaxing. A car pulled in and an anxious-looking guy came over to us.

"Have you lost a hiker?" he asked.

We all looked at each other and replied in unison, "No?"

"Well, some guy called Upchuck damn near fell in the road in front of us after falling down a slope and we nearly ran him over!"

We had all forgotten about Upchuck. The last we saw of him had been an hour into the climb up Baden-Powell. He too had made the same mistake and ended up coming down Dawson's Saddle, although his final bearings must have gone a little astray and he found an unexpected drop-off. Minutes later he stumbled into camp a sweaty mess, with blood oozing from several lacerations to his legs.

"You OK, Upchuck?" I asked.

"Yeah, man, just lost the trail."

He started to unpack his sleeping bag and then slid inside.

"You going to eat anything, dude?" enquired Jake.

"Nah, too tired. I'll have a beer. I'm doing OK."

You couldn't really reason with Upchuck; he just did his own thing

regardless. He could have arrived with one leg, an eyeball hanging out, two branches through his chest and a case of diarrhoea but he still would have drunk a beer and turned in. We all smiled and just shrugged our shoulders.

# Chapter 5

Eat

*I’ve never seen skinny people eat so much.*
**Unknown**

Food is an obsession when you are long-distance hiking. As soon as I woke, I was thinking about breakfast; once on the move it was the mid-morning snack; then I yearned for lunch; my afternoon snack loomed and the evening meal couldn’t come soon enough. It is the most hotly debated subject on trail bar none.

I resupplied roughly once a week from the store or supermarket in the town where I was resting. After a month or so I got my rations down to a fine art and could judge quantities fairly accurately. How much to take was important: too much and your pack is unnecessarily heavy; too little and you run out of food. If in doubt I took more than I needed, despite the weight penalty, as running out of food was sheer misery. I have mentioned porridge, which became a staple, although sometimes I had granola. Lunch consisted of tortillas in which I would vary the fillings: often salami or cheese, both of which lasted well, tuna, peanut butter, mayonnaise and fresh vegetables such as onions, avocados and peppers, which would keep for three or four days before they started to turn. My evening meals provided the most calories and I relied on pre-made rice and pasta meals with sauces such as cheese, spicy Mexican and Spanish vegetable. I tried to keep my snacks as healthy as possible, so nuts and dried fruit kept me company, as well as providing valuable fats and protein. Extras included a small bottle of olive oil (procured from restaurants), hot sauce, cookies, grated parmesan, some spices, stock powder and a favourite – dark chocolate-covered almonds. To drink, I usually had coffee and tea, as well as a product called Emergen-C, which provided valuable electrolytes and salts lost from perspiration, and during the later stages I carried a protein powder mixed with water. A few people carried protein powder but I only became familiar with it later on. If I had known earlier then I’m sure it would have been a staple: a little heavy but with no trapped air it packed small and was one of the richest forms of protein available. The chocolate varieties were filling and even when mixed with water tasted like a milkshake. With powdered milk it was a revelation.

When I tired of the packet meals, I experimented with my own concoctions. A favourite was powdered French onion soup with added rice, peanuts and hot sauce. The result tasted like a takeout Chinese meal.

I craved meat and ate my fill when I was in town, but carried jerky, which developed into an addiction; I consumed mountains of the stuff, especially the peppered and teriyaki varieties. Although expensive, the camping stores carried a varied selection of freeze-dried meals and I treated myself occasionally to bacon and eggs or beef stew. Chocolate cheesecake and even freeze-dried ice cream were available.

My weekly shopping totalled around £50, sometimes more, occasionally less. One way to keep the cost down was to buy the cheaper brands, make my own mixes or plunder the hiker boxes. Hiker boxes were found in various places but usually in the camping stores, hostels or at trail angels' houses. They contained items that others no longer required, including old footwear, clothing, repair kits and a lot of food. The sell-by dates had to be checked, but with the amount of rubbish most of us were eating, our stomachs could handle anything. I tended to stick to unopened packets, so I knew the quality should be good, and I did find some excellent stuff.

Some hikers were on extremely strict budgets, to the point that they walked the entire PCT using only what food they found in the boxes. Scorpion was a prime example. I met her in Tehachapi and walked with her on occasion. Her pack was huge, mainly because she carried a lot of food, not knowing when she would find the next box or how well stocked it would be. There was a standing joke that you should always get to a hiker box before Scorpion or there wouldn't be much left in it. She would also trade her surplus with others.

Camping one evening, I offered her some coffee and she reciprocated with some sun-dried tomatoes. I accepted the offer, but as soon as I put one in my mouth, I wished I hadn't. The dry, grainy, gritty morsel with the texture of dried leather told me that the sell-by date must have expired a couple of years earlier. I tried to look pleased with the gift and finish chewing it, forcing it down as you would a pill that's too big to swallow, then I rinsed the aftertaste away with a couple of swigs of whisky.

In the latter stages of my hike, I became acquainted with Nick Levy, one of only two other English guys on the trail that year, who was a source of many food stories. Nick had been travelling on and off for most of his life and had become used to existing on meagre budgets, which drove him to

drastic measures in his search for food. Over the years he had become skilled – if you can call it that – at judging if food from some bizarre sources was edible.

His first and favourite stop was actually rubbish bins in the street. Yes, that's what I said: rubbish bins. Many times in town, walking down the street, I used to wait for him to reply to a question, only to turn and find him twenty feet behind me with his nose and arms in a trash bin, smelling the offerings. Half-eaten hamburgers were his most cherished procurements and he would carefully unwrap them (if they were still indeed wrapped), offer them up to his nose and greet them with either an expression of disgust or sheer delight as he merrily tucked in. I was shocked the first time I saw him doing this but after a while I came to accept it as normal.

For Nick, rubbish skips – or dumpsters, as they are known in the States – were further horns of plenty. These scored highly because the quantities were usually greater and the quality superior. He had learnt that supermarkets regularly got rid of food even before the sell-by date. Bakeries were prized for their dumpster-diving opportunities, because any unsold goods were thrown away daily. Sometimes the swing doors on the side were locked, but if not, Nick would disappear for alarmingly long periods, to the accompaniment of the rustle of plastic bags being torn open. He would resurface, grinning, with a bag of bagels or even a cake clutched in his hand.

He recalled one situation when a friend had found an unlocked skip outside McDonalds. The fast food chain treats dumpster divers seriously, even with arrest, and to stumble across an unlocked one was a treat. This trip scored well with his friend locating some fried eggs. I was under the misguided impression that an expert egg chef merrily nurtured several of these to order; the reality is somewhat different. The skip housed a large, plastic 'condom' (as Nick called it), with twenty-four compartments, four along the top and six down the side. Housed in each one was a perfectly cooked egg which presumably was then just microwaved or maybe heated in hot water. His friend knocked back the lot and probably got his protein allocation for a couple of weeks in one hit.

Some people had to deal with dietary issues such as coeliac disease, intolerances to certain foodstuffs and being vegetarian or vegan, although the latter could re-supply pretty well without too many problems. The only way to deal with intolerances and allergies was to prepare, dehydrate and post all supplies out at various points, to be picked up along the trail. Food boxes

were used by a lot of hikers, not just those with specific dietary requirements, but I never quite saw their appeal. The sheer amount of effort to source, dry, mix, pack and post up to seven months' worth of food was mind-boggling and it constrained the hiker to stop at certain points to collect packages, where they often encountered delays because the post office was closed. I did have a 'bounce box' – a term used to describe a package that we mailed ahead of ourselves and caught up with once in a while. It contained things that we needed occasionally but were not worth carrying because of their infrequent use, for example shaving equipment, batteries, toothpicks, spare pens and recharging equipment for cameras and mobile phones. If I had surplus food that I didn't want to throw away or leave in a hiker box, I would sometimes leave it in my bounce box, but this was as near as I got to posting food ahead.

Trooper, whom I first met in the Sierras, was vegetarian and posted most of his food along the trail, a total of twenty-six boxes. His main meal was a dehydrated vegan soup, which he used to supplement with cheese from town to add to his fat intake. His lunch staple was tortilla with vegan jerky, cheese and mayonnaise.

Sugar Moma was hypoglycaemic (low blood glucose levels), protein deficient, low in iron and a vegetarian. Hell, why make life easy? She mixed and pre-packed most of her food and organised mail drops. She had to scrutinise everything in the supermarket to check the ingredients and survived mostly on protein shakes for breakfast. She also added powdered milk and TVP (textured vegetable protein) to most of her meals.

Others survived on simpler rations. Ryan 'Steve Climber' Bishop Ashby told me his success in Oregon was down to Snickers and the McDonald's Dollar Menu.

Fat intake – or, rather, lack of it – was responsible for weight loss among hikers. Dehydrated food is generally severely lacking in fat, and because most fat sources were heavy, they took a back seat until we realised our bodies were becoming way too skinny. Carbohydrates were the staple energy source; after these deplete, the body turns to its fat reserves for energy. If these were not topped up, then it could quite possibly end a thru-hike. My main sources of fat were peanut butter, which I was pretty much weaned on from an early age and still crave, along with nuts, olive oil and cheese. I, too, neglected these at the start until I realised after a few weeks I was losing body mass.

An average week's re-supply consisted of oats supplemented with raisins, sugar, dried milk and maybe some nuts for breakfast, plus of course coffee and tea. Snacks were mainly crunchy oat bars of various flavours (chocolate, honey, maple syrup, etc.), nuts, a bag of crisps or tortilla chips, jerky, chocolate, M&M's, Snickers or similar and some boiled sweets. Tortillas provided lunch, filled with cheese, tuna, salami, peanut butter or spam, and a tube of mayonnaise to moisten it a little and provide some extra fat. Dinner was a packet of rice or pasta of varying flavours. Despite the weight penalty I tried to leave town with a few items of fresh fruit and vegetables. Apples, peppers and onions all kept well for a few days and even avocados, if treated carefully, could go for three days. I also took a couple of bananas.

I then had to remove all the packaging and decant the contents into Ziploc bags. This prevented the build-up of unnecessary rubbish, saved a little weight and made access easier. The whole process could take an hour.

A staple with hikers was macaroni and cheese, known simply as mac 'n' cheese. Kraft seemed to be the preferred brand but it never appealed to me. Firstly, I try not to mix protein and carbohydrate because the body digests them differently, and secondly it looked and smelt disgusting. The cheese sauce was inside a plastic bag and once opened, when the pasta had cooked, it had to be squeezed in to heat up. It looked like liquid plastic in a disgusting, lurid yellow.

By far the most popular hiker staple, and most famous, is ramen noodles. These are thin, dried noodles shaped into a block, sealed in a packet with a foil sachet containing the flavoured powder. Choose from staples such as pork, beef, shrimp, mushroom and chili or venture into California vegetable, oriental, creamy chicken and Cajun shrimp to name a few. Ramen gets a bad press amongst hikers but you'll probably find those complaining have a pack in their supplies. It does have a lot going for it; it's light, small, incredibly cheap and reasonably filling. I wouldn't say it was particularly healthy but if you think eating on a thru-hike can be, you've been misled. It also contains a lot of salt but even that could be considered a bonus in the hotter sections.

Most stores sell them for about 60 pence and this is even cheaper if you buy in bulk and mail out, reducing the cost to an incredible 30 pence per meal. I did buy them but found one was not enough for a main meal. They were tasty but the salt was very evident and each meal was usually followed by drinking lots of water.

And lastly, allow me to introduce you all to GORP. Good old raisins and

peanuts was apparently invented by a couple of surfers in the 60s. Since then it has been changed, added to, messed with but remains a staple amongst hikers. Other ingredients have found their way into the mix such as soya beans, cranberries, apricots, pretzels, banana chips, you name it. I like raisins, peanuts and all of the above but put them all together and it just doesn't do it for me. One manufacturer had even invented a salty and sweet version consisting of peanuts and chocolate covered raisins; it was pretty dire.

I remember watching a video detailing how one hiker put together enough GORP to mail out for their entire thru-hike. A large bucket was filled with huge quantities of various dried fruits and nuts, all mixed together, then divided into twenty-four generous-sized bags for mail drops along the trail. After four weeks she hated the stuff. Enough said.

* * *

After the mishap coming down Dawson's Saddle, I followed the highway for only a mile and reconnected with the PCT. There was a toilet near a small parking area, which gave me the rare opportunity to sit down for my number twos. I emerged, a couple of kilos lighter, and met Bigfoot, Wide Angle and Stanimal. We descended to Cooper Canyon campground, which was busy with people enjoying themselves, and set about practising our hungry looks and wisely choosing to sit at a table next to someone laden with a large amount of food wantonly on display. Before long, after hearing of our hiking exploits, the family seated there were greeting us with respect and admiration, plying us with cold cans and firing up the barbecue. We were soon stuffing ourselves with burgers, chicken and even a large rack of sticky ribs. There were smiles all round and a licking of honey-glazed fingers rounded off a very successful lunch.

The temperature was now climbing at night as well as by day. My research on sleeping bags had advised on taking one rated to minus seven degrees centigrade (about twenty degrees Fahrenheit). This was fine at the start, when the nights hovered around freezing point, but now it was far too warm. I climbed into my bag with the zip undone a little and over the course of the night I kept opening the bag up more, until eventually I climbed out and just slept underneath, using it like a duvet. Before long I was going to need a cooler bag.

At some stage on the PCT each year, it is pretty much a foregone conclusion that there will be a detour off trail. Usually this is because of a

forest fire, either one still burning or another that has raged in the past, where the area is cordoned off to encourage regrowth. I was coming to the end of a forty-seven-mile detour, all redirected on roads, and my feet were taking a hammering. Trail cushions feet somewhat but tarmac is harsh. The constant pounding meant several new blisters had flared up and most of my leg muscles were retaliating. Motorists used to ask me what I was doing and when I explained I was walking forty-seven miles to get back on trail I was met with looks of bewilderment. Most could not comprehend walking this distance, so when I then added that I was walking 2,650 miles to Canada, their looks changed to complete confusion and disbelief. To them it was completely incomprehensible.

As cars approached, I used to look at the occupants; and in those split seconds when I made eye contact, I tried to guess at their lives. The smart executive models such as BMWs and Accords were mostly driven by businessmen on their way to meetings or back to the office. Elderly couples in sun hats and sunglasses, most likely just out for day trips, drove more cautiously, peering out through windows at the scenery. Larger cars with a couple of kids in the back and roof boxes suggested the holiday season was on the way. Attractive women drove past in convertibles and I used to smile, look tired and put on my hungry expression, hoping they would stop. Judging by the complete lack of success, this needed more work.

Unbearable heat recoiled back off jet-black bitumen and assaulted me. The sun glared down, almost forcing me to back off. Sweat ran off my forehead, wove around my eyebrows and occasionally into my eyes, stinging. I would instinctively wipe them with the back of my hand, only to make matters worse, as the sunscreen burnt them even further. Despite my frantic arm-waving, insects buzzed relentlessly, like someone constantly poking me in the side to try and raise a reaction.

I reached a KOA (Kamp Ground of America), where a few hikers had holed up for the day to take advantage of a small shop, swimming pool and showers. Elk, Brittany, Mojave, Cheeks, Stanimal, Bigfoot, Wide Angle, Vicky, Dennis and Hojo had cordoned off several picnic tables. Elk was busying himself preparing a rattlesnake for dinner. He had witnessed it being run over by a car and put it out of its misery. I had not tried rattlesnake before but I was very impressed. It tasted somewhat like chicken, with a hint of a fish aftertaste. Elk prepared a few separate dishes, spiced up with various herbs and spices including curry powder. Rattlesnake curry, I thought, could

definitely catch on.

Elk also had a staple recipe for the trail that I saw him make on several occasions in preparation for the week's hike. He called it Raw Dawg and it consisted of an onion, an avocado, a can of pork and beans, one bulb of garlic, a can of spam or corned beef, some packets of hot sauce and ketchup. Elk used to obtain these, as I did, from restaurants, saying, "Stolen condiments taste better." He put all of these in a Ziploc, shook it and then left it in the sun for twenty-four hours (if he was walking, this presumably meant he would leave it on the outside of his pack). It would keep for a few days on the trail, I think because the garlic and hot sauce fended off any bacteria.

That night, while trying to doze off, I hoped that my ears were deceiving me. Then I heard the sound again. I sat up in my tent, momentarily comforted by the notion that the flimsy piece of canvas around me would keep me safe. It wouldn't – well, maybe it would protect me from the odd snake or spider, unable to find its way in – but from a mountain lion? I hoped I had been dreaming, but then it roared again and this time it seemed closer. I looked at my watch; it was just after 3am. Mountain lions hunt their prey mainly at night and this one seemed to be creeping closer. I drifted off but woke up again at 6.30am, dressed quickly and got out of the tent. Bigfoot was outside in his sleeping bag but awake.

"Mate, did you hear that roaring last night? I thought I was a gonner. Sounded like a mountain lion or something," I said.

"Oh, yeah," he replied. "There's a farm up the way that keeps a couple of lions and a bear. They use them in the movies." He rolled over and started snoozing again, while I stood there feeling like a prat.

I left the KOA to pull in some miles. After taking a wrong turn as I tried to cross the railway line, I began to climb. Nothing too serious, but with the ever-increasing heat of the past couple of days, I was dripping with sweat. It rolled down my nose and caught the edge of my mouth, where I could taste the salt. My arms shone and I gulped down more water. I passed Elk, Brittany (who had now been given a trail name of Logic, in acknowledgement of her simplistic problem solving), Mojave and Cheeks, who had made camp on a small ridge, and listened as Logic recounted how she had woken the previous night and watched two coyotes sniffing around camp before she shooed them off. I walked further, steering a course around a bee's nest in the middle of the trail. The PCT wound down a few switchbacks, across a level section and then under the highway via a tunnel, perhaps 200 feet long. It was dark,

pleasingly damp and I walked to one side to avoid a small stream of water in the middle. As the circle of light at the other end grew bigger, I could make out the silhouette of someone sitting by the exit. The familiar features of Tomer came into focus as I reached the end. He looked up at me casually.

"Welcome to the other side," he offered.

After the wide space of the trail in the morning, a canyon suddenly narrowed and enclosed me. Rocks, outcrops and cliffs loomed up to either side towering over the course of a small creek, which I was forced to hop over several times. Layers of different-coloured rock, millions of years old, streaked across the cliff face. I spilled out onto the road, a mile or so from the town of Agua Dulce. Suddenly to be swept out of wilderness into 'reality' always caught me off guard after days on the trail. I reached the intersection of Darling Road and made a left for the last mile as I approached what is fondly referred to as Hiker Haven. This house on the hill is home to the Saufley family, who every year offer the grounds and outbuildings to all thru-hikers who wisely choose to stay there. While I was given the guided tour by John, my laundry disappeared, to emerge later smelling of lemons. I collected the packages that they had held for me and found an empty camp bed in one of the outside tents.

The Saufleys' proved a great place to unwind. There must have been fifty others scattered about the place, relaxing, collecting mail, resupplying, eating or listening to music. There were too many for my comfort after the previous days spent on my own and I made plans to move on the following day, still keen to increase my mileage tally. I picked up a new water filter and sent my old one back, wrapped in a complaint letter.

The café in town cooked up an excellent breakfast and I concentrated on consuming as much fat as I could handle after the scales confirmed I had lost a couple of kilos. In the store, excitement got the better of me when I wandered down the condiments aisle and stumbled across a hoard of hot sauces. With the local café devoid of any, and not knowing which of the many brands to choose, I settled on the lightest choice: a bottle of ever-reliable Tabasco.

I was enjoying myself and becoming more immersed in the PCT experience. My camp routine was becoming honed, resupplies were proving well-judged and my body was coping well. I was, however, tiring of the desert. The constant battle with heat and dust had me yearning for the High Sierra, another 250 miles away. Some had already made it to Kennedy

Meadows, a small town at the foot of the mountains that was considered the start of the higher elevations, cooler temperatures, abundant water and stunning scenery. I longed for it as for an ice lolly. Others were feeling it too: the sand was wearing us all down, insects buzzed around us and the temperature continued to climb. Kennedy Meadows started to be my focus of attention. Everything between Agua Dulce and there needed to be wrapped up so that the next stage of my adventure could begin.

Trying in vain to find somewhere to camp one evening, I became more and more frustrated. In mountainous areas, the trail is often cut into the side of a hill, so a slope climbs above and drops away below. Locating a flat area to pitch tent is nigh on impossible. Many times I walked for miles waiting to find a small patch of suitable ground but never did. Thwarted by the terrain and, at the end of the day, tired and hungry, I often just put down my pack and pitched on the path itself. The chance of another hiker coming along that late was unlikely, and even if they did, there was enough space to step round. It is not advisable to pitch on trail because wild animals use it as well. They're not stupid and pick routes that require the least effort; a clear path saves them tramping through undergrowth.

Having set up camp, I was descended on by an airborne squadron of biting flies. They looked like house flies but these predators came equipped with a nasty ability to nip. Flapping and jumping around as if I had just caught fire was futile; strangely enough, even swearing seemed to have no effect. Eventually, as twilight set in, they gave up and went to bed, only to be replaced by onslaught number two in the form of mosquitoes. Mozzies love me, for some reason. They say some people fare worse than others, maybe because of the smell of their blood, and if there is a mozzie within a mile of me, it sends out a general invitation to all of its mates that there's good eating in the area. My flapping routine started again in earnest and, stifled by the intense heat, I was sinking lower into a foul mood.

After I called surrender, I quickly cooked my meal and dived into the tent, zipping up frantically and settling down to eat in peace. The temperature inside was overwhelming and damp blotches of sweat appeared on my trousers. It was only then that I remembered I had not exactly cooked the ideal meal in the circumstances – curry with an extra helping of hot sauce. I sat there like a customer in a Turkish steam bath.

News was filtering back from hikers already gathered at Kennedy Meadows that the snow levels had not receded as far as expected and much

of the Sierra was still under a lot of snow. My ice axe, crampons and some colder weather gear were waiting for me at the post office, and I hoped that by the time I reached them, the snow would have dwindled enough for the backlog of people to start pushing up.

Before then, and only seventeen miles or so away, came the Andersons. I had met Terrie and Joe at Lake Morena and they too opened their house for hikers each year. The Saufleys have a two-night maximum stay; the Andersons have a two-night *minimum* stay. I was met with a slow clap as I walked up the drive, part of the arrival ritual. I was instructed to pick a Hawaiian shirt from a rack, as this was strict dress protocol, and given a guided tour by a bloke who was too drunk to even remember his own name. Familiar faces came into view among bins mainly full of beer cans. Laughter filled the air and the whole atmosphere was laid back and relaxed. It was a case of pitch your tent, grab some alcohol and chill.

I spent two days at the Andersons in an alcoholic daze. All the food was laid on and everyone chipped in with cooking and cleaning up, drinking in between. There was only one shower for everyone, which proved interesting: as soon as the bathroom door clicked open, there was a rush towards it of dusty hikers, eager to grab a wash, but invariably someone had held vigil outside and nipped in before everyone else. The slow-clapping routine continued every time a new face arrived, as did the guided tour and choosing of the Hawaiian shirt.

I left with my hangover at 5pm on the third day with Hojo, Swayze and Dinosaur, who were also keen to get going. Walking late into the night was a new experience for me and an enjoyable one. It was far cooler and the glow from the setting sun was mesmerising. The mosquitoes were out again, however, and the stillness was disturbed occasionally by the howl of a coyote.

Hojo was forty-two. When he wasn’t hiking he was an emergency medical technician, preferring to spend his winters as a member of the National Ski Patrol. He had completed the Appalachian Trail a few years previously and had been in remission from cancer some eight years earlier. When you have such a close brush with death, life seems that much more valuable. That, I believe, is why he walked the AT and now the PCT: you never know what’s around the corner. His trail name came about after his second day on the AT, when he arrived at a shelter for the night. As he removed his hat, another hiker noticed his ginger hair and commented that it was the same colour as

found on the roofs of a US motel chain called Howard Johnson's. The name stuck.

He was good company, easy-going, with no plans or schedules that ever seemed to put him in a rush. Fair-skinned, he took care in the sun and regardless of the temperatures he always covered himself up, head to foot, including wearing a modern-day hiking variant of the cowboy hat. He liked his kit and was looking forward to settling down to cook that evening.

"I sent my old stove back, Fozzie," he announced while preparing camp.

"Why?" I said. "No good?"

"No, it was OK, just too slow. I bought a Jetboil."

Jetboils, about two years on the market, were gas cylinder-based stoves renowned for a fierce heat and super-quick cooking times.

"I demand more immediate gratification," he explained.

He walked with his water bag strapped to one side of his pack exterior, which made refilling easier. Once it was full, one side of his pack was naturally heavier than the other and he had to counteract this by placing more weight on his other side. He joked that he always knew when he was getting short of water because he had to start leaning more to the other side.

We passed the 500-mile mark, which someone had marked on the trail in an artistic cluster of pine cones. Hojo and I shook hands and he congratulated me.

"Well done, Canadian."

He referred to me as the Canadian because I was not from the US. Despite my initial protestations and reminders that I was English, I eventually realised it was not his memory failing him but his weird sense of humour.

At mile 519 we arrived at the Hiker Hostel. I can only describe the place as bizarre. It was situated in the middle of nowhere, the nearest sign of life being a store about a mile down the road. Bob, the owner, used to work in the film industry and the area was littered with props. There was a mock-Western shop front with post office and store, vehicles dotted around, an old police car and even a Rolls-Royce. Mannequins peered at me creepily through sand storms.

Having just spent some quality time nursing more blisters and watching a toenail drop off, I went to check my email but on the way stubbed my foot sharply against a chair. After a good minute of hopping around stifling a shriek and enough swearing to make my mother cringe, I looked down and saw my hands covered in blood and my little toe dripping all over the floor.

Leaving a red-dotted trail behind me, I hopped to the kitchen, where Hojo reviewed the damage and pronounced it was not serious but a nasty cut nevertheless. I cleaned the mess up and surveyed a flap of skin, which lifted up and down like a submarine hatch. Not wanting my mileage to suffer any further, I left the following day with the Stumbling Norwegian and several layers of Elastoplast wound round my toe. Trying to keep up with him, my leg buckled every time the wound rubbed.

We followed the Los Angeles Aqueduct for seventeen miles. Sourcing water from the mountains and carrying it all the way to the big city, it was covered in a layer of grey concrete and just looked like a road. Norwegian had devised an ingenious method of obtaining water, despite the fact it was apparently inaccessible. To indulge my curiosity, he unclipped his pack and rummaged around for his filter, attached an extra length of plastic tubing and lowered this through a hole in the surface of the aqueduct into the raging torrent below. Sure enough, as he pumped and I held the water bottle, a steady stream of fluid dribbled out. We celebrated by taking a break and seeking shade squeezed under a bridge, itself only about a foot above the aqueduct.

Snake count: 5
False alarms: 117

Magnificent cloud formations decorated the sky around us. One elongated specimen stretching up from the horizon looked like a giant lava lamp bubble. The wind intensified, blowing us about like litter in a storm. We reached Cottonwood Creek at dusk but decided to carry on a further six miles to possible shelter at Tylerhorse Canyon. Turning round to check Norwegian was still keeping up with me (which was a wasted exercise, as I could have been riding a trial bike and he still would have been gliding smoothly behind), I smirked as a furious gust caught him and carried him sideways. He had to execute a brisk jump over a low bush and just managed to keep his footing as he landed. Occasionally, I thought, the Norwegian does indeed stumble.

We descended into the canyon in darkness, our head torches navigating a slim trail to the bottom, where a creek tinkled past us. It was too windy to pitch my tent, so I followed Norwegian’s lead and spent my first night cowboy-style, lying back studying the skies above and listening to a howling gale rip through the canyon.

* * *

After reaching the town of Tehachapi, I rested for a day and caught up on England's progress (or rather lack of it) in the World Cup. Mocking Stumbling Norwegian and Jake, both avid USA supporters, with the taunt that they didn't stand a chance, I had to eat my words after a 1-1 draw.

My distance targets over the next couple of weeks and planning for town stops were based solely on when England were next playing. I noted the date of the games and worked out a plan to hole up in a bar or motel. After their first lacklustre performance, adjusting my routine to make town for the next disappointment may not have been the best of ideas.

A few hours out of Tehachapi, I realised that my calculations were a day out. To get to Ridgecrest I needed to walk two days of twenty-eight miles and one of fifteen. This was not impossible, but bearing in mind the Mojave Desert, with its searing temperatures, was over the adjacent ridge and water was in very short supply, the going was painful. I stopped at Bird Spring Pass water cache, where Burnie, Cheeks and Elk were sheltering from a fierce midday sun. Elk had a mild case of Giardiasis and boasted about recently scoring a thirty-second fart.

"Fozzie, did I tell you about my trout fantasy?" he asked.

"No, but I'm in the mood, so go," I replied, looking at him expectantly.

"Well, I'm on the trail and suddenly come across a bear pulling fish from a pristine mountain stream. It has caught a golden trout about the size of my forearm. Now, what I will do in this fantasy is scare the bear away, purely with my anger, and steal the trout from it." He laughs. "Then I will take a quart-size Ziploc bag, half-fill it with lemon juice, section the trout up so it fits inside the bag and hike with it for fifteen to twenty minutes. Then I will take it out, build a fire and sprinkle it with salt and pepper. I will then let out a huge roar of triumph and eat the meal."

"Elk, do you walk with your shrink or just make regular phone calls?"

I walked with him that afternoon, finding him interesting company as always. We sweated profusely as we climbed up the 2,000 or so feet that make up Skinner's Pass. Elk slipped behind a little and I threw boiled sweets down to him as an incentive as I rounded a switchback. We crested the top and were met with our first views of the Sierra Nevada: ridge after ridge stretching away to infinity, most still covered in snow.

Elk was homing in on one of his geocaches and getting more excited by

the minute. A geocache is an item or items hidden in a specific location and most often buried, so that others cannot take it or wild animals happen across it. The coordinates are saved, usually by means of a GPS, so the owner can find it whenever they choose to. Elk had buried many of these along the length of the PCT the previous year, with staple contents that included canned meat, alcohol and pipe tobacco. Checking his GPS and beaming, he went off to home in on his prize, saying he would meet me at camp.

It was busy that evening and I had Burnie, Littlebit, Bigfoot, Stanimal, Wild Angle, Cheeks and Mojave for company. The talk was of bears and I cringed when I learned of three sightings in the last three days.

Little did I know then that I would be the one witnessing the next.

# Chapter 6

Bears

*Not all who wander are lost. But, to be perfectly honest, most of them are.*
**Shane ‘Jester’ O’Donnell**

I left the others sleeping just after 6am, eager to hit the road early at Highway 178 and get a lift to Ridgecrest. I couldn’t find any trail signs and came across McIvers Spring, which according to my map was about 500 feet too far east of the trail. I walked back to camp, still unable to find the route, and then back to the spring, increasingly frustrated. I sat down by the water, filtered and brewed a coffee to calm down.

Twigs cracked and snapped from a small wood behind me but, having become accustomed to sounds from the trees, I ignored them, losing myself in the taste of my coffee and the morning stillness.

Suddenly, I sensed a tense environment. The hairs on my arms stood up and I felt that something was behind me, something that made me fear turning around. Then I heard a loud animal noise, somewhere between a snort and an aggravated sigh. I knew it was a bear – it couldn’t have been anything else. I turned around slowly, and as my peripheral vision focused, I saw something I really didn’t want to see.

A black bear was standing a good eight feet tall on its hind legs, and holding its nose up, smelling the air and, presumably, me. It dropped to all fours and most of southern California shuddered as it landed. It looked at me; I returned the gaze and then remembered everything I had read about these creatures, the first being don’t look them in the eye but bow your head and avert your gaze. Eye contact can be threatening, so I focused at the ground a few feet in front of the bear and rapidly planned who I was going to leave my limited estate to.

My natural and initial reaction was one of sheer terror. Confusingly, I also felt it was an honour to be witness to such a beautiful and commanding creature. Its very presence demanded respect. These feelings vanished quickly as it started to hesitantly walk towards me, still holding up its nose to find a scent. I also knew not to back off or run from an approaching bear. However, putting that advice into practice when a bulk of hungry muscle weighing several hundred kilos is coming towards you is quite another story.

I stood up and started to feel real fear. The others were just two minutes back down the path, probably still waking up and completely oblivious to my situation.

I had never been so scared. I was shaking, confused and felt completely helpless. Then I remembered to make a noise. Lifting my arms up to make myself look bigger, I screamed, “Get out of here, bear. Oi geezer! Go on! Sod off! GO!”

Immediately the bear bolted back into the forest. I was astonished at how fast it covered ground. I crouched down to get a better view through the trees as it galloped away. Any hiker walking through the forest at that precise moment in the opposite direction would probably have jumped off the nearest cliff.

I eventually stopped shaking, calmed down and congratulated myself for at least remembering my bear research and reacting accordingly.

The black bear – *Ursus americanus* – is the smallest and most common type of bear in the USA. The other species, the grizzly, with the far more appropriate Latin name of *Ursus arctos horribilis*, is mainly confined to Canada and Washington, the northernmost state on the PCT. I was scared of snakes, though beginning to accept them, but bears terrified me. Their sheer size doesn’t do much for one’s confidence. Bears, however, are misunderstood. The ‘friendly’ encounters are rarely reported, the media preferring to concentrate on incidents where people are attacked, as this makes for better reading. So, we are regaled with stories of this attack, that person getting killed, this particular bear causing havoc, etc.

Bears are pretty docile creatures. They go about their business quietly, concentrating on eating over the course of the warmer months to build up enough fat reserves for hibernation, and then the process repeats itself. Attacks are rare and there has not been a reported case of anyone being killed on the PCT by a bear, a fact I recalled in earnest during my encounter.

Because the media tend to report only the attacks, and because of their size, capacity to intimidate and the fact that they have been mercilessly hunted for decades, bears are portrayed as a dangerous menace. This is a huge shame and could not be further from the truth.

I saw around eight bears on my hike but heard many more. Usually they came sniffing around my tent after I had turned in. It’s not just food that attracts them – toiletries also smell tasty to a bear. I always cleaned my teeth a good fifty feet away from the tent, although this was probably not far

enough and is what usually acted as a homing beacon. I would just be falling asleep and I would hear that familiar snort or maybe some scratching. A shout would normally suffice to send the bear thundering off into the night.

In areas where many people were out enjoying the outdoors, bears were more common. They're not stupid; they know where food is, and rubbish bins (even if bear-proof) act as magnets. Yosemite is a classic example and one of a few places where hikers are required, by law, to carry the renowned bear canister.

Simply put, a bear canister is a bucket with a lid that a bear cannot gain access to. The plastic is super-tough and the screw lid has a mechanism that locks it shut unless a finger is pressed on a small lug. The theory is that all food and anything else with a strong smell is placed in one of these and left away from tents and sleeping areas. Any curious bears will smell the canister but will not be able to gain entry. After some inspiringly strenuous efforts, some of which can be seen on the internet, they generally cave in and search for something a little easier. A pot or pan placed on top can help because of the sound made when disturbed. Many a hiker has woken in the morning to find their canister a fair distance from where they had left it, dripping with bear saliva. The standing joke is that a group of bears find one and then have a game of hockey for half an hour.

I hauled my canister around through the designated areas, resenting the fact that it easily took up half my pack. Outside the danger areas, most people kept their food in or near their tent or they hung it in a tree. Suspending your food bag from a tree has long been the most common form of protecting it. I often used this method. Pick a branch around twenty-five feet high. Tie a fifty-foot length of parachute cord to the bag and wrap the other end round a stone. Throw the rock over the branch as far away from the tree trunk as possible to prevent bears climbing up and along the branch. Watch as the stone misses the branch, falls back down and unravels the cord. Repeat attempt. Repeat again. Once a successful throw has been made and you manage to duck past the falling stone, hoist the bag up over fifteen feet and watch as the branch either snaps or bows down so low that your food bag is swinging in front of your face. Pick another, stronger branch and, amid cursing and stomping around, once the stone with cord drops down, remove the stone and tie this end to another tree or suitable anchor point.

The bear canister was introduced because our friends in the forest learnt the trick and used to climb up and retrieve poorly stowed bags. I hated that

canister, as did most of us. In fact, a few just stuck with their usual bags, taking their chances that rangers wouldn't perform a spot check. I don't know if rangers have a legal right to search rucksacks. I met perhaps three on my trip, all of them respectful of our mission and polite. When I confirmed I was carrying a canister, none of them asked to check my bag and had they done so I would have refused on the grounds of privacy and fundamental human rights, whatever the legalities.

I did hear of an encounter at Lost Lakes, just south of Lake Tahoe, where Elk, Your Mom and some others had camped. Just after they had settled down for the night, Your Mom called out to Elk to put a light on, as she thought something was in the camp. Elk initially discounted this as he was only a few feet from her and he thought he would have heard any movement. However, he turned on his light and got out of his tent. The first thing he noticed was that his medical kit and backpack were covered in drool. Your Mom was uneasy and it was decided that they should hang their bags, except for Elk, who had a bear canister, and a couple of others who placed their bags by their tents because they were too heavy to hoist into the trees. Everyone settled down again.

Elk's bear canister fell over, the clatter of the pot and mug resting on the top causing one hell of a commotion in camp and scaring the life out of him. Everyone woke up but Elk saw the culprit first.

"He must have been 300 pounds, Fozzie," Elk told me afterwards. "The ground shook when he ran away."

Elk shouted and caused as much noise as he could to scare the intruder off, which worked, but the villain made three further visits that night. Your Mom found her food bag in the morning minus all the contents except, perhaps not surprisingly, a packet of chicken ramen. They named the bear Two Socks after the wolf in Dances with Wolves because he kept returning.

After my bear encounter, I walked down to Highway 178 with Bigfoot. His trail name was obviously derived from his large feet, which made it difficult for him to find big enough shoes for the hike – in fact, he ordered several pairs of the same trainers before starting. He was also tall and towered above me but, to use a cliché, he was a gentle giant, very amenable and easy-going. Bigfoot chose his words carefully and was a pleasure to chat with. He was also one of the most easily identifiable characters on trail – apart from his size, his standard apparel was a hiking kilt and the kind of white cotton shirt that one might wear to a black tie occasion.

We reached the road, where a couple of locals had set up some trail magic. Hojo was there, along with Your Mom and Elk. I knocked back a swift Coke and made off for the road to catch a ride to Ridgecrest, as the football game between England and Algeria beckoned. In the other direction lay Lake Isabella, which I would have opted for had I known what a disappointment Ridgecrest would prove to be.

It took five hours to get there as the hitchhiking was poor.

The town was steaming hot; in fact, almost unbearable for someone who'd just dropped down from the mountains. The main drag seemed to stretch for miles. Jet-black bitumen disappeared off to the horizon as a lazy heat haze hovered. I thanked Brian, who had brought me in his gravel lorry, and started walking through the endless monotony looking for a cheap motel. The lurid red, yellow, blue and white logos of the fast-food chains assaulted me from both sides, only to be interrupted by hotels or supermarkets. The occupants of passing vehicles stared at me rudely as if I were a caged animal.

Judging from its appearance, the Budget Motel had been built in the 1950s and glossed over with several years' worth of emulsion. I figured the price would be acceptable.

Ridgecrest reminds me now of a holiday destination that looks gorgeous in a catalogue but doesn't deliver. At the launderette, which was a thirty-minute walk away, litter spilled out of rubbish bins onto the floor and a meagre selection of magazines draped an old wooden table. The detergent machine ate my money, as did the first washing machine. I found a nearby barber and had my beard removed while my clothes dried.

I spent most of my time in the motel room, as it was the coolest place I could find – coolest in temperature, not reputation, that is. My nose had now been added to the list of bodily functions that were breaking down. It was itchy, incredibly dry and kept bleeding. The pharmacist at Walgreens told me it was a common problem caused by the dry heat and he gave me a tube of moisturising gel. A sore, red rash had appeared on the soles of my feet, which looked like prickly heat and was extremely tender. Thankfully my blisters were receding but the rash took three days to disappear after several Epsom salt foot baths and some good old fresh air. I occupied myself with the World Cup, slept a lot, chastised myself for not going to Lake Isabella and worked my way through several tubs of Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia.

It was good to get back on the trail again but I was depressed. My body wasn't behaving; I felt lethargic, tired, lacking in enthusiasm and I cursed the

constant heat. My nose was worsening: in the morning I would hold one nostril shut and blow out the contents of the other. A mix of blood, snot, dust and other dried debris shot out with a very unpleasant crackle. It wasn't pretty to look at and after a few minutes I had to repeat the process.

It was day 65 and I was approaching Kennedy Meadows, around the 700-mile mark. My mood sank deeper and everything was taking its toll. I started to sleep later in the morning and the only things that motivated me were food breaks. I longed for the next town stop where I could just hide in a motel room and swim in self-pity. I had spoken several times to my girlfriend back in England and frustration had resulted in arguments, which upset me. I was plummeting over a precipice of misery into a raging river of despair. Now I was missing my daily targets and my finish date based on average mileage was looking like December, a whole three months over schedule.

At lunch I sat by Fox Mill spring, the sun relentlessly beating down on me. I started to cry, holding my head in my hands, ashamed of my weakness. Trying to muster some morsel of energy, I convinced myself I was on the verge of throwing in a threadbare towel and quitting the PCT.

* * *

Kennedy Meadows is the sort of place that you would miss if you weren't paying attention. A few mobile homes appeared along the roadside as I rounded the corner and the General Store came into view. Hikers sprawled everywhere; tents peered from among trees in the back yard. A few familiar faces greeted me – Stumbling Norwegian, Cheeks and Mojave, Walker Texas Ranger, Flannel and Elk. This unassuming place in the middle of the desert was to prove the proverbial iced tonic.

My mood lifted, everyone was in good cheer, there was food and beer, and the prospect of the Sierra Nevada's cooler climate, abundance of water and stunning scenery gave me a boost. I relaxed and concentrated on what I needed to do to make my hike the experience I wanted it to be. I called my girlfriend and we lifted each other's spirits back up. Knowing she was fine always made everything else seem OK. I ate some good food, drank lots of water, caught up with everyone, made some new friends and told myself to stop being a miserable little shit.

The following morning, I walked out of Kennedy Meadows a new man. I joined up with Chad and Justin, who had just started, and were simply planning to get where they could before money and time ran out. They were

both in their early twenties but Chad was more dominant, making them seem, at times, like father and son.

Just before midday I exited a clump of pine trees and was presented with one of the best views, no, surely *the* best view on the entire trail. Monache Meadow at 7,800 feet didn't just suggestively wink at me; more grabbed me firmly by the arse and snogged the living daylights out of me. It was ludicrously stunning. Cumuli wafted over me from horizon to horizon and the Kern River wiggled along between sandy banks cradled by a wide, gently sloping valley, speckled with pine trees, which rose into the surrounding hills. I sat down, feeling very humbled and in awe of what spread out before me.

Several times Chad, Justin and I stopped, speechless with wonder. It was as though we all knew that with any step Monache Meadow would vanish from view and we might never see her again. We just didn't want it to end. My only regret was not camping next to the river and enjoying her exquisite company for an afternoon and night.

Snake count: 9
False alarms: 347

My pack was heavier now. I had posted mountain equipment to Kennedy Meadows. I was carrying an ice axe, some Kahtoola spikes (devices that stretch over the soles of shoes and have spikes for grip in snow, a lighter version of crampons), a mosquito head net and the formidably bulky bear canister. I had managed to balance the weight out by not carrying much water; the mountain creeks and rivers were flowing well, so I would filter and drink one litre and carry just a further litre, if that. The mosquitoes were proving a big problem, especially in the evenings, when they were relentless. I hate them and can barely think of anything as annoying.

Mosquitoes love me. I don't know what it is that attracts them to me but I clearly have a load of it. If I get bitten in Europe I suffer the usual annoyance of a swollen, red, itchy bite. American mosquitoes seemed larger and more numerous but the bites bothered me less – the need to scratch was negligible and my physical reaction was milder. Their onslaught was enough to make even the strongest person crumble, though. They didn't party much during the day. The only time I really saw them was when I was near water. Come evening, however, all hell broke loose.

I camped in the forest with Chad and Justin, just off the trail in a

comforting spot with water nearby, plenty of firewood and flat areas for the tents. Before we had put our packs down, the mosquitoes were all over us. I put on my head net for the first time and immediately discovered a major design flaw that had somehow slipped through quality control: I couldn't see a thing out of it. I had to move my head up and down to find a sweet spot in the mesh. The three of us spent most of the evening slapping ourselves, shaking our heads, scratching and sitting in fire smoke coughing to repel the critters.

My colleagues left before me in the morning with similar plans in mind. I needed to re-supply – the increasing elevations and colder nights meant I was getting through my food bag more quickly. As I rolled down Trail Pass Trail on to Cotton Wood Trail, I reached the parking lot. Chad and Justin were already there, along with Farm Boy and Splints, who had camped there in the hope of getting an early ride into Lone Pine. The road finished at the car park, so there was no through traffic, or indeed any traffic at all to speak of. Two cars came and went in as many hours and we reluctantly succumbed to the 'we may as well walk it, we could be there before the next ride stops' theory.

Just as we started the plod, a minibus rolled by and we flagged it down. Bill, the driver, said he ran a taxi service up to the car park and so couldn't take us down for free, but it would cost ten dollars each, a nominal amount given the distance involved. He insisted on giving us the guided tour as well, making the journey probably thirty minutes longer than I had hoped for.

We stumbled into the Alabama Hills Café and bakery. Regardless of how hungry I was, I always tried to take some time to find a good, independent breakfast place. The usual giveaway was that they were busy – which this little gem certainly was.

We all sat down, long overdue a good feed. The waitress ambled over, eyeing us up: six soiled, aromatic and undesirable-looking hikers covered in insect bites. She was also a gem, and took it in her stride. I never checked the menu; every breakfast place I have ever visited in America has what I need and they cook my food exactly how I like it.

"Two eggs, over easy. Hash browns, crisped on *both* sides please; bacon, also crispy. Toast, rye if you have it, wheat if not, butter on the side. Orange juice and coffee, black, strong and keep it coming," I requested, scratching my right forearm.

And they do it! One thing you have to give the Americans: they know how to do a bloody good breakfast.

I enjoyed Lone Pine. The place had a long history, it felt good to walk around, it had pretty much everything a thru-hiker would need, and it commanded a spectacular view of the High Sierra, with Mt Whitney grinning at you. As usual it was tempting to stay in town just that one extra day, to see if anyone else showed up, or just to visit that café one more time.

I pulled myself away and found Trooper hitching on the same road to the same destination. I had met him a few days earlier; he was walking with an Australian woman called Vader who made me (unintentionally and rudely) laugh, because her face was covered in mud. I saw her in town afterwards and the first thing she demanded to know was why I, or Trooper, hadn't told her. She only discovered upon looking in the motel mirror.

Trooper was a cracking geezer in his mid-forties and said 'Ain't that the truth' a lot. Always calm, he would apologise if he swore, was unassuming and solid. He had attempted the PCT before, getting agonisingly close to Canada before being blown off trail by a storm. Trooper didn't merely go back to that point, but started again from Mexico. He loved it out there as much as any of us and, boy, did he want to finish.

I walked with him for only about half a day, and I asked if he'd like to camp, but he said he needed to push on another five miles, so on he went. I just knew I would be seeing a lot more of Trooper.

The following day I met Flyboxer, Indie and Answerman, sitting at the trailside and smiling in the sun. We exchanged a quick greeting and I continued.

The Sierra Nevada was wonderful. It was wild, and its remoteness was a reminder that the nearest help was a long way away. This element of danger and detachment added to the excitement.

It was also drop-dead stunning, pristine mountain wilderness, shimmering lakes, slithering creeks and majestic forests. It was tough going, probably the hardest section of the entire trail, but because it rewarded me with so many visual treats I couldn't blame it for anything.

I camped that night at Crabtree Meadow for two reasons. First, I just wanted to see it; and second, there was a side trail that ran up to the summit of Mt Whitney at 14,505 feet, the highest mountain in the contiguous United States. When someone first told me this, I had to look up 'contiguous' in the dictionary. Once I discovered its meaning, I felt it would have been rude not to climb her.

Humming Bird and Flashback had left a good two hours ahead of me the

following morning and Indie, Flyboxer and Answerman were behind me. The trail climbed steadily at first, dipping in and out of pine trees, and I glimpsed the night sky, a rising sun and the dark silhouettes of the mountains far above. As the sun started to light a way up, more of my surroundings came into view.

Snow-clad upper reaches capped a long, wide valley that eased itself up to the left turn-off to Mt Whitney itself. Marmots peeked at me curiously. They made me laugh because they studied me but ran off when I got too close, which could be just a couple of feet. Glance back, however, and you could guarantee that they would poke their faces out from their hiding place to have a last peek.

After just over four hours, at 12.50pm, I reached the top of Mt Whitney. It was Independence Day, which made my Englishness somehow more satisfying.

As if Whitney weren't enough to whet a hiker's appetite, shortly afterwards begins the ascent of Forester Pass, the highest point of the PCT at 13,200 feet. The final section to the pass is one of the most feared areas of the PCT because it involves crossing a snow chute, which can be too slippery or too mushy depending on the time of year, and it's a long way down. I had seen it countless times on video, and must confess it gave me the willies. None of us had ropes; they were considered unnecessary and bulky.

I struggled over Tyndall Creek, which a ranger had warned me to treat with respect owing to high water. I rose through the warmth of the lower elevations, passing and being passed by Flyboxer, Indie and Answerman.

A call of nature forced me off trail to the only tree for miles that offered any privacy. As I assumed position, I looked a short way downhill and saw a squall rapidly approaching me. I disregarded it at first, but it was on top of me with shocking speed. The wind slammed me first, then the rain. I watched in horror with flailing, outstretched arms as my bog roll took flight. My soap catapulted skywards and I fell flat on my arse. The squall passed as quickly as it had arrived and I carefully waddled off, looking like a penguin, to retrieve my toilet roll.

I met up with Indie and others just before the final hour-long push to the pass. Grinder also joined us as we were attempting to save time by taking a direct route up and avoiding the switchbacks. Heaving in lungfuls of oxygen, we sank into the snow and hauled ourselves up, bent double, sweating, then resting to catch our breath. When we topped out on the last switchback, all

five of us lay down on the trail, our chests rising and falling quickly.

The snow chute had a clear track carved into it by those who had gingerly stepped across before. Indie was nervous, as was I, but one by one we made it across, hugging the nearest rock in gratitude. To the north, more of the Sierra stretched away to infinity. The mountain passes were like turning pages in a book – each one seemed to make a mere dent in the bigger picture, an unnoticeable gain on an immense journey. At times it reminded me of the journey yet to be conquered. These were pleasurable moments, though. Instead of becoming disillusioned with my modest progress, I smiled. I knew I was being gifted a generous time span in which to experience what the PCT yet had to offer.

Coming off Forester Pass was quite possibly the hardest and longest alpine descent I have ever made. It wasn't too technical, although in parts my pulse was racing, but it seemed to go on and on. I post-holed severely several times, and, as usual, navigation was difficult because of the snow. The valley bottom mocked me. Grinder and I reached the end of a relatively flat-topped ridge, which abruptly ceased and fell away. We checked the map and, after deliberating, decided to negotiate a steep face to get back on track. We began stumbling, toppling and sliding down the face. I gripped my ice axe firmly and concentrated on foot placement. Looking up, I saw Indie and the others peering over at us, and they followed us down. Grinder pulled away from me and became a mere dot. I crossed Bubbs Creek and again lost the trail, so had to improvise a route over rock and then snow fields. Tentatively I picked my way over Bubbs Creek again, which, a couple of thousand feet lower, had matured into a crazy, raging cascade of ice-cold water. My legs numbed and started to shake from the force and chill of the water as I cautiously placed each foot on the next rock, trying to ignore the hundred-foot drop to my left that was waiting to gobble me up with the slightest mistake.

As dusk fell and the incline became kinder, I started to search for a suitable spot to camp. I pulled off trail into a flat area circled by a few trees, then lit some twigs and placed larger sticks on top before pitching the tent. Crouching to push through a small gap in the trees, I was surprised to see another tent.

"Hey," I called. "Anyone at home?"

There was silence, so I presumed the occupant was either asleep or looking for firewood. About ten minutes later the reply came.

"Fozzie?"

“Yeah! How the hell did you know it was me? Who is that? Trooper? That sounds like you.”

“Yeah, it’s me. Man, am I ill.” His voice was somewhere between sleep and sickness. The tent’s zip gently glided down, two hands stretched the canvas back and a forlorn, pale face squeezed through the flap and offered a weak smile.

“Trooper, you look bloody terrible. What’s going on?”

“Giardia. Fozzie, I got the shits big time. See that clump of trees down there?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t go looking for firewood there, that’s my toilet.”

Giardiasis is an infection of the small intestine, caused by a microscopic organism (protozoa), *Giardia lamblia*. Giardiasis outbreaks can occur in both developed and developing countries where water supplies become contaminated and, more importantly, are untreated. Beaver droppings are a common contaminant and the biggest culprit on the PCT, but the infection can also be spread from person to person through poor hygiene. While not fatal, the symptoms are nasty and include vomiting, diarrhoea, bloating, abnormal amounts of gas (as Elk would testify to), headache, appetite loss, fever, nausea and a swollen abdomen. I met several people on the hike who had Giardia, and it was not a happy experience being in their company. It was enough to make me filter all of my water.

I had spoken to Stumbling Norwegian about it. He had been infected the previous year, and enlightened me as to what he considered the worst symptom, *sharting*. Sharting, he informed me, was essentially a mix of a shit and a fart. I feel that I need explain this no further. The accepted course of treatment is a drug called Flagyl, which will cure the majority of cases. I had tried to obtain this at a couple of pharmacies as a precaution, but was unsuccessful because it was not prescribed unless one actually had Giardia; it was also expensive. Several hikers did carry the drug, however, and luckily Trooper had started a course of it. Generally it clears up in a week to ten days, but it may persist longer and can flare up again later in life.

Trooper spent all of that evening sleeping, interrupted occasionally by a sprint to the ‘toilet’. I offered to make him food and help out, but he was too tired even to eat or get out of his tent.

Indie, Answerman and Flyboxer appeared shortly thereafter and, although lured by the fire, said they were going to get another couple of miles in

before pitching camp. I left Trooper in the morning. My conscience nibbled away at me because you don’t leave someone sick in the mountains, but he insisted he would be fine.

After the pain of coming down Forester Pass the previous day, the next challenge of Glen Pass beckoned, as well as countless others. I was consuming food quickly and needed to find a way to re-supply. However, in the High Sierra, access to the outside world is not exactly forthcoming.

# Chapter 7

Dealing with Natural Obstacles

*As long as I live, I will hear the birds and the winds and the waterfalls sing. I'll interpret the rocks and learn the language of flood, of storm and avalanche. I'll make the acquaintance of the wild gardens and the glaciers and get as near to the heart of this world as I can.*
**John Muir**

John Muir was born in 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland. His parents, and father in particular, were deeply religious and considered anything that distracted from the Bible as frivolous. The family emigrated to the United States in 1849 and set up a farm near Portage in Wisconsin.

Aged 22, Muir enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Although he only ever achieved average grades, geology and botany kindled his interest. In 1864 he went to Canada to avoid the military draft, returning two years later to Minneapolis, where he worked for a factory making wagon wheels. Many argue that the turning point in his life came after he was struck in the eye by a tool that had slipped. He was confined to a darkened room for six weeks, fearing he would never regain his sight.

"This affliction has driven me to the sweet fields. God has to nearly kill us sometimes, to teach us lessons," he said.

He promised thereafter to be true to himself and follow his dreams of exploration and the study of plants.

His legacy is the John Muir Trail, a route better described as a work of wilderness art. Starting near Mount Whitney, it continues 215 miles to Yosemite National Park and offers quite possibly the best example of American wilderness. Its path is shared by the PCT, and its status as a designated trail needs no explanation, The John Muir Trail is also ludicrously difficult; the elevation losses and gains are perhaps the most punishing on the whole PCT.

It was, however, proving to be enjoyable punishment. A regular pattern started to emerge – a mountain pass had to be conquered each and every day. For three weeks I had to climb the equivalent of Ben Nevis daily, often in snow, at altitudes of up to 13,200 feet. The novelty of getting out of the desert and into the mountains was soon replaced by fatigue and an insatiable

craving for food. Some would regard this environment as scary or intimidating. Is it dangerous? Absolutely. If it all goes wrong, you're in trouble. You don't get an ambulance in ten minutes out there; you don't even get mobile reception.

I took the Bullfrog Lake Trail up to Kearsarge Pass, intending to get a ride into a town called Independence to buy food for the coming section. The trail disappeared off my PCT map, so I had to wing it a little, but the way was well worn. I walked past lakes so deeply blue they were almost black. Occasionally, the sun wouldn't rise far enough over the surrounding peaks to melt all the ice on the waters. I marvelled at a vision of ice merging to turquoise and the stark contrast between both. Brown trout darted this way and that in the creeks, jumping now and then to catch a fly. I dangled a line into the water, hoping for fresh breakfast, but the fish seemed to scatter as soon as they sensed a presence.

It was nearly a day's hike just to get to the parking lot at Onion Valley, where I sought a ride into Independence. As I reached the top of Kearsarge Pass, a long series of switchbacks appeared, winding downwards. As much as I loved the PCT, I didn't love its miles of trail to towns and highways. It seemed that other hikers had followed in my footsteps, and I passed Cheeks, Mojave, Burnie, Brakelight, Splints, Farmboy, Uncle Gary and the two other English hikers Nick and Chris on the way down. They told me to catch a ride back into Lone Pine, as re-supplying in Independence would be difficult.

I reached the parking area mid-afternoon, and stuck my thumb out at the first car leaving. It stopped, and Damon and Renee Rockwell offered to take me all the way back to Lone Pine. I felt suitably rewarded for my hard work that day – until the car broke down in stifling heat on the highway.

"Don't worry," said Renee. "Damon can fix anything."

And fix it he did.

I have mentioned my inability to remember people's names. I listen, but my brain doesn't seem to register, so invariably I have to apologise and ask again. After some thought on the trail, I thought it was perhaps a memory confidence problem. I decided to follow my instinct, be positive and go with what I thought.

I entered the Mount Whitney Hostel where I had stayed a few days before, and checked in for two nights. The same receptionist was there.

"Thanks, Teresa," I said.

"It's Jessica, actually," she replied, smiling, raising her eyebrows.

I didn’t really need two days in Lone Pine, but filled the time with eating, drinking coffee and answering many emails. The World Cup was still on, although without England, and I settled down in the Dow Villa Hotel to watch Spain play Germany. Being English, any country taking on the Germans got my vote, so I was cheering on the Spanish. Three German guys in the room looked at me strangely.

“You are supporting the Spanish side?” one of them enquired, puzzled. “Why is this so?”

“I’m English,” I replied, looking him straight in the eye. “Do you really need me to explain?”

I felt guilty about being off trail, so I decided to move out the following day. I visited the Alabama Café for one last breakfast. The place was buzzing as usual, and a guy stopped by my table.

“You doing the PCT?” he asked, looking me up and down and scratching his stubble.

“Yes, I am,” I said, swallowing my last mouthful.

“Well, God will be with you.”

Feeling a bit belligerent, possibly because of the heat, I replied, “Actually, bearing in mind I don’t believe in God, and with due respect, I don’t think he will be.”

He looked momentarily flummoxed and slightly shocked.

“How can you say that?” he retorted. “I find that offensive.”

“Actually,” I said, “I find the fact that you think God *can* help me offensive, bearing in mind I don’t believe he even exists. However, thank you for your support.”

I left rapidly, not wanting to clean up the can of worms I’d opened and making a note to work on my tact.

I took a bus back to Independence and got a quick ride back up to the Onion Valley parking area. Making short work of Kearsarge Pass, I was soon back on trail with a full pack of food and a spring in my step. It was about seven days to the next town stop, so I steeled myself and got going.

This section of the Sierra was hard. Leaving the trail was tricky, and the passes were brutal. Glen Pass (12,000ft), Pinchot Pass (12,150ft), Mather Pass (12,100ft), Muir Pass (11,950ft), Selden Pass (10,900ft) and Silver Pass (10,900ft) all loomed ahead of me like a huge obstacle course. The descents were more difficult than the ascents. Knees ached and the valley bottoms teased me from miles away. The uphill sections required more exertion, but I

coped with them better. I had more purchase in the snow and found more of a rhythm. Downhill was a series of leg-breaking jolts and gravity caused me to post-hole alarmingly.

Coming off Glen Pass, I lost the trail, as usual, but I knew the approximate direction. The entire route was laid out in front of me like a gigantic version of my map. I simply had to pick the easiest and least dangerous line to reach my destination. I followed a fast-flowing creek to Rae Lake, easily identifiable because the trail hopped straight through a land bridge in the middle. The snow was soft near the creek edge about thirty feet below me, so I stayed back, but still sank worryingly easily. Reaching the end of a stretch of snow, I blithely rushed to solid ground. My right leg went through the snow and bent back at a right angle. My shin smashed into the rock and I screamed in agony. I couldn't push myself up and out; the snow around me was too loose. The pain was excruciating. Fearing that a broken leg or fracture would spell the end of my hike, I pummelled the snow, screaming in frustration.

Eventually the pain subsided a little, and I relaxed and took stock. I placed my pack on the snow and used it to pull myself out, a red streak of blood smearing the stark white surface. With some trepidation, I peeled back a blood-soaked trouser leg to inspect the wound. A cut, perhaps three inches long, was starting to congeal and swell. I cleaned the wound with snow, prising it open to remove any debris. I applied some antibiotic cream, dressed the wound and swallowed a couple of ibuprofen. I hoped, against my better judgement perhaps, that I hadn't suffered a broken leg. I brewed some tea and tried to calm down, concentrating on my breathing. After half an hour I hobbled carefully away, figuring that unless bones started to protrude or I heard a nasty grating sound coming from my leg, that the prognosis was good.

This part of the PCT has numerous rivers and creeks, all swollen with an angry, foaming froth of meltwater cascading from the mountains above. While some waters were only ankle-deep, others presented more of an obstacle.

Through summer, the upper Sierra Nevada warms up and a huge amount of snow melts. Small trickles of meltwater work their way under the snow, join larger trickles which run into creeks and merge into rivers. It's a massive amount of water which has to channel somewhere, and the further into summer I ventured, the more the levels rose.

Water crossings appeared often and each had to be sized up carefully. I considered three factors: depth, width and current. Some creeks were only a few feet across yet were speeding along; others were impressively wide but flowed smoothly. Tyndall Creek, at the base of Forester Pass, was the first crossing to catch me out. As I drew near, I saw why the ranger had warned me about this particular creek. It was perhaps only twenty feet wide and three feet deep, but it was flowing fast. The real problem in crossing water is the possibility of being swept away; with forty pounds strapped to your back, you're all but helpless.

Elk had told me about a creek that had given him trouble. It was waist-deep, but relatively slow-moving, so maybe he was lulled into a false sense of security. Two steps in, and he was whipped downstream for fifty feet before managing to clamber out. Once you lose your footing, all you can do is try and work to the shore and grab anything solid to haul yourself out.

I approached each crossing the same way. I didn't assume that the point at which the PCT met the bank was the best place to cross. I walked a couple of hundred feet upstream and the same downstream, sometimes more, looking for alternative spots. I learnt some things this way. If the river narrowed, obviously the other side was closer, but by the same token the water was squeezed tighter and therefore the current was usually stronger. So a wider crossing was sometimes the better option, because the current was kinder. On occasion, the river widened but the current remained the same. This usually meant that the water was deeper, the extra water being accommodated by the depth. The main prize sometimes to be found when scanning downstream and upstream, especially in forest, was a natural bridge in the form of a fallen tree, possibly manoeuvred into place by kindly hikers. A tree bridge got me out of many a scrape.

Tyndall didn't look that threatening. It wasn't particularly wide, but there was plenty of water between its banks, so I pulled off my boots, slipped on my Crocs and put my socks over the top. This was a trick I had picked up from countless internet video clips – socks over footwear provide better grip on the creek bed. Three steps in, and the freezing water hit my feet and legs, numbing them immediately and painfully. Wanting to escape, I made the mistake of speeding up. As the current then hit me, I strained to stay upright, leaning in to the flow of the water and using my trekking poles for balance. The deafening roar was all I could hear as the torrent gushed around me as far up as my waist. I glanced downstream at the fate that would befall me should

I slip. Rocks poked out from the froth, the water hurtled downwards; there would be no chance of getting out if I stumbled. I tried to ignore the pain and take slow, steady steps nearer the bank. Scanning the creek bed for a decent foothold was almost useless, given the force of the current smashing into my legs. By the time I reached the rocks on the opposite bank, I was a wreck. My legs were screaming from the cold and I was heaving in great lungfuls of air. Still, I was thrilled to have made it safely across.

Reginald at Nerve Centre HQ was getting messages from Nancy in my right leg. Gertrude, responsible for the left leg, was having a fit and good old Angela down at foot level was going into hypothermic shock.

"What the hell is going on down there?" Reginald screamed. "I got a sudden drop in temperature, severe force to the right side of both legs, and I hear rumours that he's got his socks on over his Crocs. Is this correct?"

"I think we just did a river crossing!" Angela shouted back. "I definitely felt the socks peel off, and then he put his Crocs on; I'm not sure about the socks, I mean, why the hell would he do that? I think we're out now, though; the temperature is slowly going up. Forget Gertrude and Nancy, they'll bloody complain about anything."

I continued to tackle water crossings, sometimes as many as fifteen in a day. The more I crossed, the better I got at it. At first I resented getting my shoes and socks wet, but it was quicker to wade in with them on than stop constantly to change. At the end of the day I could dry the shoes and socks by the fire and they generally dried overnight anyway. I began to think I had mastered the art of crossing water – until, that is, Evolution Creek spoiled an otherwise typically pleasant Sierra Nevada morning.

Evolution Creek takes the overspill from Wanda Lake. I was woken from my daydreaming when the trees cleared to reveal a stretch of water that seemed at least a hundred feet wide. Because of its width, the current had backed off a little, but was certainly strong enough to get my attention. I made two mistakes: first, I had become complacent about crossing water, and second, I decided it would be a good idea to capture the crossing on video to post on the blog. Filming entailed losing the use of one trekking pole for the duration, because my camera was mounted on the end, with the aid of a nifty gadget called a StickPic. I could hold the pole in front with the camera facing back at me; the resulting film gave the impression that the camera operator was walking a few feet in front of me.

I did the usual scout for a suitable crossing place but decided the PCT had

already found it right by the creek. I guessed the water was about waist height, though in one short section it seemed deeper and the current stronger. I checked that my gear was securely ensconced in waterproof liners and commenced what I hoped would be a quick but safe traverse. All was well, until I sank up to my armpits in freezing water and then felt the current hit me like a freight train. I had difficulty lifting my foot for the next step, as the water threatened to send me flailing downstream. Helplessly stuck, I was gripped by fear; yet, somewhat taking leave of my senses, I carried on filming, not wishing to lose either the camera or such potentially great blog material.

I gritted my teeth, leaned into the current and decided that the next step would either see me through the deep section or send me tumbling downriver. With the water rushing up over my neck, I couldn't read the creek bed to find my next step. After a few seconds that seemed an eternity, I powered through to the far bank, exhausted.

Peeling off my soaked clothes, I sat on a warm rock and grabbed my camera, eager to review what must have been great footage. I cried at the sombre message blinking at me on the screen: 'memory card full'.

* * *

The Sierra was certainly providing me with all the solitude I wanted, if not more. Now 800 miles in, and having covered a third of the PCT, I was seeing fewer of my fellow hikers. Some forty per cent of those who attempt the PCT fail to get through the first month. For days, a landscape of surreal beauty, pristine wilderness and indescribable vistas was all mine to enjoy. My body was becoming a powerhouse; despite the altitude, I felt as fit as I had ever been as I stormed up passes and whipped along the trail. Forest opened up into meadows and merged with rocky, snow-covered higher lands.

It became a daily routine to tackle a pass, descend to a lower, warmer, more oxygen-rich elevation and prepare myself for more of the same in the morning. My fear of bears was under control too – I almost relished the prospect of an encounter.

I liked the evenings. After the vast effort of a twenty to twenty-five-mile day, including getting up and over another pass, having a few hours to wind down was bliss. I would look for a suitable rest spot once I had reached my distance target for the day. My preference was for forest, mainly because I could get a fire going using scattered wood. My first goal was a flat patch of

ground to sleep on; my second was a nearby creek to use for water but not too close to attract mosquitoes. I would filter a few litres and give my back and neck a stretch. Next, I made arrangements for sleeping, which were by now second nature. I'd lay out a piece of Tyvek (a building material used to 'wrap' houses in, acting as a breathable membrane). Tyvek is ideal as a sleeping platform or to lay under a tent groundsheet as added protection. I would then inflate my sleeping mat and hang my sleeping bag from a tree to aid the lofting. Every couple of days I would wash my feet and socks in the creek and then sit down to cook. A litre of water was enough to give me a hot cup of tea and to hydrate whatever culinary concoction my food bag offered. I would update my journal and might then, time allowing, do a little reading.

One of my most enjoyable experiences was listening to the wind rush through the forest. It struck me several times how simple this phenomenon was. It transported me to an almost primitive era, before technology took over the free time of collective society. No other sounds intruded, and for a few minutes I would actively listen to the wind, appreciating and then studying it.

Sometimes it was a mere breeze, which barely glanced against my face. Stronger gusts, however, played a game of cat and mouse with the forest. Myriad currents and flows wove their way through the trees. The pines occasionally parted like theatrical curtains to reveal a tantalising glimpse of the night sky before closing in again. I could hear stronger torrents coming from hundreds of feet away, faintly at first, then building in intensity as they drew closer. At times they would pass behind me with a roar, leaving my little haven calm and undisturbed. Other times they would slam into me, a cool and exhilarating blast that ruffled my hair and clothing. The forest around me came alive when the wind came out to play. Whirls and eddies whipping around me made my whole body tingle.

Mather Pass, however, took the wind out of me. Forester was the highest but not necessarily the hardest. Mather was a stiff climb up and a long and harsh ascent. I had to work my way around several fallen trees, and water crossings were abundant.

Having reached the bottom, I was enveloped in thick forest once more. At 6pm I reached the Middle Fork Kings River, where three mighty rivers violently converged. Indie and Flyboxer had settled down to cook their evening meals before venturing off for a few more miles. They introduced me to Stacks, who was cooking mac 'n' cheese over a fire. It transpired that

Stacks had walked the Camino de Santiago in Spain the same year as I had, but we had never met. He seemed extremely relaxed, and when I enquired about the green plant he was chopping, he said it was wild onion. I was aware that this existed but had no idea how to identify it. He had used up all of his, and we tried in vain to find some more for my future use. I left after he did, and lo and behold, two miles up the track, a neat bundle of wild onions took pride of place on a boulder in the middle of the trail.

I walked a little with Indie past Grouse Meadow, which shone in the early evening sun as insects danced on its surface. Now and then the river would steer a course close to the trail and thunder past us, crashing and slamming its way downstream. I pulled off trail for an early night as Indie walked off to catch up with Flyboxer, and we agreed to meet in the morning for the assault on Muir Pass.

We had heard a lot from other hikers and some of the rangers about Muir Pass. It was acquiring quite a reputation. The main hurdle was a seven-mile stretch of snow, which made post-holing a real danger, and some of the creeks were still snow-covered, necessitating walking over snow bridges.

From my elevation at camp, I had a 4,000-foot climb to the top and then some difficult miles back down past the snow line to solid ground. I started early, at 7am, to make the most of what I knew it would be a brutal day. I soon met up with Indie once more, along with Flyboxer and Answerman, and we formed a team to tackle Muir and be safe in numbers. Stax, Black Gum and Ursa Major were also packing up camp but soon passed us.

I crossed the Kings River again and scrambled up a rocky outcrop, where the river mockingly blocked my path again. Cautiously crossing using boulders, I reached the other side to discover the path was blocked by a steep outcrop. I had to retrace my route back down to join the others coming up.

As we hit the first of the snow and glanced up, things appeared worse than we had anticipated. The gradient was steep, there was snow all the way to the top, the river forced us to make several crossings and we soon lost the trail. Other tracks in the snow were always a clue but could not be trusted; after all, they were not necessarily heading up to Muir Pass. I met a woman coming down, who confirmed it was hard going, but that a day’s work should see us up and over. She also warned me that the snow was soft and would get even softer as the sun became hotter. She pointed out a dangerous snow bridge a mile away and advised taking a safer route. I thanked her and adjusted my course to take this into account, while signalling the others to veer up and

follow me.

We all tried to balance ourselves on the slope, which steepened down to the river. I was wearing my spikes and steadying myself with one trekking pole, my ice axe ready in the other hand. The snow alternated between soft and firm, broken up with damp, slippery rock sections that demanded the use of my hands. We targeted a small col at the base of a lake, descended to the river and followed its course up to the col. As we crested, a turquoise lake dotted with floating islands of ice met our eyes. We plodded on, our breathing becoming heavier as we surveyed the pass, still two miles ahead. Using well-trodden footprints where the snow had become firmer, we descended to a narrow creek and crossed over a snow bridge that creaked beneath us. Flyboxer veered off, preferring a more direct but steeper approach, while Indie, Answerman and I took the longer but kinder route. At 3pm we reached the round stone shelter perched on the summit of Muir Pass. We ate a late lunch, took photos and mocked each other's appearance. After several days on trail, we were all completely filthy.

We went back down at our own pace and spaced out within sight of each other. Clouds billowed up around me as a few raindrops fell, the first rain I had encountered in weeks. The snow gradually thinned. I removed my spikes and wove a way over rocks and meltwater until Evolution Lake appeared below. One last crossing and I stopped for the day at the edge of the lake, after twelve hours and twelve miles of particularly gruelling hiking. Gradually the others limped in and set up camp nearby. We all watched the sun set poetically between two mountains that tumbled down to form a V shape at the end of the lake. Oranges and reds streaked the sky, reflected in the waters as the clouds slowly dispersed. We were exhausted but smiling, gradually relaxing as steam rose from our stoves. We ate like wolves.

It was 110 miles between my last, and next, town stops. I had seriously misjudged both my food and alcohol supplies. I only had a day's food at best and my alcohol was a mere dribble. That's stove alcohol, not Jack Daniels. Shit, if I had been running low on JD, then things really would have been serious. I knew there was a cut-off trail heading to Muir Trail Ranch, a remote lodging miles from anywhere, and hoped I could re-supply there.

I made my way further down from Muir Pass, past ferocious, tumbling, emerald rivers cascading into waterfalls. Immense granite rock-faces towered above me and small watercourses trickled down them like streaked tears.

I was miles from civilisation, completely hemmed in on all sides by

wilderness. No intrusion from buildings, no noise from roads, and the only light at night was the moon and stars. Many people find this sort of environment uncomfortable, unnatural. It never bothered me or anyone I was walking with. Far from it: the sense of detachment was one of the primary reasons why we were out walking the PCT. I remembered coming down Forester Pass and stopping to admire the peaks around me, the lakes glistening below, the clouds floating above me and the welcoming silence. Dangerous it could be, but that was the price one paid to experience the serenity of a place like this.

I met Frank and his horse, Chief, out for an afternoon ride. He was the blacksmith at Muir Trail ranch and as we chatted for a few minutes, he showed me a fabulously intricate and detailed key ring he had forged. According to him, I would definitely get food at the ranch, as there were several hiker boxes and the owner, Pat, kept stocks of stove fuel.

The ranch lay less than a mile off the PCT, and as I walked down the track it became clear that others had also made a beeline for it. A sign on the gate said ‘Please ring the bell’. I nodded to Answerman, who was sitting there, relaxing.

“Don’t worry, Fozzie,” he advised. “Just come on in.”

As I walked through and clicked the gate shut, a voice broke the silence.

“Did you ring the bell?”

It was Pat, the proprietor. I had heard a few stories about this elderly lady’s fearsome manner, so I was half expecting a Doberman to come charging out from somewhere.

“Er … no. Sorry?”

“It’s OK,” Answerman offered. “It’s my fault. I told him to come in.”

“Please ring the bell,” she ordered.

Despite her reputation, Pat proved to be a little angel. She gave me a quick rundown of what was where, and confirmed that she could supply me with stove fuel. There was not one, but five hiker boxes. Signs politely requested hikers to take no more than they required, as food was in high demand. I needed about two days’ worth of sustenance and scored some excellent results: dehydrated bacon and eggs, chocolate-coated sesame crackers, powdered milk, oats and a couple of evening meals. Pat sold me some alcohol fuel, and after chatting to a few hikers, I was on my way.

My next re-supply was in a large town called Mammoth. After a twenty-miler from the ranch, I had left myself another twenty miles to camp; then,

the following day, a short five to reach the trailhead and catch a ride to town. After I'd knocked off the twenty by mid-afternoon, my stomach got the better of me and I pushed out the remaining mileage, calculating that the incentive of an imminent cooked breakfast increased my speed by an average of 0.2 miles per hour. If I had a cooked breakfast every morning, I could therefore walk an extra two miles a day. If only.

My second water filter had now packed up and I was using a Steripen. This little unit was essentially an ultraviolet tube which treats water when immersed in it, destroying the reproductive capability of any organisms. It was fragile but its simplicity attracted me. Just wave it in a litre of water for about a minute, and job done. I passed a group of hikers at lunch and stopped to chat. One of them asked me what water purification method I was using, and when I told him, he said he was also using a Steripen and his batteries had run out. I offered him my spares and refused payment, saying I would reach Mammoth that evening and could buy some more. He thanked me profusely as I walked off. A couple of hours later I stopped by a creek to treat a few litres of water to get me to town – and saw with frustration that my batteries were dead. So much for karma!

# Chapter 8

Washed Away by the Tuolumne River

*Shake your water, it makes the Giardia dizzy.*
**Cary 'Borders' Hart**

I walked out on to the trailhead at Reds Meadow late afternoon and made a beeline for the café, with nothing more important on my mind than bacon and eggs. Once re-fuelled, I caught the bus that made regular trips to Mammoth, and sat behind a guy near the front. After a couple of minutes he spoke to me.

"Are you a thru-hiker?" he enquired, turning his nose up slightly.

"Yes, I am," I replied, smiling pleasantly.

"I thought so, you smell like shit." He then got out of his seat and moved to the back of the bus.

I would normally retort in such situations but I was so amazed by such outright rudeness that my tongue was tied. He was right, though; no denying it. After several days on trail, a cheesy odour rising from my feet was enough to make even me grimace.

Mammoth earned its living from the winter ski season trade. During the summer, it was a mecca for mountain bikers and hikers and was well equipped in every way for a thru-hiker. It was not, however, my kind of town. The amenities, again, were too spaced out, which meant time wasted trying to find the launderette, the supermarket, a breakfast place and, more importantly, a motel. There was a jazz festival in town and everything was booked up. I called at several motels, but no luck. On my way to the KOA, I called in on the off-chance at the Motel 6. A register in reception was filled with messages from PCT hikers that had a spare bed available.

'Hey, Grey Fox in Room 6. Give us a call.'

I dialled the number.

"Hello?"

"Grey Fox, how you doing? Says here you may have a spare bed?" I said.

"Er, who is this?"

"It's Fozzie."

"Fozzie, hi. Yeah, er, a spare bed? No, sorry."

I got the distinct impression he did but for some reason didn't want me to take it.

“Right,” I replied. “Well, you might want to change the message in the book to reflect that?”

I hadn’t seen Grey Fox for a couple of weeks. He walked with Spiller, who I had originally assumed was his girlfriend; so when I learnt that she wasn’t and that he was engaged to someone else, I was intrigued. The Grey Fox and Spiller saga was bread-and-butter gossip for most of the thru-hikers. They acted as if they were together and I guess you could have classed them as inseparable. Grey Fox had driven back home when he reached Kennedy Meadows because his fiancée apparently demanded they sort some things out. Whether Spiller was part of this I never found out, but they kept most people guessing for the length of the PCT. I had never quite managed to read him, and got the impression he had a problem with me, which I suppose was verified when he rejected my interest in his spare bed.

Continuing to scan through the register, I saw a note from Pockets.

‘Hey. Got chicken pox! Come say hello!’

Having gone through my chicken pox phase aged seven, I called his room. I had met Pockets briefly at Kennedy Meadows but had not seen him since.

“Fozzie! Hey! What’s up?”

“Pockets, how you feeling? I’m looking for a spare bed for a couple of nights. Any chance?”

“Man, I feel like shit, not good company at the moment. Tell you what, though, come back tomorrow and I think I’ll be through the worst of it. You’re welcome to grab the bed then if you like.”

“Thanks, mate. I’ll give you a shout in the morning.”

I plodded on down to the KOA, confident that I could at least get a spot to pitch and grab a shower. The warden told me she was absolutely full up because of the festival.

“I only need a space seven feet long by three feet wide,” I explained, outlining a rectangle with my hands.

“You have to stay at a designated spot and I don’t have anywhere, sorry.”

After she had driven off in her golf cart, I ducked up one of the tracks, disappeared into the trees and could have picked a spot among hundreds. If they weren’t specific camping areas, with a nice little drive to park your SUV and a space big enough to accommodate the average American motor home, i.e. about half an acre, then you couldn’t stay there. I walked a little way into the trees to hide me from the warden, and pitched.

Walking down to the shower area, I heard the familiar cackle of Burnie’s

witch laugh through the trees, and went to investigate. She was with Cheeks and Mojave, and they too had experienced similar problems finding a camp spot until a kind couple had let them pitch near their motor home. It seemed funny that in the wild we had millions of acres to pitch a tent, but when we reached town there was no availability and, even if there was, we would have to pay for it. To top off the day, the shower block was closed, so I walked to the nearest eatery, McDonald's, with my lingering foot odour in hot pursuit.

I admit it couldn't have been pleasant for anyone near me, but I couldn't help but be amused by the insulting looks I got in McDonald's that evening and the way people moved away once they'd got a whiff of me. My clothing had dirt marks, my hands looked as though I had just done an oil change, and my hair was so sticky it was vertical. Even I baulked at the strange character peering back at me in the mirror.

What I found peculiar was that to me, and most other hikers, the townsfolk were the ones who stank. After being out in the woods for a while, you lose touch with how people smell. Perfume, deodorant and hair products suddenly become offensive. Even on trail, we could tell a casual day-hiker from a hard-core thru-hiker just by the body odour.

I went to the Black Stove with Burnie in the morning for breakfast, and set about the usual 'zero' tasks (a day when no hiking is done is called a zero). On my return to Motel 6, Pockets invited me up and said I could stay as long as needed.

I would have trouble describing Pockets in under fifty pages, but I'll give it a shot. His trail name came about from a thru-hike he completed on the Appalachian Trail a few years before. He had reached a small outdoors store and agreed that the owner would give him a gear shakedown (someone goes through your pack contents and advises what you do and do not need). After having the contents of his pack scrutinised, Pockets was doing well, until he was asked to empty his pockets – at which point all manner of items spilled out, and the trail name was born.

Pockets was 27, and his home was a small town called Paw Paw in Michigan. He sported an impressive beard the like of which I could only ever dream of growing. His eyes were a piercing blue that he claimed drove the women wild, and his passion was photography. Having only picked up a camera a few years before, he showed an uncanny knack for taking beautiful pictures. So much so that he had already managed to get published in National Geographic, the holy grail of any budding photographer.

We went for a meal in the evening and Burnie joined us. There were only two beds in the room, and as she had left the campsite, she took up Pockets's offer of a place to stay. I offered her my bed, saying I could take the floor, but she declined and laid out her sleeping bag on the carpet.

"Yeah, so, I got this unusual problem when I sleep," Pockets said. "I figure I should really warn you both in case something happens."

"Something happening? Like what?" asked Burnie, sitting up and raising her eyebrows.

"Well, I dream a lot and sometimes sleepwalk. It's nothing to worry about; I don't turn into a werewolf or anything. They hooked me up to some measuring machine a while back and apparently my brain is ten times more active at night than most people's during the day. If I start making noises and talking just ignore it. I've been doing it like forever. I was born in Germany but left when I was about two. I can't speak German but in my sleep I'm fluent. I also speak a little French and Spanish when I sleep. Most of the time I'm just incoherent and ramble on. My parents always had to watch me when I was little because I would get up and move around the house."

Burnie and I looked at each other in silent astonishment. Pockets carried on.

"When I was walking the Appalachian Trail, I was sleeping in the bottom bunk of one of the shelters. I dreamt that I was walking up a hill and suddenly all these logs started rolling down, so I tried to stop them. This woke most of the other hikers up and, although still dreaming, I could sense a lot of head torches shining at me. In the morning everyone said that they had woken up with me screaming to get out and I was leaning hard against one of the wooden shelter supports, slipping back on the floor in my socks. 'Get out of the shelter!' I was screaming. 'You could at least look a little appreciative, I'm trying to save you all!'"

With that, Pockets turned over and went to sleep, as if he'd said nothing unusual. Burnie looked at me and shrugged her shoulders and we both nodded off, keeping half an ear open for a German-speaking, crazed thru-hiker bracing himself against the motel wall.

Pockets was quiet that night, save a few mumbles. He had skipped a section, so the following day he went south to Kearsarge Pass to complete the missing miles. I had a funny feeling we would be meeting again.

I caught the bus back to Reds Meadow, and couldn't resist a slice of cherry pie with a chocolate milkshake to set me up for the afternoon. I was

shocked when the waitress handed me the bill for $12.02. I paid at the counter.

“Would you mind filling up my water bottle for me, please?” I asked, holding up my grubby-looking bottle.

She took a step back.

“There’s a spigot round the back for hikers,” she said.

“Would you have given me a glass of water with my pie had I asked?” I said, becoming a little assertive now.

“Yes, of course.” The look on her face suggested she had got my point before I had made it.

“Good. Because I’ve just spent twelve bucks on a meagre piece of pie and a milkshake. Now, please could you walk the four paces to that tap over there and fill my water bottle for me?”

I put in a few miles that afternoon and eventually stopped near the Vogelsang Trailhead. A pleasant breeze kept the mosquitoes at bay for once, and I camped just a few feet off trail near the river. It was a beautiful evening, the sun seemed to take longer than usual to say her goodbyes and the forest was silent except for the river whispering to me as it slid gently past. I sat on the bank and dangled my sore feet in the water, watching some trout manoeuvre around the shallows. Lush, deep green grass banked up gently from the far side before disappearing into the trees, which in turn surrendered to the towering granite outcrops above them, an orange brushed sky providing the finale. A doe and two fawns circled me cautiously, grazing the undergrowth and occasionally glancing my way. They came within a few feet, and it reminded me of how lucky I was to be experiencing the wilderness. I heard a twig break perhaps a hundred feet behind me, and looked round to see a wolf skulking through the trees. It stopped and looked at me, seeming to chastise itself, annoyed, for making its presence known. We locked eyes for a few seconds, its nose testing the air for a scent, and off it went.

The following day I made a beeline for the café at Tuolumne Meadows. This was a popular spot for tourists exploring the Ansel Adams Wilderness, the John Muir Trail and a huge rock-face known as Half Dome, down the road. I crested a hill in the trail and came face to face with Wyoming, whom I had not seen since Idyllwild. I was momentarily taken aback, thinking she, or I, must be going the wrong way. We had a big hug.

“What … where, er, why are you walking the wrong way?” I stammered.

“I’m not, Fozzie! I skipped up to Ashland in Oregon because of the snow in the Sierras. Now I’m walking back to where I skipped from, Kennedy Meadows.”

“That’s a big skip!” I exclaimed. “How was it from there to here?”

“There’s snow in the Marble Mountains down to 6,000 feet, other than that it’s fine. Oregon is kinder, the trail is smooth and the elevation loss and gain are minimal. You can crack out some good mileage there. How are the Sierras?”

“Difficult!” I said, smiling to try to lighten the news. “There are a lot of hard passes and still plenty of snow. You can get through all of them if you’re careful. Take extra food: the altitude and temperature will increase your appetite. Oh, and watch out for Mather Pass, it’s a bitch.”

We hugged again and I watched her trudge off south. It was strange meeting my first SoBo (south-bounder). I couldn’t get my head around it. I also felt a tinge of sadness. I had first met Wyoming on only the second day, at a campsite off Fred Canyon Road, when I was walking with Gabe. She was an extraordinarily unassuming and gentle woman. She spoke quietly; I had to listen closely to what she was saying. She was slight, and her hair was cut short, perhaps as the sort of low-maintenance approach many hikers adopted. I dearly wished I could see her again, but I knew I probably wouldn’t.

SoBos thru-hike the PCT from Canada to Mexico. The norm is to do it north-bound, NoBo-style. Because Canada and Washington State receive more snowfall over the winter, which does not clear until later in the season, a south-bounder starts and finishes later than a north-bounder. There are pros and cons for the SoBo, but the main advantage I could see was that you walk away from the bad weather towards California, which stays warm long after the northern states are under several feet of the white stuff. NoBos are always caught in a game of chase-the-weather, trying to reach Canada before the snow hits them. Wyoming was not a true SoBo as such; she was just south-bounding one section. I met more of them the further north I walked. Generally a SoBo starts around June and finishes around November.

The track dipped out at around 8,700 feet from Donahue Pass, and kept a close friendship with the Lyle River on my right for a good eight miles. Occasionally, winter overspill from the river had crept over the trail and softened the ground into a rich, deep brown mud which clung to my shoes. I stopped several times to talk to other walkers, who congratulated me on attempting the PCT. The area is easily accessible from the road that runs

through Tuolumne Meadows and attracts many a visiting hiker. That morning, it was easy to see why; as I walked through the meadows that stretch out from the river, the flat terrain made for contemplative meandering. I felt at ease there. I ate a good meal at the café and got in a few supplies at the well-stocked store. Holidaymakers, hikers and climbers dotted the area, and the air was busy with the chitter-chatter of people anticipating a day in the wild. I had thought about catching a ride down to see the famous Half Dome, a hugely impressive rock-face. I was putting in good mileage at this stage, around twenty-five a day, and I also felt that though undoubtedly awe-inspiring, Half Dome would be no more spectacular than the sights I had become used to seeing every day. Supposedly the inspiration for the logo of well-known outdoor equipment manufacturer The North Face, Half Dome is the centrepiece of countless photos taken over the years, perhaps most famously by Ansel Adams, whose work adorns many an outdoor-themed calendar.

I walked along the road briefly and then followed the PCT as it turned up a side road scattered with parked cars and screaming kids. Holiday-makers sat in air-conditioned cars, eating ice creams, and I wondered why they were there. Many people just sit behind their steering wheel, scared to venture into the wilderness. I found the place annoying, and I quickened my pace, leaving the cars behind and disappearing into the forest again. The woods were now my home, my comfort zone. A quick meal was always a morale booster, but everyday distractions had started to irritate me. I became frustrated at people asking me what I thought were stupid questions, which in turn made me feel guilty for not being more approachable. “What are you doing?” they would ask me. “Why are you so dirty? Why is your pack so big? You’re just wearing shoes; where are your hiking boots? Don’t you miss the TV? Where do you wash your hair?”

Before long, though, such things were a distant memory, replaced by the tumbling rage of the Tuolumne River cascading past me on my left. I approached Dingley Creek slowly, and saw the boulders peeking above the surface, acting as stepping stones.

Maybe I just wasn’t paying attention at this point, or maybe my familiarity with river crossings had bred contempt. Dingley Creek seemed innocent enough: the tributary was flowing fast, but it wasn’t deep, and a good assortment of stones and boulders should have spelt an easy crossing. And it was, apart from one unfortunate casualty.

My trekking poles, Click and Clack, named after the sound they make when they strike the ground, had been with me some ten years, since my walk on El Camino de Santiago in Spain. These constant companions gave me a feeling of security as they eased me up the ascents and stabilised me on the descents. Out here, they were a blessing on river crossings – walking without Click and Clack would have been unimaginable.

I jumped and hopped from one boulder to the next. Sometimes the water would find a way into a split in my shoes, making me shiver. Mid-jump, I sensed hesitation with Clack, who had become stuck in the creek bed. I let him go; I had to, the momentum carried me forward, and I figured that, as he was firmly rooted, I could just hop back and retrieve him. To my horror, as I looked behind me, I saw the current tearing at him. Like a boxer on the receiving end of a last, devastating punch, Clack slowly started to slump sideways, picking up speed as the current took hold.

"No! Clack!" I screamed.

It was too late; as I jumped back and held out a flailing hand to rescue him, he succumbed to the flow and started to float off. Dingley Creek travelled a mere fifty feet before joining the Tuolumne River. I ran along the bank, dropping my pack while trying to dodge fallen trees and other obstacles. I closed the gap, but the river was getting closer, Clack's speed was increasing and he seemed to be looking at me pleadingly. Then he was engulfed by the Tuolumne and torn away in an instant. With only a small part of his stem and handle protruding above the river, he swayed from side to side like a waving friend on a departing train. I waved back and swore I heard him say:

"Don't be sad, you still have Click! It'll be fine, I'll wash up downriver somewhere and a hiker will find me. I'll hike on. I will hike on!"

Click and I watched despondently as our companion bobbed into the distance. Our hearts sank. We turned north, paused for one last glimpse and began plodding up the trail.

I got lost trying to navigate over a section of granite. Such areas were few and far between, but because of their hard surface, the trail was not easily distinguishable. A few cairns marked the way, but they dwindled to nothing. Had it not been for a tent just visible through the trees ahead, it would have taken longer to find a way through.

Steve Climber, Borders, Jolly Green Giant, Dan and Splizzard were stretched across the trail, enjoying the afternoon sun. Borders had erected his

tent and was relishing a few minutes free of mosquitoes. I sat with my fellow hikers for a while, before moving on.

It was now the last week of July, but in the higher elevations of the mountains, it was still spring. Elder shrubs were dressed in white, meadow flowers splattered the grass with hundreds of colours, and squadrons of dragonflies hovered in formation over the lakes. A sandy trail carved its way through grass, and brown trout were still feasting.

I walked with Chrissie and Dodge for a morning. We were all wrapped in our mosquito head nets and I, as usual, was struggling to see through mine; but wearing it was the lesser of two evils. Click was doing his best to keep me company, but I felt off-balance without Clack. The major passes were now behind me, and although there was still a lot of altitude variation, I felt that I'd accomplished the hardest part of the Sierras.

The splits in my second pair of shoes, running from the soles to the laces, were now widening. I had tried to repair them by squeezing a rubber paste over the outside, but this had only made matters worse. It had dried, leaving rough lumps on the insides which were rubbing on my toes, so I tried to pull and cut the worst of it off. This only made the holes bigger. After 990 miles, I was due my third pair of footwear. I was at the tail end of the pack because of the time I had lost resting my bad feet. I had completed just over a third of the route, but it had taken 91 days, which put me on course to finish around January! This was four months after a typical end date of September, and frankly, the ferocity of winter in the northern states would make a January finish all but impossible in any case. I needed to increase my mileage, and try to keep town stops to one day a week at most.

On the plus side, the water crossings were less of a challenge now that I was through the big passes. Oregon was 700 miles ahead; a long way off, but the terrain was supposedly easier going. I was strong, my feet were in good shape, but I knew that unless I started to step up the pace, I wasn't going to make my thru-hike. After all the planning and hard work to get this far, the thought of failing gnawed at me. My daily mileage totals were good going for the Sierras, but not easy to sustain.

I had also received some good news from Chrissie and Dodge. We were apparently coming to the end of the worst mosquito areas. The familiar granite outcrops were soon to be replaced by a more porous, volcanic rock. Less water meant fewer mosquitoes.

I reached the end of a hard day and started to look for a camping spot. I

saw smoke wafting through trees up ahead, near to a creek and a potential place to pitch up. Sure enough, as I hopped over the water, Mojave and Cheeks waved me over from just off the trail. A new face, Mr Green, was sitting in the smoke from his fire, seeking refuge from the dreaded mosquitoes. The surrounding rock-faces were turning from a granite grey to a pinkish hue, which I took to be the start of the transition Chrissie and Dodge had mentioned. Unfortunately, the mosquitoes hadn't seemed to notice, and by sundown we were all engulfed. Cheeks seemed to be coping quite well, but Mojave had retreated to their tent, so I chatted with her through the canvas. By the time I too had sat down to cook, I was being attacked from every angle. I boiled my water quickly, re-hydrated my meal and dived into my tent, quickly closing the zip after me. I stayed there for the rest of the evening, unwilling to get out to brush my teeth, and had to make a brisk dash for the quickest pee ever. I had decided to go to a town called Bridgeport, which meant an eleven-mile morning walk to the road at Sonora Pass and, then, with luck, a ride into town. Conscious of my need to start putting more miles in, I set the alarm for 4am.

The 1,700-foot gain stated on the elevation graph before the descent to Sonora Pass seemed kind, but after a couple of miles I realised it was wrong. The route climbed from the campsite. After walking in darkness for the first hour, I gradually became familiar with my environment as the sun crept over the peaks and bathed my world in a gentle light. The forest faded into a gritty soil as the mountains came down to meet me. To my left was a huge valley with snow-capped, towering peaks as a backdrop. The PCT wound and coiled its way up to the right, heading for a pass just south of Leavitt Lake. I assumed I would be able to see Highway 108 as I crested, but I couldn't. Not only did the elevation figures seem wrong, the distance did too. I walked along a wide ridge towards a notch, where I would cross over to the other side of the mountain flank and weave my way down to the road.

I passed a figure huddled in a sleeping bag a few feet from a 1,000-foot drop over the edge of Leavitt Peak, and walked up to say hello.

"Morning," I said softly.

"Morning! Who's that? Is that Fozzie?" came the muffled reply.

I recognised the scruffy, early-morning face of Swayze as he rubbed his eyes.

"Swayze!"

We exchanged a hearty handshake, as it was a few weeks since we had last

met. Back then he was with Dinosaur, who I assumed originally was his girlfriend, and Scorpion had joined them at Tehachapi. However, he was camping alone.

“I heard Scorpion was not with you any more?” I said, prying for information.

“Yeah, she only wanted to do six-mile days, which obviously wasn’t enough for us. Good to see you! I haven’t seen you since Tehachapi. No! That’s wrong! It was that spring around the 600-mile mark.”

“It was the spring,” I confirmed, having to think for a second. “There were a lot of people there. That’s the last time I saw Stumbling Norwegian, Jake, the Israelis and a few others as well.”

“You seemed in a hurry, Fozzie? You ate your lunch real quick and moved on.”

I thought for a second.

“I was! I was trying to get to Ridgecrest to see a World Cup game. Big mistake. I did fifty-eight miles in two days and shredded my feet. I had to hole up for four days. That’s probably where you got ahead of me. Where’s Dinosaur?”

“She’s camped up ahead maybe five miles, you should see her.”

We shook hands again. I liked Swayze. He was laid back and never seemed in a hurry. I was curious about his trail name but never got around to asking him about it.

Indie was also in his sleeping bag by the side of the trail, a mile further on (it was still only around 5.30am at this point). I stopped and chatted to him also. He seemed in good spirits. I had a lot of time for him too.

It was great to constantly see familiar faces on the trail, and indeed new ones. I assumed I would always meet fellow hikers on the trail, or that they would catch me up, and so I had a certain expectation of who was where. I could, however, never rely on seeing someone again. For example, when I took the four days out in Ridgecrest, I imagined that perhaps those who had been near to me on the trail would thereafter be four days ahead, and I wouldn’t bump into them again. It didn’t work exactly like that; people took time out, some more than others, and so we were all always overlapping each other. Because these meetings were by chance, I tried to make the most of them; it could be the last time I saw that person. Swayze and Indie were classic examples. This would prove, regrettably, to be the last time I saw either of them.

I followed the ridge towards the notch and started to descend in the direction of the road, still a long way down. I could just make out Sardine Creek, teasing the back of my throat, as I was out of water. My thirst worsened, and I longed to reach the creek and drink from it. I crossed a couple of slushy snow banks, and finally reached the highway. I had done eleven miles, which felt more like twenty.

A few cars were scattered along the edge of the road, and Boy Scouts spilled out and formed a group on the other side, where their leader drilled them about the hike they were undertaking. I dropped my pack by the side of the road and tried to catch a ride, just before a blind summit. I figured vehicles would have to slow down here and I'd have a better chance. After an hour, my theory hadn't borne fruit, and I looked back at the Scout group moving up the trail to start the hike. The parents were slowly getting back into their cars, so I walked over.

"Hi," I said, trying my best to look tired, hungry and expectant. "I'm walking the Pacific Crest Trail and need to get to Bridgeport to re-supply and grab a shower. Is there any chance of a ride if you're going that way? But I should warn you that I stink." A little humour sometimes greased the wheels of kindness.

"Always happy to help someone who's walking the PCT," one of the mothers said. "If you can bear with me for five minutes then one of us can help you out. How bad exactly do you smell?" She smiled.

"It's pretty bad," I replied, shrugging my shoulders. "I can open the window, though."

An hour later, I was sitting in the Sportsman Inn tucking into breakfast. I made my way to the Bridgeport Inn and passed a small snack bar, where Nick and Chris, the other English guys on the PCT, were cramming in as many calories as possible. Cheeks and Mojave were also there, grinning cheekily, because they knew I was trying to figure out how they beat me there after leaving the campsite later than I had.

With all good intentions come a few surprises. I had intended to spend the day, as usual, re-supplying, eating and checking emails before getting back on trail the following day. If someone had told me then that the following day I would be sitting on the patio at my Uncle Tony's in San Jose with a cold beer, I would have shrugged off the suggestion as crazy.

# Chapter 9

Light, Heat and Duff

*Town? If I wanted to hang out in town, I could have stayed at home.*
**John 'Tradja' Drollette**

My mobile service provider in the United States constantly claimed that their reception covered '97 per cent of all Americans.' I therefore put my almost total lack of signal strength down to the fact that I was English. I barely turned my mobile on; I didn't really need to. It was ready and waiting for me should I need it to call the emergency services, send an occasional message to another hiker or friend back home or, as I frequently did, call my service provider to top up.

Bridgeport didn't have any reception, but I had come to expect that. It was a sweet little place, though; walking from one end of town to the other took five minutes, and a smattering of history gave it some sort of purpose. It had some good eateries and a half-decent supermarket too. The Bridgeport Inn did need a touch more refinement, though, as there was no air conditioning, no TV and a shared bathroom, all for the princely sum of $73 per night including tax. There were other places to stay, but they cost even more, so I accepted the Inn for what it was.

I bumped into Steve Climber, Splizzard, Mr Green and Borders having breakfast at the Sportsman Inn. The conversation hovered around the prospect of thunderstorms lasting for four days. I peered out of the window and saw blue skies.

"Are you sure?" I asked Splizzard, who was twisting the ends of his moustache to try to look like Hercule Poirot – as, for some reason, were the others.

"That's the forecast, coming in tomorrow. We're going up north to rest for a few days so we can ride it out."

Despite my eagerness to get some miles in, it did make sense to avoid the coming storm. I was accustomed to walking in the rain; I lived in England after all. However, I was due to meet Uncle Tony at Lake Tahoe, about seventy-six miles further on. The plan was for him to take me back to San Jose so that I could rest for a few days, have a good sort-out of my gear and get hold of a new, cooler sleeping bag. I reasoned that I may as well do all of

that while the rain was pelting down. I called Tony who, bless him, said he'd leave the next morning and pick me up. This left me with a day to chill out and, for once, forget about the usual chores.

I bumped into a rather shaken-looking Burnie, who said she had walked to the highway at Sonora Pass in a thunderstorm.

"I've never been so scared, Fozzie," she said, still looking a little worse the wear from her experience. "Lightning was striking the ground all over the place. I thought I was finished."

She also told me that Cheeks and Mojave had left to face the bad weather, come what may. I felt a little guilty for taking time out and continued to worry about the distance I still had to walk. Going to San Jose was a big gamble; I had planned it from the outset, as a sort of mini-holiday to lighten my load, both physically and mentally. My ice axe would have been useful, but the worst of the snow was now behind me and I no longer needed my shoe spikes. My bear canister was still required for a few more miles, but I decided to ditch that as well and deal with questions from rangers if and when they arose. My new sleeping bag would make me a few grams lighter, too. New shoes were also on the list, and I was toying with switching to full-blown ankle-high hiking boots, which I hoped might see me through to the end and cope with any bad weather further north.

I returned to the Sportsman Bar in the evening, taking a seat behind a couple of feet of mahogany, with the sole intention of severe inebriation.

"Jack Daniels with ice, please," I said to Gordon, the owner.

"Can I see some ID, please?"

I looked at him, then at Brad and Steve, who were drinking next to me. They smiled, I sighed.

"I'm English; the only ID I have is my passport, which is back at the hotel. I would be more than happy to go and get it for you, but let me ask you a question first. I'm 43 years old. Why do you think I may be 21 or under?"

"I have to card virtually everyone in case there is an undercover agent in the bar," he replied.

This made me laugh, which probably didn't help my chances, but the idea that a sinister agent was lurking somewhere in the bar, checking up on drinkers, was funny. It was like Mulder and Scully were casting a wary eye over the place. I turned to Brad and Steve.

"Do I look under 21?"

They replied in unison to the negative. I turned back to Gordon.

“OK, if you really want me to go back and get my passport, then I can do that for you. I’m just here for some food, to watch some sport on the TV and enjoy the atmosphere. I will be drinking, probably too much but not enough to cause you any trouble. Do you want me to go and get my ID or can I please have a drink?”

“Gordon, give the English guy a drink, he’s OK,” Brad jumped in. Gordon sighed and poured me a JD with ice.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m an undercover agent and … just kidding!”

He narrowed his eyes at me and sucked in some air, then smiled.

Brad continued to educate me about Californian drinking law. It is illegal to have an open bottle of alcohol in a vehicle; however, it is legal to have it in the boot. You can’t take alcohol out of the bar, but it is OK to drink in the street on Independence Day or if the bottle is in a brown paper bag. This was familiar to me from the movies. The strange part was that if you do see someone in the street drinking from a container in a brown paper bag, then it’s obviously alcohol! On the plus side, at least the law in California allows you to drink until 2am. In England people still get chucked out at 11pm.

This got me thinking – what other ridiculous laws had been passed? After a little research, I can offer you these classic American laws. Don’t feel left out if you want some English ones though; they’re coming as well.

In New Mexico, females are strictly forbidden to appear unshaven in public. West Virginia states that children cannot attend school with their breath smelling of wild onions. In Oklahoma people can be fined, arrested or jailed for making ugly faces at a dog. If an elephant in Florida is left tied to a parking meter, the parking fee has to be paid just as it would for a vehicle. Citizens in Indiana are not allowed to attend a movie house or ride in a public streetcar within four hours of eating garlic. Finally, my personal favourite: in Louisiana it is illegal to rob a bank and then shoot at the bank teller with a water pistol.

As for Englanders like me? Well, we can offer some similarly bizarre rules. It *is* legal for a male to urinate in public, as long as it is on the rear wheel of his motor vehicle and his right hand is on that vehicle. Ladies can be arrested for eating chocolate on a public conveyance. Believe it or not, it is illegal to eat mince pies on the 25th of December (this is true!). It’s said that a member of parliament may not enter the House of Commons wearing a full suit of armour. In Chester you can shoot a Welsh person with a bow and arrow inside the city walls if it’s after midnight. Lastly, in London, a

Hackney Carriage (otherwise known as a taxi) must carry a bale of hay and a sack of oats (this dates back to the days when taxis were drawn by horses).

Apparently there is a government department solely dedicated to scrutinising laws going back centuries, in order to revise or abolish them. Due to the sheer number of such idiosyncrasies still in existence, the task is supposedly huge, and this is why some of these classics are still actually enshrined in law.

* * *

Uncle Tony collected me the following day for the long drive back to San Jose. It was weird being in a car again for that length of time. We must have covered 600 miles that day. A distance that had taken me fifty-five days to walk flashed by in a few hours. I watched the scenery change as we travelled further north, and with the sun in my eyes I fell asleep.

I discovered the following day that Western Mountaineering, who made my sleeping bag, were actually based in San Jose. This was too good an opportunity to miss, so I called Gary Peterson, whom I had unsuccessfully emailed from England about sponsorship. He agreed to loan me a summer sleeping bag until I needed to revert to the warmer winter one again. I asked if I could come down to collect it, meet him and have a look around the factory, and he agreed.

It took a while for me to find the place, which was tucked up a back street in the older part of town, but Gary came out to meet me and took me through the manufacturing process. There were skilfully operated sewing machines everywhere, and rolls of material teetered on the end of benches for use in the finished articles. Western Mountaineering has an enviable reputation, not just in the United States, but worldwide. Best known for their down-filled insulation products, they produce sleeping bags, jackets, down trousers and a few other accessories. As I strolled around, the air was filled with escaping fluffs of down, floating around me like snow.

We discussed the options and settled on the Summerlite model, which was good down to freezing point and weighed a scant 539 grams. Western Mountaineering's Ultralite bag, which I had purchased in England, was a dedicated winter bag, good to around minus seven degrees Celsius and weighing in at 822 grams. Gary also presented me with a Flash Vest as a gift. This was a waistcoat filled with down, perfect for keeping the chill out. At a superlight 100 grams, I couldn't even feel the weight in my hand.

Three days whizzed past in San Jose, and before I knew it Uncle Tony was driving me back to Sonora Pass, with Rudy coming along for the ride. At the pass, as I strode off waving at them, I shouted that I'd see them in October. How wrong I would be!

My pack felt light; I estimated I was travelling about two kilos lighter. I tried to carry just one litre of water where possible. I had also left Click, my walking pole, behind as I now had a new pair of poles. My full-blown leather boots were heavy, but I hoped they would last the distance. It was great to be back on the trail again and I smiled as I made short work of the 600-foot climb. It was now late July and I knew I was bringing up the rear. While I never thought of the PCT as a race, I was painfully aware that I had to get moving. Imagining I was a middle-distance runner, I was just over halfway and the other athletes were pulling away from me. It was time to make my move and ease up the field.

The attacks from mosquitoes appeared to be fading away, as I had been told they would. The prevalence of granite was also decreasing, and a pinkish-grey rock tumbled down rolling green hills of lush grass. Meadow flowers were still painting their colours, and many lakes, rivers and creeks dotted the landscape.

Walker Texas Ranger and Dozer, taking a nap by the side of the trail, were startled when I rounded the corner. To be honest, I had forgotten Dozer's name, which is no reflection on him but on my failing memory. I didn't recognise Walker, as he was horizontal and his beard had sprouted alarmingly since we last saw each other at Kennedy Meadows.

"Hey, Fozzie, it's Dozer," he said helpfully, as he stood up to shake my hand.

"Good to see you again," I said. "Sorry, not good with names."

"Fozzie, it's Walker!"

"Mate, I didn't recognise you," I said apologetically, offering my hand. He refused it, which immediately made me think I had offended him at some point.

"Dude, I think I got Giardia," he said, with a resigned look on his face that suggested it was bound to happen at some point. I drew my palm back faster than England's exit from the World Cup. Walker admitted he had consumed untreated water from creeks high in the Sierras, thinking they would be safe. We all walked together for maybe ten minutes, before Walker stopped, opened his mouth and emptied out most of his stomach's contents. I hadn't

seen so much vomit since Margaret Holloway threw up on the school canteen table when I was five years old.

"Dude, I think I just purged a demon," he said, wiping sick from his beard.

In spite of ourselves, Dozer and I couldn't hold back our laughs. Unsympathetic, I know, but Walker was smirking as well.

"No, I'm serious," he continued. "I just performed an exorcism." He smiled as he tried to clear his nose as well.

"If you got a sense of humour, Walker, you're halfway through it," I suggested.

We walked slowly to the highway at Ebbetts Pass, where we sat by the side of the road cooking an evening meal. Dozer fired up his Jetboil and had his water boiling while I was still pouring alcohol into my stove. He knew I was a little envious of the speed of his stove, and smirked at me. By the time I was pouring a dehydrated chicken stew into my saucepan, he was clearing up.

Dozer and I tried to catch a lift for Walker, so that he could see a doctor in Lake Tahoe, but the road was empty. One guy did stop, but explained that he was going the other way. He offered to call someone who could help but Walker insisted that he could walk the twenty-four miles to town. We carried on, but after two miles he was finished. We camped together and somehow he managed to get some sleep. In the morning I again tried to get a ride to Lake Tahoe but failed so carried on walking. Walker, Dozer and I had all agreed to share a motel room there.

The morning was cold. I pulled up the zip around my neck, shivered and walked quickly to try to warm up. The meagre 400-foot ascent over a ridge known as the Nipple soon had me sweating, so I stopped at the summit and laid my head down for five minutes.

"This," I thought, "is the closest I've been to a nipple for some time."

I usually timed my sections during the day so that I could see my progress and, more importantly, keep tabs on my position. Here, though, I let that go. I knew it would be a long day getting to Highway 50 and maybe then catching a ride into town, and I didn't want to be reminded of it. The days pass more quickly when you don't know where you are and purposely losing track of mileage has the same effect.

I stopped for a break mid-morning and discovered that I only had one snack bar. I then realised I couldn't even cook rice, as my fuel had run out the previous evening. A walker travelling south tried to reassure me that I might

at least get some water from the Carson Pass visitor centre, at the next road crossing.

“They don’t have any food, though,” he added, with a resigned look and outstretched palms.

I practiced my best hungry-and-thirsty expression as I entered the parking area, hoping that maybe someone would hand me a cold coke or something, but there were only cars and no people. I dejectedly slumped on a chair outside the visitor centre and started to rummage through my pack, in the hope of finding some long-forgotten morsel of peppered jerky cowering in the bottom. It was not to be.

“PCT hiker?”

I looked up to see a kind face belonging, I later learned, to a lady called Peggy Geelhaar, a volunteer at the centre.

“I am, yes,” I said, smiling, but still looking sorry for myself.

“You want a soda, maybe something to eat?”

Before I could answer, she disappeared and came back with grapes and two apples. Perhaps my wide-open eyes, coupled with my tongue resting somewhere around my ankles, had already suggested I craved nourishment. She told me to help myself to a soda from the cool box and gave me some cheese. Her companion, Dan Quayle, sauntered down to the car and returned with a bear-sized pack of crisps. He apologised because the bag was swollen from the change in altitude it had suffered in its journey up the pass. As if I needed an apology.

“Don’t forget to sign the visitors’ book,” Peggy said.

I wolfed down the goodies and looked at the visitors’ book. Familiar hikers’ names were scrawled, with the date and messages next to them. It was good to see that many of my friends were just a few days ahead, and I felt that I was making progress. I scanned the entries: Burnie had passed through three days previously, Answerman just before, Mojave and Cheeks were five days ahead, Bigfoot about a week, Jake was still in the mix and Stumbling Norwegian and HoJo were a good nine days in front.

‘The trail will provide’ was ringing in my ears as I carried on towards Lake Tahoe, thanking Peggy and Dan for their well-timed gifts.

However, during the afternoon, my spirits gradually fell back down, as I felt my new boots rubbing alarmingly on my left small toe. The road to Lake Tahoe was about three hours further ahead, so I had little choice other than to push on. I thought that I needed to remove the offending boot and check my

toe, but also knew it would be difficult getting it back on and having to endure the five-minute hobble. It hurt like hell. Although in the grand scheme of things it was a minor problem, I let it get to me and ended up surprising myself by crying. Such a swing of emotions, from positive at lunchtime to negative a couple of hours down the trail! My feet had returned to shipshape, only for blisters to rear their ugly heads again. I would probably have to stop for longer than I had hoped in Tahoe to deal with them. This would in turn put me further behind schedule.

Full-blown leather hiking boots are notoriously difficult to break in and are best worn for many short walks, slowly building up to longer distances. Of course, I did not have that luxury, and I'd given my choice much deliberation. I decided to send the boots back when I reached Tahoe and secure a new pair of Montrails, which seemed to suit my feet.

I eventually reached the highway and hobbled to a halt. Easing off the left boot, I saw a blister, filled with blood and on the verge of bursting, on the top of my little toe, and another nasty one on the next toe. I switched to my Crocs, and stuck out a hopeful thumb at passing vehicles. After thirty minutes watching cars zoom past, I saw a familiar yellow taxi cruising up the hill with its light on and virtually stood in the middle of the road to hail it.

I turned on my mobile when we reached the outskirts and heard a voicemail from Dozer saying he and Walker were both in the Best Western. Walker was lying on the bed looking quite pale, having seen a doctor and had confirmation that he was suffering from Giardiasis. He was on medication and was confident he would be back on the trail in a couple of days.

I slowly peeled off my boots, closed one eye and pushed a needle into the blister. A yellow and red liquid oozed out and dribbled down my toe. I cut off the surrounding skin to reveal a tender wound, which I knew would take a couple of days just to dry out. Less severe blisters wouldn't have stopped me, but this one needed time to heal at least a little, and that meant getting air to it. I bathed the toes in a strong Epsom salt solution and hoped for a rapid recovery.

For a while, I relaxed with Dozer and Walker. Jack Straw knocked on the door, followed by Scorpion, Crow and Dundee, who also made themselves at home. With the room getting crowded, I limped up to town and went to the local outdoor store to look at the footwear options. The Montrails I had worn before were not available, but there was another version, which were lighter, more cushioned and seemed more of a running shoe. They felt wonderful, so

I bought them and sent the other boots back to REI in San Jose. REI is the major outdoor retailer in the United States and they have a brilliant returns policy. They will refund anything purchased from them with absolutely no questions asked. That system might be abused at times, but presumably REI are big enough to swallow the odd return. A few days later I received a full credit to my bank account.

Pockets was in the room when I returned. I was surprised that he had made up the time so fast, which also reminded me of my own slow progress. It was great to see him again, though. He was with a woman called Courtney, whom he had met in Wrightwood, and who had driven up to see him and to walk a section of the PCT. The five of us relaxed in the evening watching movies and eating as much Ben and Jerry's as our stomachs would allow.

I spent a further three days in Lake Tahoe allowing my blister to heal as much as possible. Walker, amazingly, left two days after he had arrived, so I moved to a different motel. Dozer had left me the number of a guy who had given them both a ride back to the trailhead, and when I called him he said he would be happy to take me back too.

Back on trail I reached Echo Lake, stopped for a quick drink and carried on skirting the water. A ranger coming the other way stopped me. He struck me as quite young, and had an air of authority.

"You hiking the PCT?" he said, looking me up and down.

"Yes, I am."

"Do you have your permit, please?"

All thru-hikers on the PCT have to carry a thru-hiking permit. As many of the areas and national parks en route require separate permits, the PCT Association offers one permit that covers the entire length. I had applied for mine at the kick-off party in Lake Morena. I duly handed it over. He asked me if I was carrying my bear canister. I wasn't; I had left it in San Jose because I wouldn't need it much longer.

"Yes," I lied, tapping the side of my rucksack where I knew a hard plastic bottle was lurking, hoping this would fool him.

"Be sure to use it, please," he ordered, and walked off.

I hate being told what to do, almost as much as I hate being told what I can't do. I do have a problem with authority. I don't know where it stems from, but I treat anyone in uniform with suspicion and perhaps unfair disdain. I don't get on with the police and customs officers are my worst nightmare. I had met several rangers thus far, many of them living at ranger huts in the

forest. All were welcoming, pleasant to converse with and helpful. If it had not been for their uniform, I would have probably not even have known they were rangers. This guy was different, though. He seemed to revel in his position and almost look down on me, which riled me and made me a little short with him. In any case, I resented having to carry a permit, even though it was free. From what I gleaned from other hikers, permits were introduced so that the United States Forestry Service could monitor the number of people in certain parks and areas, and make some money. This land, although owned by someone, I regarded as free. To have to register and pay to venture in to it annoyed me.

Hikers also had to apply for a Fire Permit before starting. This particular ranger checked for that too. The online application process included a few simple questions about what and what not to do when having a campfire. Passing the test was easy; information containing the answers was supplied with the test. But I did learn a few things. For one, all flammable material should be cleared around the fire, to a distance of five feet (this assumes there is not an existing fire ring, which is quite often the case; if so, this should be utilised to prevent further scarring). A shovel is to be used for clearing, and said shovel also helps with extinguishing campfires. A ‘responsible’ (other multiple choice descriptions were ‘happy’, ‘reputable’ and ‘busy’) person should be in attendance at all times. To put the fire out, separate any burning pieces of wood with the shovel, then drown the fire with water, stirring with the shovels to produce a sticky mess. This is known as the ‘drown, stir and feel’ method (other answers were ‘shake, rattle and roll,’ ‘hit or miss’ and ‘cut and run’). Once we had answered the questions correctly, we could print off a permit.

The main cause of camp fires was something known as duff. Duff, I learned, is the decomposing layer of vegetation under the leaves and on top off the dirt. It isn’t highly flammable and its air supply is restricted by the leaves, so it can smoulder for days from a stray ember. Once enough heat has built up, it can break free and start a fire. One thing I always tried to do was clear an area around the fire, removing the duff by getting down to the dirt underneath, and I always poured water over the finished fire and stirred with a stick. I never met a hiker or indeed anyone else who had a shovel; they were simply too bulky, and besides, we could use our feet to clear the area and a stick to stir in the water.

I never had a fire in desert land; there was no need, as it was warm enough

already and there wasn't anything to burn. Once in the forest, and especially at elevation, a fire provides warmth, light, some mosquito protection, heat for cooking, a signal to others if they need company, and – maybe most of all – a boost to morale. To sit and watch a fire burn is a great way to relax. It also dries out wet shoes and clothes (and indeed sometimes burns them!) Often I would be camping with a few others when a strong smell of burning plastic would waft over, followed by a stampede of hikers converging on the fire and pulling their shoes away from the flames.

The warmth factor was what appealed most to me. Up in the Sierras, and during the latter stages of my hike, the temperature would drop many degrees below freezing. I was always warm in my sleeping bag, but sitting around before bedtime was a chilly affair. I would perhaps write my journal in the light, and often just sit and stare into the flames. There is something deeply mesmerising about looking into a fire, watching the oranges fluctuate with reds and the ambers blend into the greys, and seeing patterns or sometimes even faces.

Mosquitoes dislike the smoke from fires and they're not fond of the wind either. The only true way of using smoke to ward them off was to sit properly in the smoke, eye-watering though that could be. And naturally enough, wind direction would always have a habit of wafting the smoke over you when you didn't want it to. It was amusing watching others around a fire as they ducked, stooped and leant to avoid the pesky fumes.

Natural light from a fire allowed us hikers to chat without shining our head torches into each other's faces. The beams were only a few feet long, but they were bright enough.

Obvious though it is, many, myself included, didn't cook on a fire until we saw others doing so. One disadvantage is the tendency of the cooking pot to get caked in a sticky mix of soot, small pieces of twig and pine resin. This put me off at first, and I used my alcohol stove; but the more fires I lit, the more often I cooked over them. It saved weight, to the tune of maybe 500 grams of stove fuel per week. I could also cook more adventurous meals with the almost limitless heat available from a fire. For example, I could make several cups of tea instead of just one (an Englishman must have his tea) and still have plenty of hot water to clean up with afterwards. After a re-supply in town, I would often treat myself to fresh meat or a jacket potato. A couple of sausages suspended over the embers with a potato wrapped in some tin foil (I always kept a small piece of foil somewhere), or some corn, would round off

the day splendidly.

Fire is a real danger on the trail, though. On the PCT, we were at times reminded of the power of fire – several sections are merely burnt-out shells. Fires dating back to the eighties still leave their scar on the land. The trees have yet to fully grow back and wide expanses of shorter vegetation remain. More recent blazes have resulted in a stark landscape of black soil and white trees where the bark has burnt away to reveal the trunks underneath. These fire-ravaged places were like a bizarre fantasy land, where no life existed except for mythical, lurking creatures. One severe forest fire over a couple of days can take years to recover from. Although it was educational to see such sights, I longed for the greener spaces.

Many fires are started by lightning strikes, and little can be done to prevent those. Careless hikers can also cause fires; at Apache Peak in southern California, for example, I learnt of a fire accidently started by a thru-hiker who spilt some fuel.

I was camped one evening with HoJo and Ben on a plateau in the desert. I cleared a bit of grass away to set my stove on the ground. As I held my lighter over the fuel, a trickle that I had unwittingly spilled also ignited. In a second, the grass had caught fire. I didn’t panic, but I screamed to the others a couple of seconds later when the fire began spreading like, well, wildfire. They sprinted over and we dowsed the flames. They both then realised in dismay that their carefully filtered two litres or so of water would have to be replenished.

# Chapter 10

Ghosts on the Trail

*This world is too cynical, greedy and self-serving for me. I'd rather be poor and work from trip to trip than die rich. We take none of our possessions to the grave, but hopefully God grants us our memories.*
**David 'Walker Texas Ranger' Allen**

I made quick progress from Lake Tahoe and awoke to a chilly morning and a tent damp from overnight rain. As I peered through the hills, I could just make out the lake flanked by mountains. She glinted back at me as an upturned feather of mist floated above. It was quiet, vegetation glistened from the rain as it caught the rising sun, and drops gently plopped from trees on to my head. I had managed an early start at 7am, eager as before to make up for lost time.

I concentrated on my breathing, as I had learnt from yoga. Expanding the abdomen muscles when I inhaled and pulling them in on the exhale forced more air into my lungs. As I gingerly walked along tight ridges, I marvelled at the beauty of the vista below me. Even after 110 days walking, my environment still had the capacity to pleasantly surprise me. The mountains and forests I saw every day made me feel honoured.

It was now the second week of August. The first thru-hikers were about a month away from finishing, but from Canada down through Washington, Oregon and northern California, a long line of walkers stretched out before me. It was amazing to think that I was still in California. The Californian section of the PCT is around 1,700 miles long. That is a full 500 miles more than Land's End to John O'Groats. My current target was Oregon, another 530 miles distant. Soon I might reach that little solitary tree, by the trailside, with a wooden sign nailed to its trunk marking the state line. Then, I thought, I'd know I was on my way. After that, I had a mere 455 miles to my next goal, Washington State, and then a paltry 495 miles until the end of my journey. I wasn't even halfway; completing the PCT was a daunting thought. Nevertheless, this is what I had come out here to do, and I was excited to be doing it. Many people, after all, can only dream of being so connected to the beautiful outdoors for that period of time.

I reached the Peter Grubb Hut, a haven for those caught out in the

elements. It was vast inside, with a large kitchen and eating area, a smaller, cosier room to the side with an open fire and a sleeping room upstairs. For the very first time, I tucked into a peanut butter and jam sandwich, which met with my full approval. Given my love for peanut butter I was amazed I had not sampled this mix before. I perused the trail register and saw that Pockets had left a message the day before.

"Foz! Catch up. I wrecked my tent, got a great story for you!"

I was intrigued, so I wolfed down the rest of my lunch and set off, hoping to catch him that day. Steve Climber had also stayed at the hut, with a few others. It would have made a great place to spend the night, but it was only midday so I kept moving.

I saw no-one for the rest of the day, so I set up tent on a flat spot to one side of the trail, just below the pinnacle of a long ascent. A builder working down in the valley stopped on his quad bike and chatted for a while. He had to come all the way up to the top of the hill for reception to make a mobile call. I optimistically turned my phone on to check for messages, to be greeted with the familiar sight of 'No Service' on the screen.

I made a fire, cooked and turned in for the night. Much later, I recognised the grunting and sniffing of a bear. I had brushed my teeth perhaps fifty feet from my tent, but evidently the scent had been detected. I slammed the ground and shouted, and heard the bear thunder off into the forest. From the reverberations, I thought it must have been a fair size. Thirty minutes later it was back, in the same area, and again I made some noise and again it charged off. It returned once more, and this time a hard blow on my emergency whistle seemed to do the trick. I lay still, listening. I looked at my watch, which said 4am. The forest was deathly quiet; no wind, no animals stirring, and I was miles from the nearest road.

"What are you doing here?!" a woman's voice screamed at me, from literally three feet to one side of the tent. Still awake listening for the bear, I sat bolt upright, my heart pulling at my chest. I started shaking, and tried to focus on the weak moonlight coming through the canvas to get my bearings.

"What do you mean what am I doing here?" I shouted. "What are *you* doing here!?"

It was silent again. I unzipped the tent and peered out. There was no-one there. I didn't sleep at all until the sun rose, when I emerged from the tent. The first thing I noticed was the amount of twigs and sticks on the ground. It struck me that nobody could have approached the tent without making a

noise. What the hell was a woman doing at that time of morning, creeping up on hikers? The man from the previous evening stopped again on his bike, and I told him what had happened, feeling rather stupid.

"Oh, I'm not surprised," he replied. "Depends on your beliefs really, but this area is littered with old and derelict homesteads from the first pioneers who tried to make a living here. It's not the first time someone has told me that they have heard voices in the forest at night."

"You mean a ghost?" I asked, astonished.

"Like I say, it depends on your beliefs." We shook hands, he wished me good luck and sped to the summit to make another phone call.

I walked for a couple of hours, and filled up with water at Haypress Creek. I knew Pockets was ahead of me – unlikely as it may seem, hikers can recognise each other's footprints. Crossing a small logging track, I stopped to adjust my pack and was startled, not for the first time that day, by footsteps behind me. I spun round to see Courtney standing there, smiling at me.

"Where the hell did you come from?" she asked, laughing.

"Where the hell did *you* come from?" I replied.

"I just stopped for water back there. Pockets is up ahead – he said if he stopped he would leave his trekking poles by the side of the trail."

"Let's go catch him, then."

Only a few hundred feet further, the poles were indeed by the trail.

"Pockets!" I cried out.

"Fozzie! Up here, mate!"

I ducked through the trees to an opening, and saw him on top of a small rise. His camera was set up on a tripod and he was taking a time lapse of the passing clouds.

"Hey mate, how's it going?"

"Good, didn't expect to catch you so quick. I was only at the Peter Grubb Hut yesterday."

"Yeah, I've been taking a lot of photos; great clouds about, and Courtney walks a little slower, so I've been keeping with her."

"What the hell did you do to your tent?" I asked.

"Dude, you will not believe the story I got for you!"

Courtney arrived, smiling as she had already heard his version, and shook her head.

"It's so far out that you *have* to believe it!"

I took out my Dictaphone to record the conversation, and settled down on

the ground.

“Pockets, go.”

“OK, just as a sort of intro, a few years back I had camped in a slot canyon, a flash flood hit me and the tent and washed us away. I was OK but a bit shaken. Anyway, erm, after I went over Barkers Pass and I was hiking along that big ridgeline by the ski lifts and everything – you know where I mean?”

“I do,” I said, adjusting my position to get more comfortable. When Pockets told a story it went on forever. This was a good thing, though.

“Well, this storm was rolling in and it looked bad, really bad. I started to run along the ridgeline until it began to drop off. There was switchback after switchback and I also needed water. So, I get all the way to the bottom and set up my tent just before it starts to rain. I eat, chill out a bit and take it easy. I go to sleep right about eight thirty. At nine it starts to pour, lightning and thunder, it was going crazy. I dozed off somehow and started to dream.”

“No shit?” I said. “You, dreaming?” I looked over at Courtney, who started giggling.

“I know! What must have happened was that I put my hand down on the groundsheet and there was a small puddle from the rain. This started me dreaming that I was back at the slot canyon in the flash flood and I must have started to try and get out of the tent. In the process I think I must have knocked the pole over and the tent collapsed on me. The canvas was right on my face so I started biting it to get out.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Yes! I can piece this shit together after the event. So I keep biting and biting until I finally make a hole in it, grab this with both hands, tear it open wider until I can get my upper body through it. Remember, I’m still dreaming here, I’m still asleep. I grab the ground because I think I’m going to get washed away. Then the rain wakes me up. It’s pitch black and I’m in the woods. I’m like, ‘What the fuck?’ I look down and see what I’ve done to the tent and I’m just sitting there with my torso poking through the hole in the canvas with the rest of the tent lying on the ground around me.”

Courtney was now shaking with the giggles, and I was laughing hard at the absurdity of it all. Pockets continued.

“I had to spend the rest of the night poking out with my umbrella up! I had done a thirty-four-mile day and was really tired, didn’t sleep at all. I even called the guys at Tarptent and they believed me! He’s sending out a new

tent!”

Pockets’s story was so unimaginable that I could do little else but believe it. He ran off to Highway 49 to get a ride into Sierra City, where he needed to find the post office before it closed, so I carried on with Courtney and we agreed to meet him there. We had heard great things about the Red Moose Café, run by Bill and Margaret Price. Camping was free in their back yard, and the food was apparently not to be missed.

Courtney was twenty-eight and came from Troy, Michigan. She claimed she could trace part of her ancestry back to the First Nations, and her features gave some indication of this: black hair braided in pigtails, skin a subtle brown. She was taking the summer off before starting as a Ski Patrol member in September, back in Wrightwood. She was tall and attractive, and I could see why Pockets had taken a shine to her. It was not going as smoothly as she would have liked, however. Pockets was also beginning to realise that he needed to put in some miles before the snow fell up north. He walked quickly anyway, a little faster than my usual coasting speed, but it didn’t bother me; in fact, I liked it because I also clocked up more miles when we walked together. Courtney, though, was becoming a little frustrated, not to mention fatigued, trying to keep up. She had only joined him for a short section, and we were now in great physical shape, which wasn’t helping her. I think there was also some friction because she didn’t know where she stood in the relationship; I got the impression she didn’t even know if there *was* a relationship.

We reached the highway, and I did my usual chivalrous act: I placed Courtney by the side of the road, suggested she show a little leg and I loitered by the bushes. She started signalling to cars going in the opposite direction to Sierra City.

“It’s that way!” I pointed.

“I know!” she retorted. “But you never know, there’s no harm in trying!”

I watched, amazed, as a BMW driving out of town pulled up, turned round and offered her a lift. I went over and got in as well, thanking him and congratulating her on a job well done. I made a mental note to keep a skirt handy for my own future hitchhiking attempts.

We peered cautiously into the Red Moose and Bill looked over.

“Come in!” he said. “Upstairs, everyone is upstairs.”

We walked into the lounge on the first floor.

“Fozzie! Dude!” Dozer came over, and hugs were dispensed all round.

Walker Texas Ranger was also there, along with Jack Straw and Pockets, who had somehow made it to the post office in time.

Sierra City was a small village with a population of just over 200. First settled in 1850, it was destroyed during the winter of 1852-53 by an avalanche. It remained in this state for several years, before being rebuilt and earning a crust from several gold mines established in the area. I look back on the place with fond memories. There wasn't much there: the Red Moose Café, opposite it the Buckhorn restaurant and down the road the local store, providing us with a reasonable re-supply and some substantial burgers. The town was surrounded by pine forest and the sheer, looming Sierra Buttes. It was relaxed, quiet and a super place to hang out.

We all went down to the bar in the evening. Bill and Margaret revealed a little about the Red Moose, how they ran things and a bit of local gossip to boot.

First we learnt that we couldn't camp in the garden. Some of the residents had complained about the tents and hikers, whom they referred to as 'vagrants'. True, many thru-hikers had given up their homes, so could be considered as homeless, unemployed wanderers. But we didn't wander idly, I felt; nor did we deserve the stigma attached to the word 'vagrant' in the minds of many people, especially town folk, who simply don't understand the appeal of walking 2,650 miles. As for the notion that PCT thru-hikers are a bunch of soiled misfits who smell, drink too much and demand unreasonable discounts on accommodation and food, well, I agree wholeheartedly!

The local paper, the *Mountain Messenger*, had printed a reader's letter, in the Sheriff's Blotter column, in a typically complaining vein:

'Monday August 22nd. A transient was seen hanging around the campground.'

The sheriff's office had replied by saying:

'In our experience most of those in campgrounds are transient.'

This made me laugh. The reader had clearly used the word 'transient' for emotive effect; like 'vagrant', the word has negative connotations, perhaps unfair. I emailed the paper to point this out; Don Russell, the editor, said that he was just having a cheap shot at the sheriff's description.

Trying at least for now to placate their neighbours, Bill and Margaret asked us not to camp, instead offering their lounge and balcony. They were a terrific couple; welcoming and helpful to a fault. Karma and Detective Bubbles, a couple of thru-hikers who had ended their hike in Sierra City,

were also staying at the place on a permanent basis and helping to run it.

Margaret explained that she and Bill had a small claim to land, and that they indulged their hobby for gold mining; although by ‘mining’ she meant a filtering machine that they placed in the creek bed. She asked me if I knew how heavy gold was. I replied that I had never really given it much thought. She opened an envelope containing some small fragments they had found, and placed a piece about the size of half a peanut in my hand. I was taken aback at its mass, and handed it round to the others.

She also filled me in on who had already passed through. Cheeks and Mojave had visited, departed, consequently returned and then finished their hike. I was despondent when I heard this as they were some of the first hikers I had become acquainted with. Apparently, Mojave had stepped on a nail which went in about an inch on her instep. Veering on the side of caution they went to Reno where a doctor advised the wound was fine but would take about three weeks to heal, which turned out to be a pretty accurate estimate. They both decided this was too long to wait, would put them too far behind schedule and deplete their funds sitting and waiting. They cut their losses and went home.

Dinner at the Red Moose Café was an absolute feast. We lined the bar, waiting in anticipation, as plate after plate of ribs kept coming. Mashed potato and sweet corn made up any spare room on our plates, and there was complete silence for thirty minutes as the six of us demolished an obscene amount of food. We were charged only a modest fee, which I remember thinking could have barely covered the cost of the ingredients. Afterwards we went to the Buckhorn Restaurant for some drinks.

We had been warned about the Buckhorn. The proprietor was not too fond of thru-hikers, and although we would be served, the welcome may not be too generous. We ventured over out of curiosity, and because we were all dying for a drink.

The owner, Joanne, said hello as we entered, and provided the first confirmation that the rumours were correct.

“Perhaps you would all like to sit outside?” she offered. I took this as a hint rather than an invitation. We all declined and once again lined up at the bar, ordering a good amount of alcohol, but drinking sensibly and behaving ourselves. Joanne remained pleasant enough for the rest of the evening, but a certain noticeable tension remained.

The following day, Courtney, Pockets and I went back to the Buckhorn for

lunch. To be fair to the place, the garden was a great place to hang out. We were served by Joanne's daughter, Sierra, and we all went for the good old-fashioned hiker staple of burger and fries. Sierra was polite, the service was prompt and the food excellent. The three of us were beginning to wonder where the bad rumours had come from; until we asked for the bill, that is.

"Can we have separate bills, please?" Courtney asked.

Sierra sighed and looked rudely skyward.

"Well, no. You should have told me at the start. I'm not going to rewrite the bill now, so you can't."

She stormed off to the kitchen. We all looked at each other in astonishment. I had to go back to the Red Moose to send some emails. I left my share of the bill, and the others returned shortly afterwards and filled me in on what happened.

"It was unbelievable," Pockets said. "We went into the bar and I asked her nicely if we could have separate bills because we wanted to pay separately. She did her huffy puffy routine again and said, 'I don't have time for this, I really don't have time for this.' Joanne took over and sorted it for us."

Despite the PCT sign on the window suggesting hikers were welcome, I think a better idea would have been 'Hikers *not* welcome'. The staff obviously harboured a dislike for us, and we would have been better off going to the store for lunch.

I slept on the balcony that night, but awoke in the morning to a little sweet return. Snoozing occasionally, I rolled over and peered through the wooden railings towards the Buckhorn. Joanne had just arrived for work and was unlocking the door. Sierra slowly plodded along the path in her footsteps and, thinking no-one could see her, proceeded to pick her nose and scratch her arse in one beautiful, synced unison. Imminent revenge was a joy to behold.

"Morning Sierra!" I called out, motioning to her nose. "Anything good up there?"

To say she gave the most evil glare ever dished out in northern California would be a big understatement. She gave me the finger and disappeared inside. It took ten minutes for me to stop giggling.

Pockets was waiting for some new trekking poles to be delivered to the post office, so he had to take a zero. I followed suit, as Sierra City was nice and relaxing. Brains, another thru-hiker, arrived; and Hawkeye, who was walking the PCT in sections, also turned up to sample the delights of the Red Moose.

Walker, Dozer and Jack Straw had already left, so Courtney, Brains, Hawkeye, Pockets and I chilled out in the lounge that evening. Hawkeye was full of stories, especially about Sasquatch. Also known as Bigfoot, this huge, hairy biped is the subject of countless stories. Thought to be between six and ten feet high, ape-like in appearance and weighing an estimated 230 kilos, this beast is most commonly thought to lurk in the Pacific Northwest, where we were heading. The legend fascinated me. Pockets was also riveted, and he admitted to me later that it was his ambition to photograph the creature.

Scientists claim Bigfoot is a mixture of folklore, misidentification and hoax. This is standard practice for the scientific world, to assume the non-existence of something if it can't be proved. In my book, though, if something can't be proved, it's intriguing. Scientists argue that a species must exist in numbers sufficient to sustain a breeding population. Or, put simply, if Sasquatch does exist, there must be more of them; and if there are, then there would have to be more evidence. I fully understand the sceptical view, but I'm also a sucker for a legend, myth or story that the scientific world can't explain.

Before the 1950s the Bigfoot phenomenon was just a series of stories. However, in 1951, the British mountaineer Eric Shipton photographed what he described as a Yeti footprint. The public's interest was then captured, and the legend started to grow. In 1958, in the area of a road construction site at Bluff Creek in California, several large footprints were reported. Gerald Crew, a bulldozer operator, decided the prints warranted further examination, especially given the lack of interest in their discovery. A cast was made of the prints, and the subsequent photographs appeared in the *Humboldt Times*. This, in turn, fuelled speculation until the story was picked up by the Associated Press.

The most famous film footage allegedly of the beast surfaced in 1967, when Roger Patterson and Robert Gimlin released what they claimed was decisive proof of Bigfoot, taken near Bluff Creek in California. However, the two later admitted that Bob Heironimus, a friend of Patterson, had worn an ape costume.

In 2007, Rick Jacobs, a hunter, captured an image triggered by a motion camera he had left in the Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania. He claimed this was Sasquatch, although experts thought it showed nothing more sinister than 'a bear with a severe case of mange'.

Many cryptozoologists claim that up to eighty or ninety per cent of

sightings are not real. This raises the obvious and interesting implication that ten to twenty per cent *are* real. Another possibility is that Bigfoot was a close relative of Gigantopithecus, whose fossils have been found in China. Migration across the Bering land bridge from China to America could have taken place, but no fossils of a biped similar to Bigfoot have ever been found in America.

After discussing the topic with Pockets and Brains, we decided that our next adventure after the PCT would be a Sasquatch hunt. Pockets would do photography, Brains would be responsible for securing and flying a radio-controlled helicopter with an infra-red camera, while I would document and write about the expedition.

To fuel my Sasquatch appetite in the morning, I surfed the web for more information. I had also received an email from a company called Backpackinglight in Denmark. The owner, Niels Overgaard Blok, had been reading my blog and noticed my alarming habit of damaging sunglasses: I dropped them, sat on them, and on one occasion just plain forgot them. Niels was the Danish distributor for a company called Numa Sports Optics, based in Arizona. They claimed their shades were unbreakable. Niels said he'd be happy to send me a pair in return for a little advertising space, and I readily agreed. We arranged for them to be shipped ahead. As for the chances of my losing them, I figured that I'd take a lot more care with them than with an average-price pair of shades. As it turned out, they stayed with me for the rest of my hike, and I still use them now.

I also gained another sponsor. Brains had been walking in a kilt made by a company called Sportkilt in California. In fact, I had seen several guys walking in them. Pockets had started from Mexico wearing one, but lost a waist size, so switched to shorts. Everyone spoke highly of kilts; the air circulation around one's undercarriage was reason enough to try one. Brains had suggested Sportkilt the previous day, so I tried my luck and emailed them. They arranged for one to be sent to me in a fabric pattern called Blackwatch. I was excited; it's always great to get stuff for free.

Courtney had decided to return to Wrightwood. She had discussed the situation with Pockets and thought it best if she went back. I reluctantly left Sierra City with him and Brains, and we formed a loose group over the ensuing days. Sometimes we walked together, sometimes one of us had a burst of speed and went ahead, but we usually ended up camping together. They both walked faster than I did, but I was comfortable with their pace, and

it meant I could cover a couple more miles in a day.

I cautiously peered down at the Feather River a couple of hundred feet below me, from a bridge spanning a chasm. It was good to camp near water; the mosquitoes were not as prolific as in previous weeks, so we could hang around a river or creek in the evening without fear of too many bites. Hawkeye had left a note on the trail saying that he had found a nice camp spot by the bank, so I ducked and weaved through the undergrowth until I found him. I stripped off and lowered myself into calm waters, sheltered by a few boulders above the surface. I washed some clothes, took half an hour to appreciate the opportunity to get clean and then sat on a rock drying off.

"Fozzie! Fozzie! Look what I got!"

I turned my head to see Pockets skipping over rocks like a nine-year-old, with something wrapped around his forearm. I couldn't make it out.

"What you got, Pockets?"

"Look mate, it's a rattler!"

In the split second that it took my eyes to send a signal to my brain, Reginald at Nerve Centre HQ decided to have a severe fit. In a matter of milliseconds he had discarded a few first-responses, ranging from "Back off quickly" to "Keep a safe distance" and eventually let rip with a simple but effective "Get the fuck out of there".

At first I didn't believe Pockets, but as the reptile merged into focus, Reginald's advice hit home.

"Pockets, get that thing away from me! Are you nuts?!"

"Fozzie! It's OK, I killed it! Look, no head!"

Sure enough, a bloody stump was all that remained. The eerie part was that the body was still writhing about and curling around his wrist. It made me cringe just to look.

I found Pockets's behaviour curious. One minute he was merrily hopping along like a kid, the next he was mischievously creeping up behind me. And at first he seemed happy to have scared me, but when he saw that I was genuinely soiling myself, he showed real concern.

Pockets explained later that, as he stepped over a log, the snake had struck the sole of his shoe. Taking exception to this, he turned round, waved his hand to get the culprit's attention and then punched it on the head with his other hand. Having stunned it, he picked it up and killed it with a quick slice of his knife behind the critter's head. I watched as he skinned, gutted and prepared the beast for the fire. Even when we placed the meat over some

embers, it was still moving. My second taste of rattlesnake was just as delicious as the first.

Pockets had a seemingly bottomless pit of energy. The way he chomped at the bit and then tried to rein himself back was hilarious. He was the last to get up in the morning, but bloody hell, when he was up, he really was up.

His pace was faster than mine, but he never looked in a hurry. He often had to stop for photographic work; he had a PCT photo-story deal with *Backpacker* magazine. He sometimes stayed in one spot for an hour or so. He would see artistic potential in trees, skies, water, snow; places that wouldn't even occur to me as good photo opportunities. After burning off extra energy this way, he'd run off a few more calories by upping the pace to catch up with me or Brains.

Then he'd play his games. I think, in retrospect, Pockets just came up with the most simplistic idea that would amuse him, and offload a little more of that energy. Sometimes, Brains and I would be walking through a forest and he'd jump out, growling loudly. Most of the time I found it funny, but if I was tired, it annoyed me.

And to this day I still can't figure out how, when I was convinced I was ahead of him, he would appear in front of me, and when I was sure he was in front of me he'd pop out from a tree behind me. He did this several times in one day, too; I started to think he was some sort of PCT ninja.

In town he just went crazy. We didn't usually need a TV in our hotel rooms: Pockets laid on his own cabaret. A regular act consisted of him opening the back window and barking. Within seconds, half of the canine population within a mile would go completely bananas. After a while they'd calm down a little, leaving just a couple of dogs still yapping. Then, trying different types of bark, Pockets would try to have a genuine conversation with them. Seriously.

Then he'd start with the cats…

At one motel I was sitting on the outside porch with Brains, having a cigarette and supping on a Pale Ale, when the door was flung open. Pockets stepped out completely naked, hands covering his genitals, and cried:

"Come on boys, get inside! I haven't finished with you yet!"

Brains's normal reaction, as was mine, was to hold his head in his hands and deny any association with him.

His other favourite prank was to wait until Brains or I were asleep and get the other person to take a photo of the slumbering one, while he stood in the

frame, his back towards the camera, flexing his muscles, with his shorts dropped. And using someone else's camera. I can't tell you how many times I checked my shots at day's end to find a picture of me or Brains fast asleep with two buttocks in clear view.

Alluringly insane, Pockets was certainly the wild card of the group, and perhaps of the entire PCT.

Brains, on the other hand, was a little more laid back, very intelligent and usually had an interesting point of view to share. He seemed to know a lot about everything, which kept me on my intellectual guard.

We would regularly sit outside smoking when we stayed at a motel, and a ten-minute cigarette break quite often became a thirty-minute chat.

Brains was originally from Long Island, New York. He grew up in a suburb of New York City and used to ride the train into Manhattan, Queens or Brooklyn whenever he could. He moved west when he was eighteen, and had been moving ever since. Illinois, Utah, Nevada, California, Colorado and North Carolina all lured him, and he would find work, stay for a while and then move on.

Sitting outside a motel during one of our smoking sessions, I asked Brains why he was hiking the PCT. I didn't normally ask that; it was too common a question. Something told me he had a different story to tell, though.

"Fozzie, there are two main reasons why I am on the trail," he began. "First, I wasn't comfortable with where my life had taken me, and I was utterly bored with it. Exactly the same thing day after day. Get up, go to work, come home, watch TV, go to sleep, wake up and do it all over again. I wanted a challenge, the bigger the better."

"And the second reason?" I pushed him.

"Well, that could be classed as a little controversial, I guess. I am expecting Western civilisation to crumble. The greed, corruption and graft displayed by the ruling powers is astonishing. I have been paying attention for a while and noticed things were getting in a terrible state, so I started to save money. Sure enough, the financial sector melted and then brought the whole world to the brink. I figure it's just a matter of time until someone, somewhere, makes an irreversible decision and then the banks, corporations and governments will fall."

"I feel that way sometimes as well, mate. Do you really think we're heading that way?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. Anyway, this leads me to why I am hiking the PCT. I

thought that if I hiked the trail, it would give me some skills that I would need in the future. Skills like wood lore, hunting and trapping, orienteering, weather reading and so on. I grew up in and have lived in cities my whole life, so I know nothing about camping; the last time I ventured into the woods was twenty years ago. I thought then, as I do now, that it would be smart to get a jump start on the skill set I would need in the future. I would learn to live a meagre existence, move quickly over long distances and be able to find water, food and shelter when needed.

"So," he continued, "I wanted to make a change in my life to test myself, and I sure have. I haven't really learnt much of what I thought I would. I can read a map better but I haven't learnt to hunt, yet. I have learnt endurance, though."

It was an unusual view but one I could relate to. I often found myself wondering when, not if, Western civilisation would collapse. Being in the wilderness and not seeing a building for days, let alone another human being, only fed those thoughts. I agreed with Brains; we are becoming too greedy, we supposedly live in a democracy but our voices are not heard. We elect leaders on the basis of promises that are then broken. What can we do about it? Not much – write a letter to our MP or post about it on Facebook. It's frustrating to feel so helpless. Democracy is not democracy any more.

As for living in a so-called free society, that too is being eroded. In America you can be arrested for standing on a street corner. In the UK, we are filmed while walking down the street, entering a shop or driving our car. We have our retinas scanned at the airport. The extent of information-gathering is astonishing, but where is it all going?

My opinion is that society as we know it is moving towards a point where everyone says 'enough'. I think we are tired of restrictions on the way we live, of rules and regulations and of being ignored. History shows that if people are not heard, they revolt. At that point, when everything comes tumbling down and society collapses, I, too, will escape the riots, meltdown, disorder and disarray – and disappear into the woods.

* * *

Hawkeye had already left as Brains and I climbed from the river the following morning. The 3,500-foot ascent seemed surprisingly easy; we both steamed up it like raging locomotives. Leaves from the previous autumn still carpeted the trail, cushioning our feet, and poison ivy reached out from the

undergrowth.

Poison ivy is not to be taken lightly. Although not life-threatening, even the slightest brush against a leaf will set the plant oil on an all-out war with your skin. The plant alkaloid urushiol causes severe itching, inflammation, colourless bumps and blistering in four out of five people who come into contact with it. I learnt from other hikers how to recognise the plant, as it is not found in my native British Isles.

The plant only grows to perhaps a couple of feet on average, but was commonplace along the trail. 'The Poison Oak Dance', as I heard several others refer to it, was the name given to the contortions one had to perform to avoid contact. I was perhaps complacent at times, but I remained unscathed. Maybe I was one of the lucky individuals who had some resistance to the effects of the plant. Hiking at night was a little precarious; my head torch picked out the small plants and shiny leaves, and I had to exercise a tad more caution.

The air cooled as we rose, affording a welcome respite from a sweaty night at the river. Stunted oak trees occasionally allowed shafts of sunlight through, which patterned the ground. Brains surged ahead and I let him go. An hour later I saw another hiker approaching. We both stopped and chatted whilst resting.

"I'm about a month behind where I should be at this stage," I said to a solo SoBo called Peacemaker.

"No," he replied with a wry smile and a glint in his eye. "You're *exactly* where you should be."

Peacemaker looked like a lost hippie. I had watched him climbing the hill that I was working my way down. He strolled up calmly, taking his time. Stopping in the middle of the trail usually suggested that someone wanted a chat; if not, they would generally keep up the pace and step to one side to let you pass. If someone removed their backpack it meant they had decided to take a break, and this was something of an open invitation to the other to do the same. I sat and talked with Peacemaker for about ten minutes, glad to be resting and eating. He was hiking a stage of the PCT, though he said that if he found it enjoyable, he may keep going further. The expression on his face was of someone completely at ease with himself. As I left him, his words reverberated in my mind: "You are exactly where you're supposed to be, Fozzie."

It made me feel happy and secure. Regardless of my limited progress,

hearing those words validated my position and reminded me the PCT was not a race.

I passed Brains who was taking a break. We had split off again into our different day paces, and I tried to catch Hawkeye to camp with him, but he clearly wanted to get some miles in. Approaching twenty-seven miles for the day, I was still alone as I left a note for Brains telling him I intended to camp in another couple of miles. Sure enough, he joined me an hour or so later. I had become grateful for the company at camp. During the day we each had our own routines; sometimes we spent the whole day together, other times we criss-crossed or walked alone. Neither of us knew where Pockets was, but as night fell, I left my poles at trailside in case he should pass by.

I stood outside the tent listening to the wind rip through the forest around me, marvelling at the sheer energy of the night. I crawled into my tent and updated my journal, and contemplated something Hawkeye had mentioned in passing earlier. I had heard him, but was not really listening. However, if I knew then the repercussions of his words during the latter stages of my hike, I would have taken more notice.

“Bad weather up north forecast later in the year, Fozzie. They say it could be one of the worst winters for years.”

# Chapter 11

Setting the Limits

*I found things in the woods that I didn't know I was looking for … and now I'll never be the same.*
**Jennifer Pharr Davies**, 2011 record holder for the fastest ever thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail

I left Brains to snooze in the morning and made quick progress down to Belden, a small community established when the railroad was built. Hemmed in to one side of the surrounding hills by the familiar sight of the Feather River, it was a sleepy little place with a population of just twenty-two. The original iron bridge spanning the river was a useful reference point as I made my way down from the hills. The few people I had spoken to about Belden were none too enamoured with the place and told me it wasn't worth stopping there. I was glad I did, though.

I was under the impression that a diner and store could be found two miles down the highway, so I was excited to find a restaurant, bar and simple shop in Belden proper. Resting on the bench outside, I was surprised to see Pockets emerge.

"Where the hell did you come from?" I said.

"Got in last night, me ol' mucker. Walked through most of the morning and slept in that old rock-crushing building over the road." He pointed to a restored structure on the far side of the river.

Pockets had taken my accent to heart and by now had a string of English words and phrases to his bow. "Me ol' mucker" was his favourite; he'd also come up with bizarre concoctions like "You gonna 'ave a bacon buttie, then, mate? Wiv sum, yer know, braaawn sauce and a cuppa tea?"

Brains strolled in shortly thereafter, and we all settled down for breakfast, which became lunch. Before we knew it, it was afternoon. We swam in the river and I thanked the Feather for giving me two good baths in as many days. The old monument provided us with some secluded shelter for the night.

* * *

I often pondered the juxtaposition of technology and the outdoors. Certain

gizmos were carried by most hikers: head torch, mobile phone, iPod or similar musical device, perhaps a GPS. All designed to make our lives more comfortable, and some, like the head torch, could be considered necessities. I wondered how far this kind of technology might advance, and what equipment would be around twenty years from now. Tents with solar panels in the fabric? Body implants that monitor temperature, energy, pulse and other functions and give advice on improving performance? Kinetic-energy trekking poles or shoes that produce electricity from movement? (I think I might copyright that one, so don't tell anyone.)

The need for gadgets on the trail can be considerable, but is always balanced against their usefulness, weight and energy consumption.

Escaping computers, mobile phones and other annoyances was a motivation for me to do the PCT. Although I would find life difficult without my computer or my mobile, especially as I use them for my business, retreating to nature was a beautiful and enlightening way of realising what I actually needed. I never missed the computer, and even though I carried a phone, I rarely turned it on more than a couple of times a week. TV was a novelty in towns, and I spent many a night in a motel catching up, but I never missed television when I was on the trail.

Experiencing the outdoors or – even better, the untamed wilderness – imparts a certain wisdom about what is truly needed to be happy. Though material pleasures do provide a sense of achievement, a feel-good factor if you like, I worked out many moons ago that the feeling is only ever temporary. Two weeks after buying a car it's just a car. Your bright, shiny new mobile phone is exciting for a couple of days and then you look for the improved version. It's only a fake pleasure. If you're after true fulfilment, I say take a walk in the wilderness.

We started the 5,000-foot climb out of Belden the following morning, and bumped into Billy Goat on his way down. Perhaps the most famous face on the PCT over the past few years, he has walked the route many times and each year ventures out for the summer to do a section. Wispy white hair and a long beard earned him his nickname. This was the third time I had met him; first at the kick-off party and again coming down Fuller Ridge. We all spent a few minutes chatting and taking photos, and wished each other well.

The talk turned to mileage. We were knocking out around twenty-five-mile days on average now. This was a comfortable distance for a day and respectable progress. We discussed how far we each thought we could walk

in one day. Thirty-milers should be easily achievable, we thought; mid-thirties likewise. Silly mileage was anything over forty, fifty-plus miles was classed as mad, and in the unlikely event that any of us managed a sixty, this was simply ‘insane’. I had not reached the thirties thus far, at least not on the PCT, and neither had Brains or Pockets, but it was a tempting prospect.

As with most sports, there are a few die-hards who set out to break records. Andrew Skurka is one of them. In 2006 he walked a 1,744-mile section of the PCT in 45 days and 16 hours, an average of 38.2 miles per day. To put this in perspective, it was three times quicker than my average.

On the 3rd of November 2007, Skurka became the first person to complete the 6,875-mile Great Western Loop, averaging 33 miles per day for 208 consecutive days. On the 19th of July 2005, he completed a coast-to-coast walk starting from Cape Gaspe in Quebec and finishing at Cape Alava in Washington State, some 7,800 miles and 373 days later. He said of his section of the PCT:

“I was successful in doing what I set out to do. I dropped 25 pounds and am currently a little leaner than I was at the end of my sea-to-sea hike. I now think of a 40-mile day as hardly unusual; hiking 45-50 miles a day successively presents a more notable, but entirely doable challenge. And I have a much greater understanding of how I must manage my mind and my body while I’m pushing it to this level. Yeah, I only spent an afternoon at Kennedy Meadows; but I am a much better and more enlightened backpacker as a result, who is now in a much better position to succeed in some of the challenging hikes I have planned over the next few years.”

In 2004, Scott Williamson, on his fourth attempt, became the first person to ‘yo-yo’ the PCT. A yo-yo entails reaching the end of a long-distance route, then walking back to the beginning again. He took 205 days to complete the 5,280 miles, an average of 25.8 miles per day. In 2011, he set the record for completing the PCT, in an astonishing 64 days, 11 hours and 19 minutes, an average of about 41.1 miles per day. His pack base weight (without food or water) was 3.9 kilos. This was well under half of mine, which was around 9 kilos. It was his *thirteenth* thru-hike of the PCT!

He didn’t carry a stove, water treatment or a bear canister. He slept under a tarpaulin and used a quilt (made famous by a designer of lightweight backpacking equipment called Ray Jardine) instead of a sleeping bag. He hiked without a waist belt and sternum strap on his pack, and did not use trekking poles. Rising at 5.30am, he would be walking by 6am. His breakfast

consisted of what he called a ‘green shake’, containing a powdered protein, a green supplement which had all the greens he would need for the day, spirulina, soy milk powder and of course water. Lunch was a swift fifteen-minute affair utilising homemade ‘Phat Doug’ bars, and dinner was simply dehydrated refried bean powder, crumbled organic corn tortilla chips and a generous splash of olive oil.

“That may sound very unappealing to you,” he once said during a presentation. “Actually, right now I’d agree, but it gets to be delicious and satisfying after several weeks on the trail.”

If you feel the urge to do a long-distance thru-hike and can’t make up your mind which one, how about doing all three? Walk the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail and you earn the accolade of a Triple Crowner. Several hikers have completed this feat and many, myself included, wish to.

On the 31st of December 2000 Brian Robinson walked eight miles to reach Springer Mountain, the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail in Georgia. On New Year’s Day 2001 he started hiking north. Nine months and twenty-seven days later he had not only walked the Appalachian Trail, but also the Pacific Crest Trail *and* the Continental Divide Trail. He was the first person ever to walk all the three long-distance trails in America in one year, a total of 7,371 miles.

The Appalachian Trail has also seen its fair share of record-breakers. In 2008, Jennifer Pharr Davies set the women’s record for a thru-hike with a remarkable 57 days, 8 hours and 35 minutes for the 2,175-mile trail.

If that weren’t enough, in 2011 she vowed to do even better and also to beat the men’s record of 47 days, 13 hours and 31 minutes set by Andrew Thompson in 2005. Having averaged around 38 miles per day every day for her 2008 record, she now somehow had to pull off the same feat ten days faster. Forty-six days, 11 hours and 20 minutes later she set the AT thru-hike record for both men and women. This equates to a leg-numbing 47.2 miles per day. My personal best for a day’s hike on the PCT was 38.5 miles, 8.7 miles short of what Jennifer was cracking out each day, every day.

“The first two weeks were a physical challenge,” she said afterwards. “Adjusting to back-to-back 30- to 45-mile days is brutal, especially on New England terrain. The weather was bad, the trail was slick, and hiking in New England usually involves using your hands or butt to overcome significant grades. I would finish each day looking like I had come from a war zone:

muddied, bloodied and bruised. After the first two weeks, the remaining hurdles were mental and emotional. Mentally, it was hard because I never had a break. It is really difficult to maintain mental focus for 57 days."

The latest, unsupported, PCT record was set on August 7th, 2013, when hiker Heather 'Anish' Anderson of Bellingham, Washington truly smashed it. Having averaged around 44 miles each day and beating the previous record by almost four days, she reached Canada in 60 days, 17 hours, and 12 minutes.

The Appalachian Trail record set by Jennifer Pharr Davies was improved upon again in August 2015 by Matt Kirk, who registered a time of 58 days, 9 hours, and 38 minutes. That is, until Heather romped home a month later in 54 days, 7 hours, and 48 minutes. I'm betting good money she has her eye on the CDT next.

It is worth noting that there are two types of hikers who take on these challenges: those who hike with all their possessions with them, known as unsupported, and those who have help, such as a support vehicle so they carry little equipment. Pharr Davies was supported by her husband, Drew, on her record-breaking attempt, but both Matt and Heather deserve respect by setting their records unsupported.

And the guy that's currently breaking all the records? His name is Karl Bushby, and he's from England (of course!). Karl is making Scott, Brian, Jennifer, Andrew, me and every other walker on the planet look like we are taking our first, tentative steps in kindergarten. Allow me to explain.

Karl is attempting to be the first person ever to walk around the world entirely on foot, with no transport. And before you question whether this is actually possible in light of a small problem known as 'the sea', he's figured that one out as well.

Karl started this mammoth undertaking from Punta Arenas, Chile, on the 1st of November 1998, and he estimates the journey will take him fourteen years by the time he arrives back at home in Hull. If the timespan doesn't grab your attention, then consider the mileage: 36,000! This is about fourteen Pacific Crest Trails!

He has walked the entire length of South America, through America itself, into Canada and Alaska – and this is where I come back to the ocean problem. Believe it or not, to walk around the world one only encounters about seventy-six miles of ocean. His first water obstacle was the infamous Bering Strait, a fifty-six-mile stretch of water separating the USA from

Russia. During the winter, the sea freezes here, sometimes completely, but usually partially. In 2006, Karl and a French explorer called Dimitri Kieffer walked (where possible), crawled and stumbled over ice and water to arrive in Russia some fifteen days later. When he reaches the French coast, he has permission from the English and French authorities to walk through the channel tunnel.

Currently, Karl is involved in a battle with the Russian authorities, who have allowed him only a ninety-day visa. In 2008, as a result of the first delay in obtaining this permission, he managed to walk for three weeks to reach Bilibino. This area is essentially swamp and can only be traversed in the winter when the surface has frozen solid. He had to leave after his visa ran out.

From late 2008 to 2010, Karl spent most of the time in Mexico, for reasons to do with costs and funding. Because of the Russian delays, he lost valuable sponsors.

In 2011 he reached Srednekolymsk, again having to leave because of his visa. He needs to complete another 560 miles to reach roads and not have to rely on crossing frozen earth. The last I heard he's still going.

People such as Andrew, Scott, Brian and Jennifer fire the imagination. Physical boundaries are then pushed further, records are smashed and extreme feats of endurance are set. I never set out to break any records on the PCT; my goal was purely completion, but reading about what others have achieved makes me want to better myself. Distance is the obvious target; 2,650 miles is a hell of a long way even by car, let alone on foot. As I walked the PCT, the Continental Divide Trail was starting to seem viable to me, as was the Appalachian Trail and indeed the whole Triple Crown. But I also found myself thinking about other, more original goals. Approaching mid-way on the PCT, I was already planning my next thru-hike.

There are several 'E' routes in Europe that I thought would make good targets. The E8 starts in Ireland and finishes 2,920 miles further on in Turkey. The E4 begins in south-west Spain and stretches through Europe some 6,250 miles to Greece. Or perhaps I could attempt a round-the-coast walk of the UK? I could immerse myself in my home country over the course of a year and improve my hiking total by a healthy 6,500 miles. I started to walk a little faster in anticipation of these challenges.

Dozer told me after his thru-hike how he had pulled in a sixty-two-mile day. I didn't believe him at first, but he enlightened me.

“I had not planned the day,” he began. “But I was trying to catch Crow, Dundee and Walker. I had been pushing hard doing a four-mile-per-hour pace when darkness settled in. I stumbled across the Pro from Dover who was also hiking in the dark, and we startled each other. We decided to push on and try to catch them but figured they must have camped off trail somewhere. Looking at the map we realised we were only about twenty-five miles from Mount Hood, the Timberline Lodge and that famous breakfast buffet. We carried on with that in mind, only stopping for water and a couple of ibuprofen. We were hiking fast but by now I was hurting. My feet were blistered, I had chafing and my knee was painful and swollen. The hardest part was the 2,000-foot climb to the lodge and some of it was on sandy soil and very steep; we kept slipping. We took turns leading, which motivated us a lot, and we made the lodge as the sun came up. It was epic! Twenty-one hours of hiking took its toll on me but after breakfast and a hot tub I was happy that we had pushed and made it.”

I also contacted the Pro from Dover who furnished me with his version of events:

“I never set out to do a huge day. I did plan to do about fifty miles which, although big, was something I had done before. I have completed at least a half dozen forties and I think one fifty to get across the Oregon border. I was a strong hiker and the draw of doing big days was attractive to me. I liked to bust it out every once in a while and prove my own mettle.

“The motivation for this one day might be misplaced but it was really centred around getting to Timberline Lodge on Mt Hood in time for the breakfast buffet. My initial plan was set up by a forty-miler I did to put myself sixty-five miles away from the destination. I figured I could hike a fifty and then wake up early and crush another fifteen in the early morning, and make it to the buffet some time in the middle of it. That would allow near a couple hours of feasting and gorging.

“The day didn’t start off too well. I woke up and got moving before sunrise but I just wasn’t moving fast and it was a little chilly. So naturally I found a spot to get water, with a view, and I took a long break. Surprisingly, Dozer, Pajamas, Uncle Gary and JC found me. I hadn’t seen these guys since Kennedy Meadows, so I was extremely surprised and happy to see them, especially Dozer, because I had done a fair amount of hiking with him: we started the same day way back in Campo. I still wanted to make the buffet the next day but these guys were talking about the morning after that. I was

stubborn and wasn't backing down from my plan.

"So I hiked on and on, still firmly bent on doing fifty. Dozer caught back up with me when it was about to become headlamp time. He was looking for Crow, Dundee and Walker and wanted to camp with them for the night. We kept hiking together but still couldn't find them. By this point, I had a forty in place, whereas I think he'd done five miles less, based on where we had started. After thinking hard about where they would have camped and not finding them, Dozer decided that he would just keep going with me. Big days are better with someone to go through them with.

"The thought of doing a big day was enticing to Dozer, but his head had started to churn. I remember saying to him at one point, 'I will hike with you as far as you are willing to go.' I wanted to get as close to Timberline as I could, and his support was making this hike a lot better. It became Dozer's golden carrot as well. The prospect of the morning breakfast buffet had got him excited too. He had never done a monster day of forty or more miles and now was his chance. So we kept going and as we neared the fifty-mile mark for me, we both just decided that this was going to be the day of all days and we were going to make it to Timberline Lodge come hell or high water. So we did. Once Dozer made that leap mentally, we were both going to push ourselves to the end.

"The late night and early morning portion took a while. Our bodies got tired and slowed down. We used instant coffee every five or so miles to give us that recharge for the next leg. Rest for twenty minutes, make coffee, eat something and then get moving again. The last stretch was the longest; it seemed as if it would never end. Time moved slower, miles weren't clicking off as they had been earlier in the day. We were mentally tired too, from pushing our bodies all day. I would have loved a nap but knew I would never wake up. We had to keep going all night; sleep was not on the cards at all. The overnight portion was methodical. I had been going for three-quarters of a day already and my legs just kept moving, step after step; not really physically sore or tired, to the point where I couldn't possibly take another step, just tired from over-exertion, but the muscle memory was there and they just kept going. There was one point on the last climb where I just closed my eyes and my legs kept moving. I could keep my eyes closed for a minute at a time and still be on trail. It was weird; I sort of knew where I was going. I also just wanted to see the door of the lodge within my sights.

"The sun was starting to lighten up the sky faintly but we were basically

there. Nothing could stop us now; maybe another half mile and that was it. The joy of accomplishment was awesome. We had just done this stupendous hike and pushed ourselves further than we ever had before. I don't really know how to describe that feeling. It was intense: we felt invincible mentally, though exhausted physically. I loved it.

"As it turned out, I never recovered from that superlative effort until my thru-hike was done. That run of miles left my legs beaten up and devoid of any real strength. I lost all my speed. I could still hike long days but they were mentally exhausting and from then on I began to hate long days, even thirties. I simply couldn't push myself as I had before. With the speed in the legs wiped out, all I had left was endurance. I continued to enjoy the hike but the physical aspect of it depressed me. As a result, my hiking style changed a bit. Although I still did the miles, I switched to a new pace. It was another one of those things that I learned about myself, and I am much wiser and stronger for it."

Talk of a forty-mile day ebbed away, and after 25.8 miles we reached a small clearing by the side of the trail just before Humboldt Summit. It was a beautiful evening and tents were left in our packs as we laid out our sleeping bags beneath a wonderful, inky-black sky embedded with millions of crystals. Trees around our clearing framed the night sky perfectly, and as our eyes became accustomed to the light, the Milky Way appeared like a vapour of mist. It was so vast and clear that I felt as if I could just let go and fall away into infinity.

I woke at first light, around 5am; feeling rested, I got up and put some water on the boil. Brains was still snoozing but began to wake and then Pockets, who I thought was still in his sleeping bag, appeared from behind a rock carrying his camera equipment.

"Morning!" he cried, as though he had been awake for half a day. "Got a great time lapse of the sun coming up, what a great morning!"

It was another perfect day. We left to knock off the remaining twenty-two miles to Highway 36 and hopefully get a quick ride to Chester. Over the past few days the track had been covered in a layer of fine dirt, roughly the consistency of sieved flour. Each footstep made clouds of powdery soil stick to the sweat on our legs and cover them in a dirty mess. As we walked into the night with our head torches on, the air was obscured and glistened with seemingly billions of dust particles. Brains had taken to wearing his bandana over his mouth to stop choking. Even our feet were brown with a congealed

mix of muck at the end of the day. I had by now stopped washing my feet at day's end, because I couldn't be bothered – and I also felt a minor sense of achievement at coming to terms with my filth. Brains and Pockets also embraced the dirt, and after a week on trail we would emerge from the woods looking as if we had put in a shift down the local coal mine.

"I can't stop thinking about getting into town," said Pockets, breaking the silence mid-afternoon. "I'm gonna get some Ben and Jerry's, you know, buy four and get four free? Then I'm gonna empty them all in the bath, lie in it and roll around till I'm completely covered. And, *and*, you two are going to watch me."

"I won't be there, Pockets," I told him, noticing Brains up ahead catching drift of the conversation and shaking with the giggles.

Before the highway, and catching us completely off guard, we came across a granite marker by the side of the trail. I was bringing up the rear, and when I emerged, the guys had dropped their packs and Pockets was grinning as though he had just found a hidden café serving free, all-you-can-eat food complete with naked Singaporean waitresses making themselves at home on our laps while offering 'extras'. Or something like that.

"What you smirking at?" I asked.

"Dude, we're halfway!"

I did a double-take at the small obelisk-shaped monument with its engraved gold inscription.

'PCT mid-point, Canada 1325 miles, Mexico 1325 miles.'

Suddenly, everything focused and became very, very lucid. I had completed half the distance I needed to get to Canada. It was the 20th of August, 119 days since I started back down in Campo. This meant that at my current pace I would finish just before Christmas. That would be too late. I had another two months at best to get there before the winter hit. Immediately, Hawkeye's words whispered to me.

"Bad weather up north forecast later in the year, Fozzie. They say it could be one of the worst winters for years."

I looked at Pockets and then Brains. They were both beaming, as was I, but I could see the underlying worry in their faces as they realised what I too had realised. We pushed our fears to one side, shook hands, jumped about, captured some photos and video and set off to celebrate in Chester.

"Guys, do you know the name of the town that's famous for being the place where most thru-hikers quit and end their hike?" asked Pockets, after

we had walked in silent contemplation for a couple of miles. Neither Brains nor I responded.

"Chester," he added. "The town we're heading for now."

# Chapter 12

Paw Fall would be Awful

*You will never make it to Canada.*
**Billy Goat**

*I did make it to Canada.*
**Patrick 'Wideangle' Pöndl**

Pockets was right. A lot of hikers crash out after reaching Chester. When the euphoria abates, the full extent of the situation smashes into them. They now know what it entails to walk 1,325 miles and with shock realise that they have to do the same distance again. After many celebrate their achievement to date in Chester, a few are unable to cope and comprehend what then faces them. It was a sobering thought that none of us was entertaining but mind games like that can creep up on you. Feel fine one minute but slowly it starts to sink in, fears surface and doubts start to crumble one's resolve. We walked in silence to the highway and caught an easy and quick ride into Chester with Rick, a passing builder.

"I always stop if I see you guys," he said. "I take my hat off to all of you."

Reaching town after dark, we decided against getting a motel, but planned to get one early the following morning to make the most of a full day and night in comfort. We wolfed down a burger at the Kopper Kettle café, and after a quick scout for suitable sleeping areas we crashed out on an open-air stage in the park, tucking ourselves near the back, away from prying eyes. A few kids kicked a ball around, smoke rose from a family barbecue and as dusk fell the park gradually emptied.

We stayed in Chester the following day and moved out after one night at the motel. I think Pockets's words were ringing in our ears, and we were keen not to quit our adventure here as many others had before. Trooper had also arrived at the motel and, while Brains and I ate a speedy lunch at the Kopper Kettle, he caught a ride with Pockets eight miles back to the trailhead.

Trooper had walked on by the time we caught up with Pockets, and we made our way to the Drakesbad guest ranch. We were on a bit of a roll in terms of food availability. Our stomachs were groaning from Chester, the ranch was looming and Hat Creek resort, home to trail angels Georgi and

Dennis Heitman, was a day's walk away. None of us were entertaining any thoughts of quitting. In fact it was quite the reverse; getting away from Chester quickly had proved a good move and the prospect of food always put a smile on our faces.

We set a good pace through intermittent forest dotted with open spaces and stopped at Boiling Spring Lake. A warning sign advised not to approach the small expanse of water that happily bubbled and steamed about fifty feet from the trail.

I treat signs telling me not to do something the same as I treat someone in authority. Albeit with some caution, I walked a few feet from the banks as Pockets took some photos and Brains smoked. Being near volcanic activity gives me the willies so I was glad when Pockets finished so we could get to the ranch.

The forest cleared and opened out into a lush, green strip stretching away either side of us. Despite the breaks in the trees that afternoon it was almost a relief to emerge into the open. We had barely dropped our packs when the front door opened and a waiter appeared.

"Guys! You thru-hikers? It's the end of August, you're late!"

We laughed nervously, all aware of the situation.

"Come in! Sit!"

Drakesbad ranch was in the middle of nowhere. I couldn't even see a road leading to it. Paying guests are made to feel welcome at this forest nirvana and can relax in the hot springs, eat great food and forget about the nine-to-five routine. We were given some water and our waiter came over again.

"Guys, what you wanna eat? You're a little late, kitchen is closing but we have leftover quiche and plenty broccoli." Smiling a lot, his grasp of English was amusing as he left out the occasional, unimportant word. I tried to guess where he was from.

We looked at each other and paused.

"I'm not actually hungry," Brains offered first.

"Strangely, neither am I," I added, before Pockets also agreed.

The waiter looked momentarily perplexed. During the course of a season, hikers appear at the ranch in a steady stream and proceed to demolish obscene quantities of food. Now all of a sudden three of them turn up and aren't hungry. He was as confused as we were. Whispers starting coming from the other waitresses, the kitchen door twitched and eyes peered out from nooks and crannies. All was silent.

“Don’t want any food?!” said Billie, the proprietor, leaning against the kitchen door. “First time in ten years that I’ve heard a hiker saying they don’t want any food. Is it a money thing?”

“No,” Brains replied. “We have money, just not much of an appetite.”

“Well,” Billie continued, “You’re all eating and I don’t want to hear another word about not being hungry!”

We fell silent as though the headmaster had just rapped our knuckles. Billie was jesting, of course, but we weren’t about to argue with her. Said food arrived, followed by chocolate mousse, and we all realised how hungry we actually were. Pockets was trying to eat but becoming distracted by several lovely Slovenian waitresses.

“I’m moving to Slovenia after my hike,” he said.

We thanked them all profusely for the food. Upon discovering that they didn’t even want payment, we left them a thirty-dollar tip, which they only reluctantly took. They handed us each a towel and gave us directions down to the hot springs.

For an hour we floated about laughing and relaxing, the water soothing tired muscles as steam rose away from the surface, catching the beams from a full moon. If it were not for one of the ranch staff who arrived to close off the spring, we would have stayed for another hour. Walking a mile down a rough track away from Drakesbad I kept glancing back as the forest slowly engulfed the building and finally it disappeared completely.

Four miles in to the following day, we emerged at a campground by a road.

“Guys, this isn’t right,” I said sheepishly, as I had been leading the way and therefore, following an unwritten rule, was responsible for navigation.

“It’s not, no,” Brains confirmed, checking his map.

We eventually managed to pinpoint our location, and lethargy set in. Having put in four miles on the wrong track, and needing to walk another four to get back, we decided the obvious and natural solution was beer. We managed a quick hitchhike to the angelic Heitmans at Hat Creek. Georgi and Dennis, in their welcoming and helpful way, showed us round and fed us.

Brains pitched tent in the grounds with Pockets and I grabbed a spare bed in the tree house, complete with TV, ageing video recorder and wonderful selection of 80s movies.

I had learnt the hard way when trying to secure sponsorship from gear manufactures never to give up; persistence pays off. Before embarking on my

journey I'd contacted Matt Swaine, editor of *Trail* magazine, the biggest hiking publication in England. I asked whether the magazine would like to publish an article. They politely said it was a good idea but not at the current time. I had spoken to Pockets and he was keen to have some of his photos published too, so I tried again.

We sent *Trail* six of the best shots. I made our adventure sound as enticing as I could, mentioning that Pockets's work had featured in *National Geographic*. Two hours later I received a reply to my email.

"Hi Keith. I am about to head out on my wedding for a couple of weeks but I am actually interested in this and I've forwarded it for someone here for discussion. Will try to get back to you before I leave on Wednesday. All the best. Matt."

Two days later a big smile rippled across my face when I saw another email from Matt. I took a deep breath and opened it.

"Hi Keith. We will run with something but the current issue is looking very busy, so might have to wait until the following one. I've forwarded to the editorial people and will get back. Hope all's going well with you! Matt."

I went nuts when I read it.

"Pockets! POCKETS!" I cried.

"Mucker, wassup?"

"We got in *Trail*, they're gonna run it!"

We jumped around for a couple of minutes, and then realised we had to catch a ride to Burney. The internet connection at the Heitmans was slow, and Pockets's photos were on his laptop, which was in his bounce box on a shelf at the post office. Georgi kindly drove us into town, with Brains accompanying us, and before long we were guests at the Shasta Pines Motel. I had to write the piece for *Trail* in a couple of days, and Pockets started sorting out which photos would show the PCT and us in their best light. Each photo took an hour to send (the motel's internet wasn't much better than the Heitmans'), because the magazine wanted high resolution. Eventually we sent all the pictures, and cracked open a case of Pale Ale.

I was keen to get going the following morning, but the guys wanted an extra day. I pondered for a while, but guilt got the better of me. I told them I'd see them up trail and waited by McDonald's to get a ride out of town. After giving in to temptation in the form of chicken nuggets I went outside to try again, promptly returning for another portion. It would prove to be difficult getting back to the wrong turn off the PCT at Kings Creek. My first

ride dropped me five miles up the road. I stuck my thumb out, hoping that another willing soul would put on the brakes. Steve, a plumber, stopped and said he could take me part of the way to the entrance of the Lassen Volcanic National Park, which he duly did. Next, Marjorie stopped and said she could take me to the Park entrance but no further, as she would have to pay to get in.

"You have to pay the entrance fee if you want to come into the park," the woman at the gate told me.

"I'm hiking the PCT," I replied. "Just took a day out to re-supply." I gave her my thru-hiking permit and she waved me through, wishing me good luck.

I was still ten miles from the car park where Pockets, Brains and I had found ourselves after straying off the trail. I walked to the visitor centre and grabbed a cold Coke from the machine. I then went to catch ride number four of a long day. A police SUV pulled up alongside me, tyres crunching on the gravel. A smoky window lowered.

"You know you can't hitch a ride here, don't you?" said a most attractive female officer.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm afraid it's illegal to try to hitch a ride in a national park."

I was aware of this as several hikers had told me before. Figuring it was only a very minor misdemeanour, I decided to try anyway – I was hardly likely to be arrested at gunpoint and thrown in the local slammer. I decided flirting was the best option. I flashed a cheeky grin, looked her in the eye and plumped for the innocent English tourist routine.

"I'm English," I said. "Sorry, I didn't realise. Shit, how the hell am I gonna get back up to the park at Kings Creek?"

"I don't know, but I think you may be walking. What are you doing here anyway?"

"I'm walking the PCT."

"Oh, really?" Her eyebrows raised a little and she started to loosen up. "Well done for getting this far but you still can't hitch a ride, I'm afraid."

"What are you up to now?" I decided to go for the big sell, hardened the accent slightly and tried to look forlorn.

"No way!" she exclaimed. "I just finished work, I'm going home to have a long, hot bath and to relax. Don't even think about asking me for a ride."

"Come on. You're gonna get home, slip into your bath, lie there and then you're gonna start to feel guilty because you know you should have given me

a ride instead of leaving me out here helpless in the middle of nowhere. Do you want that on your conscience? Please? It's just a few miles up the road."

She sighed, looked skyward and smiled again.

"Hang on," she said, reaching for the radio. "Guys, where are you, are you due down at the entrance at all?"

The radio crackled but I couldn't make out the reply.

"OK," she continued. "You're in luck, Mr Englishman. My buddies are just starting their shift. If you can wait for thirty minutes, they will grab some lunch and be here shortly after. They can give you a ride."

"Sure you won't let me ride with you? I'll buy you a drink," I said, making one more throw of the dice.

"Don't push your luck. Good luck with your hike; I'm going for that bath minus any guilt complex. And don't hitch in the national parks!"

With that she flashed me a cheeky smile, tossed her hair back, slipped on her sunglasses and drove off.

Sitting in the back of my first American cop car, I quizzed her mates on why they needed five guns between them. There were two big shotguns, a couple of guns that looked a bit more familiar, and something resembling a sniper rifle. They also had a pistol each. For a moment I was Rambo in the back of that car, being taken back to the town outskirts before being told not to return. I felt like letting their tyres down, sticking my tongue out, flicking one of them in the ear and running off into the forest taunting, "Catch me if you can!"

Finding the same track down to Kings Creek easily enough I soon came to the junction with the PCT where we had gone wrong. It was late afternoon and I felt I needed to put in some miles to make up for a lost day. We'd missed the section from there up to Burney a couple of days earlier, so I had around sixty miles to reach Highway 299 from where I had begun that day. I thought the Heitmans' would make a good place to get a quick rest and a bite to eat. I started walking into fading light. The forest was dense, so long before sunset I needed my head torch. I did my best not to remind myself that I was walking in the woods after dark. Bird shrieks startled me and twigs snapped in the darkness, amid an eerie, enveloping silence.

I turned my light up brighter and looked up trail. Two yellow eyes appeared from the forest and stopped about fifty feet ahead of me. They paused for a few seconds and then disappeared again. I couldn't stop thinking about the scene in *The Amityville Horror* where Margot Kidder's son says his

invisible, imaginary friend has just gone out of the window and, as she looks out, a pair of menacing white eyes flash at her and disappear. My mind was certainly not helping the situation. I was convinced those eyes belonged to a hungry wolf that by now had crept through the undergrowth to my left, flanked me and at any moment was going to jump on my neck – and it wasn't for a tummy scratch.

Eventually, after ten miles, I left the forest and entered a large, moonlit clearing. I walked for a further half mile to the next section of forest and camped just inside, with faint light for company.

It was strange being separated from the guys, and I was starting to miss their company at evening camp. For the next few days at least, I had to accept it.

Hiking a long-distance trail is not about giving up six months of your life. It's about having six months to live. The harshest days, when everything seems to be going wrong, when you doubt the whole idea of hiking the PCT, when the rain is flying horizontally into your face and you realise you've run out of stove fuel – these are only ever that, just days. Whenever I was in my sleeping bag after a brutal few miles where I thought the world was against me, I would relax in the knowledge that tomorrow would be kinder. And really, the bad days rarely come; on the whole, a thru-hike is a heart-warming experience that nurtures the soul and makes you feel glad to be alive to experience it.

I woke at 5am to light rain tickling my face and catapulting leaves a few inches skyward. Weak sunlight filtered through the pines and I peered up at dark clouds racing overhead. It was the 1st of September, and my surroundings were looking distinctly autumnal. Foliage was withering and changing colour: even California could be cold. My watch showed nine degrees Celsius, and I shivered, wondering why the temperature had plummeted from the mid-twenties yesterday. Skipping breakfast, I set off quickly to warm up.

I reached Hat Creek where I had been dropped off with Brains and Pockets a few days earlier. I decided against calling the Heitmans again because I knew, especially given the cold weather, that I would struggle to move on if I stopped there. I went into the café and ordered the biggest breakfast they cooked, plus a few extras. I nurtured my miniscule celebrity status as two day-hikers chatted to me outside, eager to hear about my hike, but eventually headed off to make some inroads into one of the hardest sections of the PCT.

Hat Creek Rim is a notoriously hot and dry twenty-six-mile stretch out of Hat Creek, so hot that it's more typical of southern California. The Heitmans maintained a water cache at the start. After a short climb to the top of the rim, I filled up. The clouds had dispersed and the temperature was already rising alarmingly. I had twenty-six miles to the next cache – about eight hours' walking plus breaks – so I filled up my litre bottle and pulled out a two-litre bag, which I normally used to fill up for camp. As I balanced a four-litre plastic jug and poured into the bag, a small jet of water sprang out from the side; it had a hole.

"Shit," I mumbled. I pulled out a clear, waterproof compression sack and emptied the contents back into my pack. Filling the sack up with another two litres, I strapped it securely on and strode off. Three miles further on, stopping again to rest, I saw that the sack had also punctured and had deposited most of the water on the trail behind me. I now had only one litre in my bottle, but rather than return to the cache, I decided to press on: perhaps not the most sensible of decisions, but any thru-hiker will tell you that making miles is far more important than safety.

It was now ludicrously hot, and the rim was starting to earn its reputation. Walking in that temperature I should have been carrying an absolute minimum of two litres, ideally four; I had one. To my left the rim dropped down and away to the flatter lands below. The grass was scorched and blond; a heat haze made the horizon seem like an apparition. Stunted trees appeared ill and withered. I felt as though I was in the African bush.

Three hours and nine miles in, I stopped for lunch. My throat was rough. I coaxed the last few trickles from my water bottle. It was so hot that I started longing for the desert. Popping a couple of boiled sweets into my mouth to elicit some sort of moisture response, I picked up my pack and carried on. I had no choice but to walk the entire rim; there was no water until the next cache, and that was still another seventeen miles away.

I passed through a fence and a reflection caught my eye, to the right. A group of cattle had gathered round a water hole. They dispersed as I approached. The water was black, with the consistency of sludge, and strange green organisms floated on its surface. Flies buzzed round my head. I pulled out my water filter and sat by the edge. It stank, cattle dung littered the area, and one of the cows was eyeing me up suspiciously. I relented, putting my filter away, and walked away. Even at this stage, I was contemplating turning back to the water cache; it was still only ten miles behind me, whereas the

next one was still sixteen miles distant. I had visions of diners in the café the following morning, tutting and shaking their heads as they read the *Hat Creek Herald* running a headline "English hiker found with no water on Creek Rim."

Reginald at Nerve Centre HQ was in a mess. While trying to cope with borderline dehydration, heatstroke and sunburn, he was sending out orders faster than a thru-hiker's mouth in a burger bar. His centre of attention was Nancy, responsible for the main chest organs. Normally faultlessly efficient, she too was overheating.

"I'm running way above normal temperature down here, Reginald. He must know he needs water; I need a good two litres just to maintain stability. Anything above that is a bonus."

"Do what you can," Reginald replied. "I think we're in some sort of dry zone. His field of vision is only showing parched, dusty soil. I don't think any fluids are forthcoming, so you'll just have to shore up the defences and wait."

Five hot hours later, I came across a white sign by the side of the trail:

"Cache down here!"

In the shelter of a few trees was a solitary chair.

"Don't rely on the cache twenty-six miles in," Georgi Heitman had told me a few days earlier. "It is maintained but not often; there's a good chance it could be empty."

About ten large water bottles were tied to a tree (this is often done to prevent the empty bottles blowing away). As I gingerly lifted each one, my hopes fell further and further.

"There's a good chance it could be empty…"

They were all empty. I was still coherent but not in good shape. I had a pounding headache and felt tired and lethargic. My throat was so dry that I couldn't even muster a swallow. Then I noticed a cool box nestled under a bush. I didn't open it but lifted it from one corner; it felt heavy and my hopes rose. I pried open one corner of the lid and peered in. One jug of water sat lonely in the corner, and two Coke cans slid down and rested next to it. The writing on the cans was speckled with thousands of little condensation bubbles. They were still cold! I literally poured one can straight down my throat; the fluid was so frigid it almost hurt. I had never drunk a can of anything that quickly. I drank a further two litres from the water bottle, and left one Coke and two litres of water in case someone was behind me. From there on, the situation, according to my maps, was due to improve anyway.

From the searing heat of the rim, I descended quickly and camped near Lake Britton amid the gentle hum of a nearby waterworks. The scenery in the morning was transformed, and reminded me of home. Lush green grass, lakes idling in hills, familiar trees such as oak and elm, and a heron fishing. A low mist hovered over the water, and it even rained a little.

After some barren weeks, the rain caught me off guard. I felt restricted in my waterproofs, so I removed them and carried on regardless, dodging a few light showers. The undergrowth was damp as I brushed against wet leaves, chilling me even further. I wondered whether Pockets and Brains had overtaken me somewhere, and I started to check footprints, as I was familiar with their tread patterns, but I couldn't see any.

The temperature had dropped, and this combined with the moisture in the air attracted a multitude of gnats. They drove me insane, constantly buzzing round my face and following me in formation for miles. I had long since ditched the mosquito head net because I just couldn't see through it, so I had to resort to waving my trekking pole handle to and fro across my face.

Encountering a hiker going south, I learnt he had seen Brains by himself the previous evening. I was now walking through dense forest and felt constrained, hemmed in. I had mail in Castella, a few miles down the road from Shasta which I figured would make a good place to rest and re-supply; the town had a good reputation with thru-hikers. I reached the road a couple of miles down from Castella and ducked into some woods, squeezing past a gate with a sign saying 'no camping'. I settled down for the night. Writing my journal that evening and tallying up my mileage, I was pleased to see I had knocked off 150 miles in only 5 days – an average of 30 miles per day, including a 33, the most I had done in one day.

I walked up to Castella in the morning. It consisted of a post office and a garage. No Pain was sitting on a bench outside, cramming a breakfast burrito into his mouth. He got up and shook my hand when I arrived. It had been a while since I had seen him, and we chatted for an hour while I too munched some food.

"You won't make it to Canada now, Fozzie," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Really? What makes you say that?"

"You're way too late. The snow will hit Washington and you won't get through."

It was clear from his unfaltering voice that he was certain of his ground and there was not even a whiff of doubt in his mind.

“Are you going to carry on from here?” I asked.

“I will, but I know I won’t make it all the way. I’ll carry on until it gets too cold or wintry and then go home.”

“You’re wrong, No Pain,” I said. “I am late, yes, but I’m not backing off now. I’ve come too far. I will hit snow but I’ve put in too much work just to presume I won’t be successful. Good luck with the rest of your hike.”

I shook his hand again and walked back to the highway. There was a very good chance that No Pain was right, I knew that; but I didn’t want to entertain it. A little into September and I had completed 1,509 miles; there were still 1,131 left to go. Assuming I put in six-day weeks with twenty-five miles each day, I still had seven to eight weeks left. This meant finishing in the beginning of November, a good month over target if I was to beat the weather. I respected No Pain’s opinion; he had been walking this trail and the Appalachian Trail for several years and he knew the seasons. Emphatic as he was, though, when someone tells me I can’t do something, that’s all the incentive I need *to* do it.

When I finally managed to get a signal on my phone, during a fifty-metre stretch on the road out of Castella, I listened to a voicemail from Pockets.

“Mucker, I’m in Shasta, call when you get in.”

I got a quick ride in and we agreed to meet outside the local supermarket. Many shoppers stopped to talk to me as I sat outside; spotting my pack and soiled appearance, they guessed I was on the PCT. They were pleasant enough, but they kept reminding me of the obvious.

“You’re a bit late, aren’t you?” or “Most thru-hikers passed through a few weeks ago.”

With Pockets, whom I now referred to as ‘Rockets’ on account of his walking speed, I went off to find a motel. How had he overtaken me, I wondered? It transpired that he had camped at Ash camp, perhaps a quarter of a mile further on from where I had spent the night in a clearing. I had even walked into Ash camp in the morning to get water from the river, but somehow missed him. Brains was holed up in a motel in Dunsmuir about seven miles away, with the flu or something similar.

Shasta was an excellent little town, with a good selection of re-supply shops and plenty of restaurants. Rockets had found an Italian place already, so we went for lunch. It was all-you-can-eat, unlimited pasta dishes and salad of your choice, so we settled down for a feast. I watched as he picked up the glass jar of grated parmesan. It was full, but he unscrewed the top, proceeded

to pour the entire contents over his dish and then called the waitress over. He showed her that the jar was empty and she duly went off and returned with another. He unscrewed that and finished it off as well. He ended up with not so much pasta with parmesan, but parmesan with pasta.

We left the following day, eager to move on and make inroads into a 5,000-foot, eighteen-mile climb out of the highway near Castella. Halfway up, in the late afternoon, we were both tired, so we camped early and made a fire. Rockets darted around the forest taking photos.

Although we were keen to make up for lost miles in the morning, we had only managed twelve by lunch, so we ate a quick snack and Rockets set a four-miles-per-hour pace through the afternoon.

“I hate puds,” he said.

“What, as in puddings?”

“No, puds. You never heard of a pud before? A pud is a pointless up and down, p, u and d.”

“Oh,” I replied and then thought for a while. “Does that make this bit of trail a paular then?”

“What the hell is a paular?”

“A pointless and useless left and right.”

Once in the groove, we were steaming up the hills, and pulled up at 6pm, having clocked thirty-three miles for the day. The site we chose to camp on was stunning: a small, open plateau offering views for miles until the earth suddenly shot skywards and finished on the summit of Mt Shasta. As the sun set, streaking her white flanks with orange, she rose supreme over all she surveyed.

Four days from Shasta and we had both run out of food. Having purposely only re-supplied with a smaller amount, to keep the weight down, we had agreed to get more supplies at Etna, but had not properly considered the distance. There were two possible locations from which to catch a ride in, and the first one we stumbled to was Carter Meadows summit and Highway 93. We could either try to get a ride or else camp and push out a twenty-one-miler in the morning to a smaller road without any food. It was a no-brainer. We set down our packs and stuck out a thumb.

About three forestry trucks passed within ten minutes and then it all went quiet. An hour passed and we saw no-one. Finally, we heard the groan of an engine approaching from the other side of the pass. Both standing in the middle of the road, we started waving and pretty much forced the car to stop.

The window lowered and an attractive woman stuck her head out. She had a cigarette dangling from her mouth and one foot was contorted into a sort of yoga position on the dashboard.

"You two are going to get run down! You hiking the PCT?"

"Yep," we replied simultaneously. "Any chance of a ride into Etna?"

"No way!" she replied. "I've just come from there, it's twenty miles down the highway, I ain't going all the way back again!"

We hung our arms limply and said we were out of food, hoping it might swing things in our favour.

"Listen," she continued, "I live six miles down in the valley. If you want to come with me, I can feed you and give you somewhere to sleep tonight. There's not many houses where I live, it's in the middle of nowhere, but maybe someone can give you a ride to Etna to re-supply in the morning."

It was a good offer and certainly the best we would hope to get.

Laurissa's place, tucked away from a cluster of other houses, was wonderful. Walking into her garden, you could have been in the middle of the wilderness. She grew many fruits and vegetables and was more or less self-sufficient; she had even stopped off en route to fill up several bottles from a local spring. The house was off grid, generated its own electricity and must have been a beautiful place to live. It looked as if it had been constructed with materials found somewhere in the local vicinity. Different types of wood formed the outside shell, their naturally differing colours enlivening the walls. A hotchpotch of mismatched tiles clung to the roof, and there was a sizeable porch where we could sit outside while a little gentle rain fell.

The interior wrapped us in a warm feeling as soon as we entered. A wood stove provided most of the heat, shelves groaned under books and rugs decorated a wooden floor.

Laurissa disappeared into the garden and returned with home-grown tomatoes, onions and herbs. She boiled some rice, pan-fried some tempeh and mixed it all together in a bowl with a generous dash of olive oil. It was one of the best meals I had eaten on the entire trail, and even Rockets, who wasn't much of a health-food fan, was raving about it for days afterwards.

One of Laurissa's neighbours gave us a ride into Etna in the morning, and we grabbed some breakfast at Bob's Ranch House.

The only motel in Etna was full, so we were forced to get a bus to Yreka, where we stayed for the day. Rockets had been suffering with toothache and it was becoming unbearable. He kept holding his jaw. He phoned around

trying to find a dentist in the area and eventually a family friend pointed him in the direction of Portland, Oregon. I naturally couldn't wait for him, so we parted the following morning and he said he would catch me somehow. After a long series of rides back to the trailhead, I started walking in the hope of putting in a few miles before sunset.

As dusk fell, I tried in vain to find somewhere flat to camp. The trail fell away to my left and rose to my right, where it had been cut into the slope, and eventually I accepted that I wouldn't find anywhere; the contours on my map were only getting worse.

It was a clear night but in the forest my environment was a dark, inky black. There was no wind, not even a breeze. If a mouse scurried home fifty feet from me, I could hear it. Cowboy camping was normal for me now; it put me in touch with the woods, and I looked forward to falling asleep every night waiting for a shooting star or two. Also, I saved a little time by not pitching the tent or taking it down in the morning. After laying out my ground mat, sleeping pad and bag on the trail, I settled down to cook and write my journal.

After a few minutes I heard wood cracking in the trees, maybe a hundred feet away up the hill. Ignoring this as I normally did, I continued writing, but then I heard bushes swishing and springing back to make way for something. Whatever it was, it was big, no mistake. The closer it got, the more I could hear footsteps – or indeed hoofs, maybe even paws. I pleaded with whoever was listening not to make it paws; paw fall would be just awful. The intruder seemed to be making a beeline for me – certainly heading too close for comfort.

"Please let that be a deer," I thought. "Please, don't make it a bear."

Closer and closer it slowly crept. I could almost feel the reverberation as it came closer. I stood up, heart thumping, as I waited for some fearsome beast to emerge on the trail.

However, thankfully adjusting its course, it veered off slightly and thundered down the trail about twenty feet away. I could hear it, but couldn't see a thing. I turned on my head torch. The beam immediately picked out two big, menacing eyes which bored a hole right through me. It was a bear.

# Chapter 13

Into Oregon

*If everyone in the world treated each other as we treat each other on the trail, the world would be a far, far better place.*
**Unknown**

Size, we are told, is not important. This maxim is not applicable to bears. The size of a bear is in fact directly proportional to the fear it strikes into one's heart. It had been weeks since my last bear encounter, and perhaps I had been lulled into a false sense of security.

I didn't know what to do. The mere thought of facing a bear, let alone being in the middle of nowhere with such a creature, was the one situation (along with falling down a crevasse, maybe) that had haunted me in the months before my hike. I must admit that I very nearly decided against going to America because of the possibility of encountering a bear.

I had seen several since my last close call at McIvers Spring some three months earlier. I had become comfortable in their presence, purely because they had all been some distance off or were happily munching away on berries and preoccupied. If they were aware of me, they usually ran off anyway. This one was different; it scared me. Unpredictability and bears are not a good match.

Not wanting to shine my light in its eyes, I kept the beam directed at the shoulders. It was dark and I avoided eye contact. Fear kept me frozen to the spot, unable to act, make a move or process even the simplest of thoughts, though I knew I should do something. I waited for the beast to react, like a cowboy facing his arch-rival across a dusty street, guns at the ready. It was waiting for me, and I was waiting for it. A standoff with a bear; great.

The bear stood still, eyes glinting. I glimpsed my dinner-smeared pot lying a few feet from its nose, and other culinary items dotted the camp. If this bear was on the hunt for food, it must have thought it had lucked upon a supermarket aisle. I half expected it to disappear amongst the trees and emerge with a shopping trolley and grocery list.

It then moved a few feet towards me, slowly, deliberately and confidently; perhaps it was following a new smell. The animal's sheer bulk cleared aside some overhanging branches which had kept it in the shadows, and it emerged

on to the trail as the moon bathed it in a weak, silvery light. I could almost make out the hairs on its back, shimmering as its nose moved up and down, testing for scents.

I started shaking, and then kicked into self-preservation mode. If, I thought, it was moving closer to see if I would react, then it would probably do so again, as I hadn't twitched a muscle.

"Hey, bear! Get outta here! Go! Go on!"

It didn't wince, and merely carried on staring at me. Now I really was in trouble. Bears are supposedly more scared of us than we are of them, but this one was not conforming to the rules.

"Go! Get out! GO!"

Nothing. I was a comedian having delivered my lines and no-one was laughing. I definitely wasn't amused, and was in fact becoming ever more convinced that dinner was on the agenda and I could be the main course.

I wondered if the bear sensed my fear; was I giving off a scent? Perhaps it could see my anxiety, or maybe it was picking up on my unease through its other senses.

So far I was simply behaving as I should have done in this situation, though fear had prevented me from revealing myself a little earlier by making noise. I had, however, stood my ground. When the beast crept a few paces closer, my instinct was to retreat, but I knew that would have been a big mistake. Retreating is a sign of weakness, and all the excuse a bear needs. It's like sizing up to the bloke in a pub when you've just knocked his pint of Guinness over. You don't run – you attempt to resolve the situation rationally and if things turn grim, you stand your ground and square up.

Bears communicate with each other by establishing a pecking order, a hierarchy. They fight only as a last resort, wary of sustaining an injury. The hierarchy is about dominance and submission; territorial disputes are usually solved by the alpha male. If nothing else, I knew that in this encounter, I had to continue to stand my ground. All this guy was looking for was a weakness, a chink in my armour. I was slap bang in the middle of a very serious game of chicken.

"All or nothing," I thought. I raised my arms over my head, puffed out what chest I had, and screamed.

"Hey! Bear! Get the hell out of here! MOVE!"

Still it remained rooted to the spot. Then, slowly, it turned its head to one side, looked down the hill and sniffed the bushes. It took one last look at me,

appeared bored, and sloped slowly off. I felt exhausted, as though I had just run five miles. I looked skyward and thanked whoever had helped me, and lay down. I didn't sleep at all that night; every time a twig snapped, I shot bolt upright like a jack in the box, torch at the ready.

Preparing breakfast in the morning, I had more bad luck – my Steripen had packed up. I had been using it since Mammoth because my second water filter had broken. When it worked it was brilliant, but it was temperamental. The batteries were not standard so I had to carry not only a spare pair but another pair on top of that just in case. A green LED on the side lit when the purifying had worked but there was also a red LED that blinked if there was a problem, which more often than not was nothing to do with the batteries. Every time I used the device, I really dreaded that red light. It was like turning the key in your car's ignition and hoping the spanner symbol doesn't illuminate. To be fair, Steripen had sent me a new unit when the first one failed, but that had also been sent back for repair. I looked in dismay as, sure enough, the red LED started to blink mockingly and furthermore, nothing I tried corrected the issue.

I had only been back on trail for an afternoon and a night and my next re-supply was six days away. A few purification tablets were my sole backup, which would at best see me through a couple of days. I resigned myself to the fact that I had to walk back to the highway, get another ride into Etna, find a motel and locate the nearest decent hiking shop to buy another piece of water treatment equipment. Dejected, I plodded back to the road and stuck my thumb out.

Etna is a beautiful little town with much to recommend, but it lacks a dedicated shop for outdoor enthusiasts. I tried the pharmacy, desperately hoping for some purification tablets, but it was not to be. The owner of the hardware store shrugged his shoulders when I asked him, and said my only option was to reach Yreka again and catch a connecting bus all the way back to Shasta. I started to wander off to the motel but then remembered a cheaper alternative at Alderbrook Manor.

The Manor had converted a large garage to one side for the use of PCT hikers during the season. The owner, Dave, showed me around and made me welcome. I dumped my gear and hurried to the bus stop for the 10.30am ride to Yreka. As the bus trundled into the Walmart car park, I took a gamble by missing the next connecting service, and went into the store. The camping section was limited, but there was a small bottle of iodine tablets. This purple

chemical kills any nasty organisms but I didn't like using it. Iodine has a reputation for being unkind to the body; in fact, some research suggests it should only be used as a backup and never for long periods of time. However, this particular brand came with another small bottle of tablets that neutralised the iodine after it had worked its magic. Besides, I only had six days until my next stop in Ashland. So I bought them and caught the next bus back to Etna. I made a quick phone call to a camping store in Ashland, some miles up the trail, who confirmed they had the filter I was looking for and kindly agreed to put it aside for me. Dave took me the few miles up the hill, and I was back on trail five hours after I had left.

A mental calculation confirmed that I still needed twenty-five-mile days, with one zero a week, to finish the walk by the 31st of October. I remained behind schedule, but if the winter held off a little, it was certainly achievable. Oregon was also approaching, which meant two positives. First, I would finally be out of California. That would be a huge morale boost, and tangible proof of progress. Second, Oregon is known for being a little more hiker-friendly. Elevation loss and gain are less severe than in California and Washington, and generally the terrain is easier. On the negative side, the temperatures were dropping at night, and dusk was now falling not in the evening, but late afternoon. I put my head down, increased my pace a touch and became stricter about leaving camp early, taking fewer and shorter breaks and meeting my target each day. I tried to stick to this plan; it was easy, surely? All I had to do was make sure I walked at least fifteen miles by lunch, and put in a brisk three hours in the afternoon to make up the miles. Anything on top of that would be a bonus.

Journal entry:

The weather is changing. It's getting cold, clouds appear more often and become more threatening each time I look up. Climbing out of my cosy sleeping bag in the morning is now something of a chore. Tentatively I reach out and pull down the zip, groping around for my clothes. I cringe as I slide into cold trousers and a frigid top. I crawl out of my warm little haven, squint into a rising sun and decide whether to fire up the stove or jump-start my body. My brain sputters grains of a battle plan for the day. Come the evenings, I'm stopping a little earlier because of the diminishing sunlight. Fire is the first priority; food and erecting tents take a back seat compared to warming my tired and aching body. A cup of hot chocolate brings a glow to

my face and the pain begins to melt a little. I know that food is close at hand; the portions seem to increase as the temperatures drop. I sit by the orange glow of the fire, and warm my front as my back chills. Twigs cracking and snapping in the forest around me bring thoughts of bears and Sasquatch.

They say the PCT really starts to take its physical toll after the halfway point. They're right. I am tired, the aches take longer to fade and new ones appear. It hurts just a little more each day, and the ibuprofen supply seems to run out a bit earlier each week. However, none of this really matters. The PCT continues to astound, surprise and welcome me. New views greet me each day, different panoramas and vistas bringing a smile to my face. The relentless California stretch that I have been eating away at for the past 138 days is coming to an end. Oregon is in sight, maybe about five days away, and in about three days I will have 1,000 miles left to walk. These things are huge confidence-boosters. My morale needs little lifting, but targets help to keep me focused and positive.

My mileage has gone up from around fifteen per day at the start to around twenty-five now. On a recent stretch I managed to complete 150 miles in five days, and I maxed out at thirty-three in one day. I need to keep moving at that kind of tempo, because a finish in late October means walking nearly twice as far each day as I did during the first half. I continue to walk with Rockets, a fine companion. Brains left us a few days ago but we spoke on the phone recently. We expect to catch him because he had to rest for a couple of days owing to illness. Rockets is the crazy wild card. A veteran of the Appalachian Trail in 2006, he continues to make me smile with his larking around and mischievous antics. A true outdoorsman, he is at one with his surroundings and regales me with his adventures in walking, climbing and mountaineering. He stops often to pull out his Nikon when he sees something worthy of his photographic eye. He is one of perhaps a handful of people that I can see myself walking all the way to the end of the PCT with. A thousand miles is still a long way, but I know it is the start of the home stretch. Mexico, all those weeks behind me, seems an age ago. Time has little meaning out here; I get up when it feels right and stop when I'm tired. One day melts into another, and I don't even know what day it is; but a small part of me knows that I am within striking distance of Canada. Though the elements may grow restless, winter draws its sword and I find myself at the tail end of the pack, I walk with delight in my eyes and success in my heart.

* * *

I wandered off trail into a meadow to locate Buckhorn Spring and fill up with water. A small clear pool tinkled as the spring trickled in, and I scooped up a litre, added an iodine tablet and sat down to wait for it to take effect. Despite being at 6,500 feet, it still felt like the middle of summer. A heat haze shimmered in the valley below, insects hovered and butterflies floated past. Cicada hummed a gentle, reassuring melody, the meadow grass waved as a breeze wandered through and flowers splashed colour everywhere. Long grass tickled my bare skin as I sat there.

Downing the first litre in one go, I filled up again and dropped in another tablet so that I was set for another couple of hours.

I checked the PCT atlas to ascertain my route and general plan for the day. I had twenty miles to go to Seiad Valley, descending 5,000 feet in the process. I planned to ingest some fat at the famous café there. The elevation graph included a 4,500-foot climb, which normally wouldn't be a problem for me, but it stretched out over only eight miles. That would make for a steep and tiring end to the day.

I met Colin, a SoBo, on the downhill into Seiad. He agreed that I should be able to crack out some good mileage in Oregon. He also confirmed that the climb out of Seiad up to the summit at Devils Peak was long and steep. I was glad I was going down and he was going up but that situation would soon be reversed.

I reached Highway 96 and made quick work of the couple of miles to the café, store and small post office. Seiad Valley Café is renowned among hikers for its pancake challenge: eat five inch-thick, 500-gram, dinner-plate-sized pancakes in less than two hours. A complimentary drizzle of syrup and trickle of butter finish off the dish. This innocuous-sounding test has laid out most of those who have taken it. In fact, only a handful have succeeded since its inception. The only reward for success is that the food is free.

This was, however, the last thing on my mind. Not being too fond of American pancakes, and with the climb out of the valley on my mind, I settled for delicious bacon and eggs as I chatted to a couple of locals.

"You're late," said Brian, a local decorator having lunch. "Most hikers have come through by now."

I didn't need reminding again.

"There's a hiker holed up in the campground next door, by the way. He

had Giardia but has more or less recovered. I think his name is Cash."

I had bumped into Cash a couple of times and wasn't too fond of him; there was just something I couldn't put my finger on. I didn't want to see him again, so cautiously peered out of the window to see if he was loitering. The coast appeared clear so I grabbed my pack and walked out.

"Fozzie!"

"Shit!" I thought. "He's seen me."

Cash came over, looking very much the worse for wear.

"Are you with anyone?" he asked.

"On my own, trying to make tracks and still aiming to finish," I replied.

"Wait for me? I'm just getting over Giardia but think I'm OK to walk, so let me pack up camp, get something to eat and I'll come with you."

I made some excuses and said I couldn't wait. It may have been harsh to leave an ill hiker, but something about Cash didn't ring true to me. He went back to the campsite and said he'd catch me up.

Another SoBo called Two Dog stopped me, and told me whom she'd met. To my surprise, she had bumped into Rockets two days earlier.

"What the hell?" I thought. "Where does that guy get his energy from? I leave him in Yreka to sort his tooth out and now, somehow, he's passed me?"

I called his mobile.

"How the hell did you get ahead of me, Rockets?"

He laughed.

"I don't know, mucker," he replied. "I got the tooth sorted and didn't have to go to Portland, so put my head down and ground out some miles. I walked late a couple of evenings, so guess I must have passed you while you were sleeping."

He was with Brains in Ashland and said he would wait for me there although Brains was moving on.

I walked along the road for a mile and then turned right back into the forest to take on the Devils Peak climb. It was hot and humid. The hill was steeper than I would have liked, but it maintained a steady gradient, so at least I knew what to expect and could adjust my pace accordingly. Stopping only briefly at Lookout Spring, I gritted my teeth and let fly, reaching the top in one go. As I eased on to flatter terrain, my legs gently relaxed after their efforts. I battled on, trying to put some distance between Cash and me.

"Everyone I meet is walking south," I thought, as I glimpsed another hiker descending towards me. As he came into view, I realised I had met him

before.

"Patch!" I exclaimed. "I haven't seen you since Wrightwood!"

I had camped in the back yard of a trail angel's house with Patch some three and a half months earlier. He was having a bad time there; on the approach to town, he had left his pack by trailside and taken a side route to fill up with water at a spring, and on his return found that someone had stolen his pack. Apparently this had happened to several hikers; the rumour was that someone was lying in wait at the trail junction. The culprit presumably knew that the route to the spring was downhill and a fair distance and that most hikers slipped off their packs so as not to be burdened on the climb back up.

This was a major blow. The cost of equipment for a thru-hike can run from £700 to £1,300 and over. My main essentials – namely pack, camping mat, sleeping bag and tent – totalled around £800 on their own. If you are on a tight budget, having your gear stolen can end your hike.

I'd watched Patch at his computer ordering replacements for all his gear, and then play the waiting game with the postman, but he managed it.

He'd skipped up to Canada from the Heitmans' and was now walking back, on course to complete the PCT in two more weeks. Somehow, he had managed to walk 800 miles more than I had in the same amount of time. I feared it was more my slow pace that was to blame.

"In anticipation of becoming a thru-hiker," I offered, "let me be the first to congratulate you," and I shook his hand.

"Go, Fozzie!" he shouted after me as we went separate ways. "You can do it!"

Fuelled by good progress since Etna, I rose early. I downed a litre of water, threw my only remaining snack, a handful of parmesan shavings, into my mouth and sped off.

Perhaps two hours into my fifteen-mile morning shift, I approached a couple of signs nailed to a pine tree. I assumed it was a 'distance to Canada' reminder, so I took no notice. I dropped my pack and rested for a few minutes. Curiosity got the better of me, though, as I got up, and a broad smile rippled across my chops as I checked the sign:

'Welcome to Oregon
'Interstate 5 – 28
'Hyatt Lake – 51
'Washington Border – 498

‘Canadian Border – 962’

I felt a fire in my belly, a mixture of achievement, pride and determination. At last I was out of California and into Oregon! It was well under 1,000 miles now until the finish, and I could in theory get through this next state in a month. Finally, after four and a half months, I felt as though I was on the home stretch.

“YES!” I screamed, as I literally ran off. “Get in there!”

I spent the next hour kicking pine cones into the back of an imaginary goal past an imaginary, helpless German goalkeeper in an imaginary World Cup final.

I walked well into the night, and took a short rest before vowing to walk a few more miles. The lights of Ashland twinkled below me a few miles away and a full moon cast a soft, silvery light. I called Rockets and said I would get to him by lunch the following day.

Searching for a good place to camp for the night, I came across a four-way intersection on the trail. A sign pointed to my right:

‘Grouse Gap Shelter – 0.25 miles’

Shelters on the PCT are few and far between. The Appalachian Trail, by contrast, is strewn with three-sided buildings where hikers spend the night in the dry; a hiker will pass one or more each day. I turned right, anticipating the simple prospect of a picnic table where I could eat and chill.

I reached my goal at 10pm after a long day. Lights from a couple of recreational vehicles penetrated the darkness and Steve, who ran the shelter, came out to meet me as he saw my head torch scanning the area.

“You walking the PCT?” he enquired.

“Yes I am, glad to come across the shelter.”

“You’re a bit late, aren’t you? Sure you’ll make it?”

This was becoming somewhat regular, but I didn’t mind. The look of surprise on most people’s faces was all that I needed to prove them wrong. I settled down, cooked the last remaining meal in my food bag and tallied up the mileage. I arrived at the figure of 38.6. I was happy, but also chastised myself for not keeping tabs on my progress and pushing on for another 30 minutes to achieve my first 40-miler. To my delight, I also discovered I had walked 95.4 miles in three days, an average of 31.8 miles per day. Finally, the need to crush some miles was starting to sink in.

I woke early, sat up and peered through the slit in my sleeping bag. The sun was just under the horizon of a distant hill but casting enough light to see by. A low mist had settled on the field by the shelter and seemed in no hurry to disperse. I was just about to light my stove when Steve appeared smiling and handed me a coffee. We sat and took in the calm environment for a few minutes and he left, bidding me good luck.

I set off, eager to get to the highway ten miles away. There was also the prospect of breakfast at Callahan's Restaurant and maybe a ride to Ashland. I startled a huge bear in the forest, and watched in awe as it thundered off up the hill like a runaway goods train. Passing under Interstate 5, I entered the restaurant. Callahan's is also a hotel with a great reputation among hikers; it's a little upmarket for the likes of us, but we are made to feel more than welcome there.

Callahan's burnt down in September 2006, but the owners Donna and Ron Bergquist bounced back, re-opening bigger and better in August 2008. In order to keep attracting business from PCT hikers, they have kept their mid-week prices flexible. The place also now has showers and laundry, and allows camping on the back lawn, as well as offering one of the best breakfasts I had eaten.

I felt slightly self-conscious, but the receptionist didn't bat an eyelid. I explained I was heading to Ashland and so, despite my appearance, didn't need a wash or laundry. She led me into the dining room, introduced me to my waitress and wished me well on my hike. An immaculate waitress called Angela floated over, poured freshly squeezed orange juice, asked me how I liked my coffee and gently placed a menu in my hands.

"You're running a little late for a thru-hike, aren't you?" she asked, looking me directly in the eye and smiling so sweetly that I considered proposing to her there and then.

"Not enough decent breakfasts," I replied, feeling a little bashful.

Making quick work of the meal, I got a ride into Ashland from a member of staff named James. I knocked on the door of room five at the Ashland Motel, and Courtney answered.

"What are you doing?" I smiled as she hugged me.

"Came up to see Pockets and chill out for a couple of days."

"Mucker!" came a voice from inside the bedroom, as Rockets strode out and gave me another hug.

"You seen anyone in town?" I asked.

“Nope, we’re the last of the pack, I think. Brains left a couple of days ago with Lone Ginger. You?”

“Saw Patch south-bound and due to finish soon, someone called Two Dog, who said she had bumped into you, and also Cash.”

His face dropped.

“Cash is here?”

“Well, I don’t think he’s in Ashland,” I continued. “I left him at Seiad and I’ve put in some good miles since then but he’s probably not far behind.”

Rockets was not too fond of Cash, since they had nearly come to blows in Mammoth. Apparently Cash was slightly the worse for wear after a few drinks, and tried to pick a fight and grab Rockets’s camera. Rockets, a former nightclub bouncer, said that Cash had backed down with a little gentle persuasion.

We were all in good spirits. I was still on a high from my mileage, Courtney was just happy to be with Rockets and he was full of his usual energy. We went down to the post office to pick up mail and as we parked Cash strolled over, surprising me at how he had caught up so quickly.

When he asked us if we had found somewhere to stay, we confirmed we had but there was no space. We drove him to the hostel, also full, and eventually two miles out of town to a motel where he found a spare bed.

We spent two days in Ashland. As usual, I tried but failed to get everything done in a day. I had to update my blog, answer emails, download photos, re-supply, clean myself up, do laundry and eat a lot of food. It rained on and off, and was getting colder. I had a raging hunger, for which the café next door was a godsend come breakfast. I worked my way through a pile of hash browns, eggs, bacon, toast and sausage every morning. I drifted around in a caffeine-induced high after discovering an abundance of good coffee houses, and finished off pizzas so big that I normally would have surrendered after three slices.

The camping shop had indeed put a Katadyn Hiker filter to one side. I hoped that this, my fourth water treatment device of the trip, would see me through to Canada. My waterproof pack liner had also reached the end of its life, so I replaced it. All my other gear was faring well, although I was resigned to the fact that I might need a new tent soon. What with the impending wetter weather and possibly snow, I knew I’d need the Gore-Tex lined boots that Inov-8 had sponsored me with. I called Aunty Jillian and she arranged to post them up trail.

Rockets and I zoomed off in the late morning, constantly aware now that the weather could close in. Winter was almost upon us and snow was all but inevitable. Hikers up the trail had said that Washington hadn't had snow, but was wet. The forecast bad winter was, so far at least, late.

We stopped briefly so that Rockets could take photos. Before long we spotted a hiker snoozing by the side of the trail, his gear drying out on branches. It was Cash.

"Hey guys! Wassup?"

We stopped briefly to exchange pleasantries but carried on as soon as we could. Cash appeared in no hurry. As we looked back, we expected to see him packing up and coming after us, but he just lay down and went back to sleep. However, two hours later when we had stopped for lunch, he rounded the corner and sat with us, opening his food bag. He shared some of his food, which I thought was a nice gesture, and I started to think that maybe he wasn't so bad after all. Rockets raised his eyebrows at me, suggesting that he thought the same.

Cash appeared to be taking the trail lightly, and again stayed behind when we strode off. Reaching Hyatt Lake road, we spotted Keene Creek reservoir down the hill and camped on the bank so as to have access to a supply of water. It was a still evening; I watched the sun slide down behind a hill and the moon rise, reflecting in the Keene's waters. Car headlights flashed on a nearby road as the driver negotiated the hairpin turns.

I sloped off a few feet just before hiker midnight for a pee. There's something immensely satisfying about peeing outdoors. Sprinkling in a toilet doesn't come close. I often pondered this as I stood, legs astride, in the woods. I think it stems back to our caveman days, when it was the norm. It's territorial too, I think; the marking of one's patch of land. Dogs and cats still do it, as do wild animals. I'm sure that before humans lost their evolved, heightened sense of smell, they knew when they were encroaching on someone else's area. Even in motels, I still had the urge to go outside to pee. At home, I nearly always go in the garden. I feel the need to mark my dominion, and will tinkle in various spots to spread the scent around. It's an enlightening experience to relieve yourself outside; try it, you'll be pleasantly surprised.

We woke to damp gear and ice crusting the outside of the tents. It had rained again during the night, and we knew it wouldn't be long before plunging temperatures turned rain to snow. Clouds streamed overhead and

didn’t disperse all day. We discussed tactics. Rockets had a friend in a town called Corvallis, accessible by a road about eighty-five miles up trail. We debated getting a ride from there, re-supplying and then finding transport to Cascade Locks and the Bridge of the Gods.

This impressively engineered bridge spans the Columbia River and separates Oregon from Washington. Our plan was to skip up to the border before the snow hit, knock off Washington, get transport back to the bridge and then south-bound to Oregon, where we had left the trail. It made a lot of sense; we were keenly aware of the game of dice we were playing.

Oregon was living up to its reputation. Instead of a rollercoaster of hills, now the altitude graph had settled into a kinder, flatter line. We did twenty-seven miles the next day, nearing Brown Mountain shelter, most likely nearby water and a useful stock of firewood. Taking the 0.1-mile side track to the shelter, we were lucky on both counts. A hand pump provided access to clean well water and inside the hut we found not only wood but also a huge, cast-iron stove in the middle of the single room. By the time we had fired it up, it was so hot that we were walking around in shirts and shorts. We cooked on the stove and settled down to read and write journals. Just as I was just dozing off around 11pm, I heard, “Hey, Fozzie.”

I turned over to see Rockets with his nose pressed to the window, looking outside.

“Hmm. Wassup?”

“I think there’s someone coming.”

# Chapter 14

Jekyll and Hyde

*The long trail can change us if we listen and let it. The longer we are on the journey, the deeper the truth penetrates and the deceptions of modern life vanish away.*
**Ned Tibbits** (Director of Mountain Education, a free service to educate hikers on winter skills)

Rockets peered out of the window and spotted a head torch bouncing along towards us.

"I think it may be Cash."

Sure enough, Cash poked his head through the door. I sat upright and acknowledged him as he walked in.

"Sorry, mate," I said, "our stuff is everywhere, we weren't expecting anyone. Hang on and I'll make some space for you."

"No, it's fine," he replied. "I can sleep on the trail."

Before I could answer, he left and I watched through the window as he sat at the table outside and started to read. Thirty minutes later he stormed back in, a changed man.

"This is disgusting!" he screamed.

Surprised at such an outburst, I looked at Rockets, who raised his eyebrows in amazement.

"Your stuff is everywhere, there's no room! What's this trash doing on the floor?"

"It's our trash, which we'll take with us in the morning, Cash," Rockets said. "We can make room for you. We weren't expecting anyone, which is why our stuff is spread out. We *can* make room for you. Where do you want to sleep?"

"This is fucking disgusting!" he screamed. To say Cash was angry was a huge understatement. Rockets sensed something amiss, as did I, as Cash carried on with his Jekyll and Hyde tirade.

"What is this?!" he cried, and began to throw our gear about. He approached Rockets, who was zipped up in his sleeping bag, and shouted at him. Rockets glanced at me and narrowed his eyes. It was a warning that the situation could turn dangerous, a fact I was already very well aware of. He

gently unzipped his bag as Cash threw a torrent of abuse at both of us and encroached threateningly on Rockets's space.

"Cash! We can make room for you!"

"You're both scum! Look at this shit!"

I broke in. "Cash, you're being a prick. Shut the fuck up and piss off."

"Fuck you!"

Then he started with our gear again. I began to get out of my bag. Rockets stood up and confronted him. Holding his ground, he pleaded with Cash to calm down, but also told him in no uncertain terms to stop or else get thrown out. Cash motioned to throw another piece of equipment, but Rockets stepped in, and held him with a firm gaze.

"Cash, I'm going to say this once. Leave our stuff alone, get the fuck out of here or I'll throw you out."

Cash paused, glared at me and then at Rockets. The atmosphere was tense. Rockets was standing tall and ready for anything, his body rigid and primed. I got up and stood staring at Cash. His fists were clenched, his stance suggesting violence. In the momentary ensuing pause, I was convinced all hell was about to be unleashed, but then he appeared to relax and retreated a few steps. Picking up his bag, he thundered off into the night.

"What the hell was all that about?" I exclaimed.

"I don't know," Rockets replied, "but I never want to see that guy again."

We slept fitfully, half expecting Cash to storm back in. Although he didn't, we knew that at some point we would bump into him again. Sure enough, a couple of hours into the following day, Cash's familiar frame appeared ahead of us, seated by the side of the trail.

"What you wanna do?" I asked Rockets.

"I don't know about you, mate, but I don't even want to look at him."

I made eye contact a good ten seconds before we passed Cash and locked his gaze. He showed no remorse, didn't move and said nothing. We left him and sped up to put some distance between us.

"I got a message from him," Rockets said, checking his phone as we were finishing lunch. "He's apologised and said he was out of order."

"It's a nice gesture but it doesn't excuse his behaviour," I said.

Rockets nodded.

"Too little, too late. Good of him to apologise but I still never want to see him again."

Just then my mobile beeped with the same message.

We hurried up, agreeing that mileage was the priority, and also with any luck we'd leave Cash behind. For once I was ahead, and had stopped near a spring, which was reduced to a small trickle. Rockets arrived a few minutes later, sweat staining both his top and the trail behind him.

"Where's water?" he asked.

"Down that trail," I replied, motioning for him. "Ignore the first creek bed, it's empty. There's another one a few yards further that's just about running."

Rockets sweated more than a Taliban member trying to get through customs at Heathrow with a fake passport and an AK47. He literally dripped his way along. We discussed our intake when he returned. I drank about two to three litres a day, more or less regardless of the temperature, while he apparently knocked back between six and seven litres. We timed our rest breaks around creeks or springs that we located on our maps, so when I got there first he would stroll in and the first words out of his mouth would be, "Where's water?"

The Oregon trails were indeed kinder and we found ourselves finishing our daily twenty-five-mile target earlier than previously. The trail itself, dark, sandy soil with a smattering of pine cones, felt softer and cushioned each strike of our feet on the ground. The temperature was warm during the day but chilled rapidly in the evening, and mist often wafted around us.

We reached Highway 62 and got a ride with John, who was heading for Mazama village. This small cluster of buildings included a store, restaurant and post office. As we pulled up, I noticed a familiar figure leaning against a wall.

"Cash is here," I said, pointing towards the restaurant.

"Great."

I walked over and completely ignored Cash but as I looked back, I saw Rockets talking to him.

"I'm sorry, Pockets," Cash began.

"We appreciate you sending the messages apologising," Rockets said, "but what you did was completely out of order. You don't go crazy at people in the middle of nowhere. You threatened both of us."

"Where's Fozzie gone?"

"He's inside, and he doesn't want to speak to you. In fact, he never wants to see you again and neither do I. Good luck with your hike, Cash."

After downing a few hot dogs, John asked if we could use a lift somewhere. We checked the map and realised we were right on top of Crater

Lake. One of the finest sights on the PCT, the lake was formed around 7,700 years ago when Mount Mazama collapsed and formed the caldera now filled with water. At 1,943 feet deep, it is the deepest lake in the United States and the seventh deepest in the world.

"Why don't we try to get a ride to Corvallis from here?" I asked Rockets. "Imagine walking back and finishing at Crater Lake: it would make one hell of a finale."

He agreed and we jumped in the car with John, who took us all the way to Benton. Dancing on the slip road to the highway to attract attention, we were quickly picked up again and dropped off at Grants Pass. It was now dark, so we looked for somewhere to sleep in town and passed the Greyhound station. A bus to Corvallis was scheduled to leave at 3am. After grabbing a bite to eat, we slept round the back of a factory – or tried to. Rockets didn't sleep well.

"Your feet smell like a dead rat in a rotting, musky basement," he said.

"Thanks," I replied, laughing.

"And what is it with your Neoair?" (A Neoair is an inflatable sleeping mattress which has a habit of squeaking when the user shifts position.)

"What do you mean?"

"It's noisy! Every night you sound like you're wrestling a dolphin."

"Have you not met my mate Flipper yet?"

We arrived in Corvallis early morning and found Rockets's mate Brett in his kitchen.

"Guys, if you're hungry, we can go down the local café and maybe you can try the Beaver Buster!"

Tommy's 4th Street Bar & Grill was responsible for the Beaver Buster. It's a breakfast named after the local American Football team, the Beavers, and to call it monumental is something of an understatement. When I first read the menu, I decided that just good old eggs, hash browns and bacon would do; but Rockets, who can put away abnormally large amounts of food, was tempted by the challenge.

Said challenge was to eat the calorie-loaded mound of gluten and cholesterol in under an hour. The diner must sit alone – I believe this rule stems from an incident when someone discreetly passed some of the food to a friend on the same table – and a timer is placed near the diner. You can only start when the waitress gives the nod, and the reward for success is a free meal. Otherwise, it's a $24 bill. In the four years since Tommy's had offered

the challenge, only four people had succeeded.

Rockets looked at the menu, then at Brett, checked the menu again, looked at me and scratched his chin.

“I’ll give it a go, me old mucker!”

A waitress appeared fifteen minutes later, struggling to keep hold of a plate groaning with an obscene amount of food. She placed it carefully in front of Rockets, who had sat at an empty table. He raised his eyebrows slightly, picked up his cutlery, looked at me, then at Brett and finally at the waitress.

“Good luck, go!” she said, starting the timer.

We had discussed tactics. I advised making the most of the seven-minute rule – that it takes seven minutes for the brain to register that the stomach is full. Therefore, Rockets needed to put away as much food as possible before his brain had a chance to react. I also told him to eat the wheat products such as bread and pancakes first, because these are the most filling; the sooner he got those out of the way, the easier it would be to finish the rest of the plate.

This, I thought, was all good advice. The problem was the actual contents of the plate. When I first laid eyes on it, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Two six-egg omelettes (that’s an astonishing *twelve eggs)*, a mound of hash browns, piles of home fries (sautéed potatoes), five pancakes, two biscuits (in America a biscuit is similar to a savoury scone in England), strips of bacon, sausages, ham, gravy, and eight pieces of toast!

As Brett and I tucked in to our modest servings, Rockets dived in, piling in the food as fast as he could. However, a mere ten minutes in, he puffed out his cheeks and raised his eyebrows. The poor chap had barely made it through half the plate before giving up and holding his stomach, groaning. Brad and I just sniggered.

We stayed in Corvallis for two days and then caught the Greyhound to Cascade Locks. Arriving late, we found a cheap motel. We were both eager to get back on the trail and tackle Washington.

We bumped into Uncle Gary the following morning. I hadn’t seen him since Independence, where he was hiking with the two Brits, Nick and Chris. I was keen to hear where my fellow countrymen were. He thought they were about seventy miles up the way. They had gone to England for a wedding and returned to finish off the trail.

We set off late but walked until Panther Creek, still only managing nine miles. Gary told us in the morning that Flannel, Walker Texas Ranger, Crow

and Dundee were close behind. It was Rockets's birthday, so we got a swift ride back to town, secured some beer and snacks and sat by the creek, slowly getting drunk. Sure enough, at midday the others rolled in. They were surprised to see us, as they had heard through the hiker grapevine how far behind we were. We explained we had skipped up to Cascade Locks and were planning to finish Washington and return to complete the section we had missed. We set off, and I felt good being among familiar faces.

Uncle Gary was from Petaluma, California and was studying outdoor education. He sported an impressive beard and mound of hair and, despite the sunshine over the previous few months, he had somehow managed to stay as white as a sheet. We all walked together for most of the day, until Rockets, Uncle Gary and I descended a series of switchbacks to camp by a creek.

Journal entry:

The bears know when it's time. So do the mountain lions, the squirrels and the snakes. They sense when the snows are coming and they prepare for the winter. I can see the obvious signs, like the leaves painted in reds, oranges and yellows. When the wind catches the trees, we walk through thousands of leaves cascading down, floating from side to side like a mother cradling her baby. The mornings are colder and frost clings to our tents. We watch a cloud of warm mist rise as we exhale. Gaggles of geese fly overhead calling out, perhaps warning us of what to expect.

The vibe of autumn approaching is hard to explain. It's more than merely visual signals, as mesmerising as they are. This is my favourite time of year: the temperature is perfect for hiking, the sunsets are magical and sitting in camp with a blazing fire is comforting. Something in my body makes me aware that summer has ended. It's more than the smell of musty leaves; it goes deeper than the mist banks swirling around me with beams of sunlight slicing through.

Rockets and I have been joined by Uncle Gary. At twenty-six years old, he is an interesting guy to walk with. A powerful hiker with thighs like tree trunks, he walks a good-but-not-quick pace, and reels off a series of jokes. Many times he stops to study fungi poking through the soil and we feast on the forest's bountiful supply. His knowledge in this area is impressive, and adds to my modest memory bank of information regarding edible shrooms. Our food stocks are well supplemented by the likes of cauliflower fungus, boletes, chanterelles and white matsutake. Throw in some leftover bacon,

fresh garlic and possibly some ‘past-its-best parsley’, and the finest restaurants would be hard pressed to come up with anything this tasty.

Washington State is providing great walking. We meander between pine trees towering above us so high that we strain to see the tops. The trail is dampened with occasional rain, which cushions our steps and puts a stop to the clouds of dust we normally kick up. Occasionally we glimpse valleys below us. Lakes peek through gaps, and peaks such as Mt Adams and Mt Hood tower imposingly above us, capped with fresh snow. Tough going after our brief Oregon entrée, Washington has the dips and crests we had become used to in California. Climbs of 3,000 feet or more, and four-hour ascents, make our thighs and calves scream.

* * *

Progress was good but I was concerned about Rockets; he wasn’t behaving in his normal, mischievous manner. I’d noticed this over the course of a week and had broached the subject of whether anything was wrong a couple of times. He was more despondent and said he was tired of walking, was unhappy with his photos and had no motivation. He seemed too blasé about taking zeros, and the threat of possible snowfall didn’t bother him. It was a strange departure from the carefree, positive and crazy friend I had come to know, and it was threatening to demotivate me, too. I never needed an excuse to take a zero, and I enjoyed a more sedate pace than some, covering fewer miles than I should. I was, however, painfully aware of the changing season, and, unlike my mate, was desperate to get moving.

I rose early with Uncle Gary and we tried to rouse Rockets. He grunted and said he’d catch us up.

Reaching a dirt track, we decided to clean up and re-supply in the small village at Trout Lake. We tried for thirty minutes to get a ride, but no-one passed so we started walking the thirteen miles. After two hours, a ranger truck came by, and I saw Rockets sitting in the back, grinning and waving. The ranger pulled over and took us into the village.

Rockets admitted he hadn’t risen until 2pm. He complained that he felt constantly tired. That night he threw up on several occasions. He was getting worse and was again unable to get up in the morning. I told him he should see a doctor but he shrugged it off and said it would pass.

Walker, Flannel, Crow and Dundee showed up, re-supplied and left. They were late like me, but I could see in their eyes their determination to finish.

They kept their rest breaks as short as possible, and I was envious of that attitude – I was still struggling to get out of Trout Lake. The usual diversions of the café and hot food had made me stay too long.

It was a constant battle to get moving, and difficult to find motivation, especially when surrounded by town comforts. It was cold and wet in the woods; though I could stay warm when moving, stopping for camp meant fighting the cold. I also felt a sense of duty towards Rockets – you don't abandon your hiking partner unless by agreement or illness. He was clearly ill, and I felt obliged to be there for him. He stayed in bed for most of the day.

Uncle Gary had found some matsutake fungi in the woods. He was confident that's what they were; he'd picked them before. They can be elusive, but in the woods around Trout Lake we spotted them a few times. We discussed lunching on this expensive treat. I went into the Trout Lake Store Grocery where we had rented the room above and asked Greg, the owner, if he had a frying pan we could borrow.

His ears pricked up when I told him what we were cooking.

"Really?" he said. "I haven't had matsutake for a while. How many you got?"

"Enough to let you have some, if you'd like. I'd trade for some bacon and garlic."

"I like!" His eyes lit up. I soon found out how highly prized our fungi were when he also threw in some chanterelles and a slab of steak each.

We fired up Uncle Gary's stove, let it heat up nice and hot, dropped in some butter and watched it become a layer of liquid fat, coating the bottom of the pan. We carefully added the steak with a little seasoning, seared it for a couple of minutes each side and then took it out to rest. We had trimmed and prepared the fungi, and they hissed as they hit the hot butter. Then, in went the bacon, and we cooked both to a golden brown, finally throwing in some chopped garlic. The resulting dish was one of the best I had eaten on the entire trip. Dundee appeared.

"What are you cooking? It smells amazing!" she exclaimed.

We let her try it. Her face contorted into ecstasy as she looked gratefully skyward and made approving noises. Even Mike and Murray, the two local cats, came over to see what was going on.

Uncle Gary left in the morning and I was keen to move on as well. Rockets was still unwell, and seemed grumpy; he was annoyed at a couple of things I had done, and he moved out of the room because I apparently made

too much noise in the morning. He had always let stuff like that slide before; when you hike with someone day in and day out, you let the little things go because it's just not worth the tension. If you don't get along with another thru-hiker, then you don't walk together. I didn't blame Rockets – I knew it wasn't him, it was his illness. I asked if he wanted me to do anything for him, and he said no.

"I have to hit the trail, Rockets, I have to finish. I can help you out but you have to make a decision: stay and find out what's wrong with you, or come with me."

"Go, Fozzie, I'll catch you up."

Greg dropped me back on the trail. It was cold, a low mist lingered and moisture dripped all around me. I looked at the track and watched water trickling around tree roots, trying to find the path of least resistance. It worked its way into creeks and streams, which in turn fed the rivers, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Water never took a zero, didn't fall ill and never quit until the goal was reached. It's funny, the comparison we make between nature and walking, I thought, as I skipped along the trail trying to keep my feet dry.

I camped in a small clearing circled by trees, which made me feel like the centre of focus in a large arena. The melancholy mist had lowered and thickened, and my head torch struggled to make an impression against a random mix of eddies, fluctuations and billions of water droplets twinkling at me. Somehow I managed to start a fire in the dampness, to warm up and dry out my shoes. The glow from the fire arched out as far as it could before being forced back by the mist. An orange dome formed around the flames, gently tickling the trees around me and illuminating the patterns on the bark. Beyond that, the light was engulfed by the forest void. It felt oppressive, as though several giant hands were smothering me.

The murkiness had subsided a little in the morning, just clearing the treetops. Sunlight occasionally lit solitary trees around me like a spotlight in a crowd of people. Silence was broken by the occasional creak and groan from the forest, and huckleberry bushes hemmed me in on a trail so worn that it was more of a shallow trench. Barely a thing stirred or made a sound all day. My only company as I walked was the gentle crunch of my boots on crispy, volcanic soil.

At 8pm, before the ascent to Goat Rocks Wilderness, I stopped for the day. It was late, and from the map I saw that the contour lines were about to

have a party. I was approaching a climb and a knife-edge ridge walk. There was no way I was going to attempt that in the dark, especially with ominous clouds rolling in. I tucked my tent into a tiny gap at the forest's edge for some extra protection, lit a fire and cooked over the flames. A log offered a seat and, as I sat, I reached out to the fire for warmth. A faint light from the moon bounced around the camp, but not enough to see by, so I switched on my head torch and supped hot chocolate.

The beam began to pick out something falling, reflecting thousands of tiny particles winking at me. I assumed it was light rain, but then noticed that the particles were floating rather than falling. It was the first snowfall, and though only a light dusting, I knew then that the Washington winter was beginning. It threw me into a few seconds of mild panic, which subsided but left a deep feeling of fear and failure in the pit of my stomach. All those zeros, all those days I could have walked a few more miles. Why didn't I get up a little earlier or walk a little further? Now, all my mistakes had snowballed, as it were, into one. My PCT hike was in very real danger of faltering on the home stretch. I had 336 miles left in Washington, and then I had to travel back down to Cascade Locks and south-bound the section I had missed to Crater Lake, a further distance of 322 miles. This 658-mile effort would equate to about 26 days of walking, or a month, to be safe. I was looking at completion around the second week of November, a good two months over schedule.

The mornings and nights were cold, the days chilly. I woke again to ice on the tent and on the trail. My boots crunched on the frozen dirt as they broke through the crust into small puddles. Icicles protruded horizontally from bushes where the wind had forced them sideways. I drank from my water bottle, and a mix of water and slush slid down my throat.

Entering the Goat Rocks Wilderness area, I climbed for what seemed an eternity towards the ridge at 7,150 feet. I crested the ridge and was dumbstruck as I was confronted with the best view in the world. The trail followed the ridge as it descended and I walked carefully as my boots tried to gain purchase on shiny, slick, icy rock as smooth as glass. I was in the middle of a gigantic arena; the ridge fell away to green lowlands and then rose again, dipping and diving all around me as it disappeared to infinity. White peaks merged into grey rock and plummeted into valleys, where the silver ribbons of a river wove their way along the bottom. Mt Rainier stood majestically, like a king perched on his throne, as low cloud whipped past and occasionally

obscured my own personal panorama.

I negotiated the rollercoaster like a feather caught in the breeze, straining up hills and relaxing a little on the downs. Early afternoon I spilled out on to Highway 12 and turned left towards White Pass, where a small store stood by the side of the road. Walker Texas Ranger, Crow, Dundee, Flannel and Uncle Gary sat outside opening mail boxes and cramming new supplies into their packs. I grabbed a quick coffee, and the assistant told me that my mail had not arrived but had probably ended up in Packwood, a small town nineteen miles down in the valley. I wished the others luck and caught a quick ride into town. The Packwood Inn had a reasonable room for me, and the owner, a creepy and untrustworthy-looking guy, took my laundry away. I reached the post office just before it closed, and picked up a package from Dicentra. I had sent her a copy of my last book in exchange for a food box. I opened it eagerly, and smiled as I found several dehydrated meals from her own recipes, proper coffee, almond and peanut butter sachets and a host of other goodies. My other packages contained a new tent, my winter sleeping bag, down jacket, warmer socks and a neck buff. My mood brightened at the thought of being a little warmer and better fed over the coming days. I sent my tent back to HQ in San Jose, and my summer bag to Western Mountaineering.

The soles of my feet were in bad shape. Although blisters were a thing of the distant past, I had painful and tender areas of red skin. I had no idea what caused them, but they had slowed my progress over recent days and I pondered resting for a day more. I secured some comfort food from the store, along with Epsom salts. I sat with my feet in a strong solution while working my way through a tub of ice cream and occasionally pausing to take in some Pale Ale.

Later, as I wandered aimlessly around town, I caught the aroma of coffee drifting up from a little side street. Following my nose, I found the Butter Butte coffee shop. Not content with making wonderful espressos, they also ground and roast their own beans. I returned several times, and sat in the corner reading and contemplating my hike thus far and the challenges still ahead. I can reliably inform you that the Butter Butte coffee shop served me the best coffee on the entire Pacific Crest Trail.

Rockets called me the following day and told me to hold on; he was due in Packwood that day. Although he had seen a doctor, who had diagnosed possible E. coli poisoning, he sounded upbeat and eager to get going. He

arrived shortly afterwards and we moved over to a twin room at the Hotel Packwood. The hotel was empty save the owner and her dog.

The doctor had told Rockets to get off trail. Most thru-hikers don't consult doctors, regardless of the ailment. The advice, nine times out of ten, is to 'get off trail', and nine times out of ten hikers don't need to. Rockets simply said "You can't keep Pockets down."

He was, however, not well. Apart from the physical problems associated with E. coli, it was his psychological state that troubled me. He was despondent, still sleeping a lot, and reluctant to move on. He was constantly tired and struggling, but would not admit it. I looked up to him in some ways, and was thankful for his lead when we walked together. But maybe because of my admiration for him, I let his disinclination rub off on me, and I became too comfortable also doing nothing. Rain had covered Packwood for two days, only adding to the gloom, and I found myself repeating a mantra several times a day to try to generate some self-motivation:

"I will finish the PCT and I will enjoy it. Foz, you have to move. YOU HAVE TO MOVE."

On the third day, despite the rain, I left Rockets again and caught a quick ride back up to White Pass. He wanted to wait for clearer weather, but I couldn't. Recoiling from the spray of passing trucks, I found the trailhead and disappeared back into the damp forest. My shoes, now worn out, slipped on the mud, but they had to last until Snoqualmie Pass, ninety-nine miles away, where HQ had mailed my Gore-Tex boots. Water seeped through the mesh as I squelched unceremoniously along. When dusk crept in, I pulled off trail to a flat area near the shore of Snow Lake. I dropped my pack as drizzle started falling, and was two minutes into erecting my tent when I heard what sounded like the call of an eagle behind me. I swung round to see Rockets peering out from behind a tree, smiling.

We spent the rainy evening in separate tents, eating and reading. We discussed plans, our conversation somewhat drowned in the pitter-patter of water falling and trickling off our tents.

"I have to get going, mate," I said. "I know you're ill but it's your head that worries me: it's holding you back and, in turn, me as well. I *need* to finish this. I've got way too much resting on it to consider failing. I'm late as it is, I have to move. I'd love you to walk with me, but you do have to start walking."

"I know, me old mucker, I know."

The inevitable happened: rain turned to snow at higher elevations early afternoon the following day. Venturing upwards, we hit dark, damp, sticky soil, which turned white with a couple of inches of snow. The cone-shaped hills around us were topped with a sprinkling of the white magic like huge iced buns. Rockets was ahead of me as I stopped for water at a creek which crossed the trail. A voice from behind startled me.

"How's it going?"

I spun round to see a very damp Trooper grinning at me.

"Trooper! Where the hell did you come from?"

Pleased though I was to see him, I was again reminded of my slow progress. Trooper had walked from Chester, where we had last met. He had made it through Oregon and the section from Crater Lake, which I hadn't. I couldn't help feeling a little jealous of how far he'd walked. He already knew what it was like to falter at the last hurdle, after his previous PCT attempt had ended a few years earlier. He was determined to succeed this time, and he was 313 miles away from doing so. He was putting in some miles to reach Stehekin, 251 miles away. That was the last place to re-supply before the end, and lay eleven miles off trail. A bus service runs through the summer, taking hikers to this small settlement on the banks of Lake Chelan. There, they can rest and stock up for the final sixty-five-mile section to the Canadian border. However, the buses had usually stopped by the middle of October, so time was running out. Anyway, Trooper was in good spirits and seemed glad to have company, as were we.

We camped that night and dried gear by the fire. Through the day, we stayed reasonably dry in our waterproofs; it was really only our socks and shoes that were damp. We tried to build a fire every evening, but the damp conditions were making life difficult. Usually finding shelter in the forest gave us some drier wood, but we constantly had to check and feed the fire before it spluttered to a moist death.

Trooper had left when I started the following morning, leaving Rockets taking photos of the appropriately named Dewey Lake. The target for the day lay twenty-six miles away: a cabin called the Urich Shelter by the edge of a meadow, where we could dry out in comfort and, for once, get warm. I descended towards Highway 410 and Chinook Pass, where the sun had emerged. A curling vapour rose from Trooper's gear, which he'd spread out over a wall by the roadside. Rockets arrived shortly afterwards and I left ahead of both of them, eager to conquer a series of small passes between me

and the shelter. I crested Sourdough Pass, Bluebell Pass and Scout Pass, the thought of a warm night spurring me ever onward. Rockets caught me after a couple of hours, and we finished the day off with two fast-paced two-hour stints. He pulled away from me with a couple of miles left, and said he'd start a fire.

Daylight was fading as I emerged from the forest and crossed a wooden bridge over Meadow Creek. I homed in on the cabin, seeing a window glowing a faint orange in the murk.

"How is it in there?" I called out as I approached the large, impressive-looking shelter.

"Awesome!" came the muffled reply. "There's a stack of firewood, a good stove and seating. Come on in!"

Rockets's head torch struggled to illuminate the back wall. I turned on my torch too, and found a few tea lights. The fire caught and before long the gloomy cold was warming up nicely, as the flames cast a flickering light, which played a game of shadows and silhouettes on the walls. Trooper strolled in after dark, and we spent the evening drying out, warming up and eating in comfort. I updated my journal and looked down to a see a mouse sitting next to me, patiently waiting for a crumb or two.

Trooper had already set off by the time I left at 9am. Rockets had said he wanted to take a zero at the cabin and take more photos. I crunched my way along an icy trail, guided by Trooper's footprints. A solitary jet plane screamed over me, perhaps twenty minutes from Canada at that speed. Reaching Tacoma Pass, I was sitting down munching on some snacks, when two motorbikes pulled up and the bikers came over. They congratulated me on my story, and gave me apples, pears and a pack of my favourite dark chocolate-covered almonds, before zipping off home.

My body was in reasonable shape after 173 days. I did have an aching right elbow, and a right calf muscle which always made itself known at some point wherever I walked. Otherwise, though, my only slight concern was a sore throat. I could handle a cold, but I sincerely hoped it wasn't the onset of flu. The weather had turned somewhat and, for the time being at least, I enjoyed sunshine and rising temperatures. Fungi poked through the ground, topped with clods of earth, and announced themselves in vivid reds, browns, greens and whites. Sunset foliage decorated the bushes, and leaves clung on with their last hope.

A hum of traffic intruded on my solitude as I reached the brow of a hill

and looked down on Snoqualmie Pass and Interstate 90. Ski lifts crawled up from the small cluster of buildings by the roadside, and beyond I grimaced as a series of peaks and passes spread away to the horizon. I followed a collection of tracks downwards, crossed the road and walked through an area shivering between the lost season of summer's end and the start of the ski season. The Howard Johnson Motel beckoned me over and Trooper was there in reception, washed and laundered.

"Pockets is here," he said.

"What? What the hell!" I spluttered. "I left him at the cabin and he said he was resting for a day. How the hell does that guy do it?"

"Well, he didn't say much," Trooper continued, "but he didn't walk in. I think he got picked up by a couple of hunters slightly the worse for wear."

"Do you know what room he's in?"

"No, but Reception may tell you, providing the receptionist has cheered up a little and finished with his arsehole routine."

I approached the desk and looked at the PCT book, which was often left at reception. It included comments about the establishment as well as messages for other hikers. To my surprise, most of the writing was covered in Tipp-Ex.

"Hi," I said to Dominic, seeing the name etched on to his shiny brass badge. "What's with all the Tipp-Ex in the PCT book?"

"I use it to block out the negative comments," he replied matter-of-factly. "I don't want other customers reading them."

"Aren't you missing the point?" I asked. "That's what they are there for, so you can take note and do something about the complaints."

Ignoring me, he said: "Is there something I can help you with?"

I looked at Trooper, who, in turn, raised his gaze skyward.

"I need to check in but will be sharing a room with Josh Myers."

"I'll need to speak to him about that." He checked the records, picked up the phone and called the room.

"There's a gentleman in Reception who says he will sharing with you. I need you to come to Reception and verify this will be OK." He replaced the receiver, and continued to ignore me while shuffling some paperwork. Trooper disappeared off to his room.

Rockets appeared, looking somewhat dishevelled and annoyed at being disturbed.

"I'll fill you in shortly," he said to me and then turned to Dominic.

"Wassup?" he asked.

“The room is booked under your credit card, so I need your permission to book this guy in.”

Rockets glared at him. “Can you make my stay here any more unpleasant than it already is?”

After checking in, I collapsed on the bed, and he filled me in on what had happened.

“I’m feeling shit,” he said. “I stayed at the shelter until midday and then started to walk. I had no energy and was really struggling. I was stopping every few minutes to take a shit and then I virtually fell on to a forest road and had resigned myself to putting up the tent, when a couple of hunters stopped in their truck. They drove me here; I got a bus to Seattle, where a doctor took a stool sample. He thinks it’s E. coli but I have to wait for him to call.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not stopping now, Fozzie. I have to make the hike.”

“And what’s the deal with the guy on reception?”

“That guy is an arsehole. He wouldn’t let me check in till three thirty despite the place being empty. All I wanted to do was sleep; he wouldn’t give me the Wi-Fi passcode, wouldn’t give me my package he was holding, wouldn’t let me change the channel on TV in reception, wouldn’t let me lie on the couch even though I made sure my feet were hanging off the end and wouldn’t let me use the PC. He wouldn’t let me do anything!”

The situation cooled a little in the evening as Dominic finished his shift and was replaced by a more accommodating lady. All three of us ventured out into the rain to a local bar, which had laid on a midweek all-you-can-eat Mexican feast. We ate heartily, including Rockets, whose hunger was alternating between non-existent and insatiable, despite his condition.

To my dismay, my boots had not arrived in the morning, so I left a note to return them to HQ and went online to order a pair for delivery up the trail. My existing footwear was splitting alarmingly, and the sole flapped around as I walked. Rockets also had to wait for new shoes and for the doctor to call, so as usual, he said he’d catch Trooper and I up.

We huffed and puffed up the steep 3,000-foot climb from the pass into the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, and camped in a little dip, which offered some shelter from the cold wind whipping through the mountains. Trooper walked at a pace identical to mine. After slipping over a couple of times on icy ground, he was fast earning himself the new nickname of ‘Tripper’.

It was now 255 miles to the Canadian border and the end of the PCT, for Trooper, at least. Before the finish line were two re-supply points: 75 miles away lay trail angels the Dinsmores, just down from Skykomish, and another 99 miles would take us to Stehekin and the last chance to re-supply for the final 81 miles to the border. A further eight miles into Canada was Manning Park, where a solitary hotel stood by a main road, and from there Trooper could get transport home, and I could travel back to the Bridge of the Gods.

At our lunch stop, a succession of hikers heading back to Snoqualmie Pass came by. Instead of the familiar "You won't make it" comments, they were full of praise for us and fed us titbits from their packs. I felt like a duck in a pond waiting for bread to be thrown at me.

The weather forecast was promising, with no rain predicted, but I knew that weather patterns in the mountains were notoriously temperamental. The ice was also becoming more of a nuisance. Rounding a corner cut into a steep incline, I gingerly placed each foot on a solid sheet of ice glued to the rock. Knowing Trooper was immediately behind me, as I reached safety I waited for him to round the bend and called out a warning:

"Trooper, watch the ice, it's…"

It was too late. His legs slipped out from under him and he came crashing down. I grimaced as he fell, hoping he'd grab the nearest lump of something solid to stop him careering over the edge. This was the third time I had seen him fall. He would always laugh it off, dust himself down, check nothing had fallen off him or his equipment, and carry on. He surveyed his trekking pole, which had snapped, and performed a spot of emergency repair with the aid of that good old hiker staple, duct tape.

We all carried duct tape. The wide, silver material is easy to tear off yet extremely strong. To save space in our packs, large rolls were often wound around trekking poles. We used it for pack repairs, broken sunglasses, ripped clothing and even taped it to our ankles. The strong consistency and slippery surface were ideal for blister prevention. I would consider it one of a few truly necessary items.

Our hunger was raging. The mix of mountainous terrain and cold weather was playing havoc with our systems. In extreme conditions of cold, the body prioritises and conserves fuel to look after the main organs and to increase bodily warmth. This is its basic survival instinct. Remaining calories are used for energy expenditure and motion. Fat reserves also take a hammering when the temperature drops, and consequently I found myself craving sugary

sweets and oils, nuts, cheese and the like.

During the summer my sweet tooth was satisfied by crunchy oat bars, and I could get by on a couple a day. Now when re-supplying I would allow for no fewer than seven sweet candies per day. On a typical day, I'd polish off four bags of M&M's, a couple of munchy bars and a Snickers or two. I was eating double portions of oats in the morning, laced with sultanas, nuts, powdered milk and sugar. My evening meal, usually a packet of pre-mixed rice with various flavours, was supplemented with pools of olive oil, chunks of cheese and bacon bits. My jerky consumption was alarming, and expensive. Five hundred grams used to see me through the week: now I was eating three times this amount. In the rare event of finding a butcher that made their own jerky, I was like a kid in a toy shop. I'd taste everything and then buy 500 grams each of the best three.

My hands never fared well in cold weather. They'd started to crack, bleed and were very dry, despite taking care and using my gloves. My feet were permanently wet, and the cold was almost painful when I stopped, although once moving it subsided. The rest of my body was coping well with the cold. I walked in a long-sleeved wool top with my waterproof jacket over the top, wool leggings and waterproof trousers. My wool hat stayed in place all day, and once at evening camp I put another wool T-shirt on and replaced my jacket with my down alternative. Despite advice from sleeping bag manufacturers to wear nothing inside the bag, as the body heat warms it more quickly, I wore most of my day clothes in the bag. I knew it was getting colder because I was waking to ice on the inside of the tent as well as the outside.

The Glacier Peak Wilderness was stunning, a mix of all terrains. In places it was flat, but more often than not it dipped, dived and wiggled its way through Washington. We clung to ridges, walked along a trail cut into the hillside, relaxed on soft soil and slipped on rock. Enjoying the sun in the exposed sections, we shivered when we returned to the forest. Once the sun was up it was pleasantly warm, and even Trooper commented on how lucky we were for this time of year. The landscape was taking its toll at times, though, and twenty-five-mile days meant twelve hours' walking.

Knee-jarring descents levelled out and rose into formidable ascents. It was a repeating pattern of bottoming out and then getting stuck into the uphill stretches. After five minutes, lungs were heaving, legs were screaming and calf muscles were ready to burst. Thereafter, however, the physical

conditioning we'd acquired over the past few months came into its own, the adrenaline surged and we settled into a good rhythm.

We left the Waptus River intending to cover twenty-nine miles, leave nine miles for the following day to reach Highway 2, and catch a ride to the Dinsmores'. Fallen trees littered our path, the remnants of a major storm a few years earlier. We regularly had to clamber over slippery, moss-covered tree limbs, or duck underneath them. Trooper laughed as I spent ages figuring out how to surmount one particular tree, only to find, upon rounding a switchback, the same culprit blocking that as well.

Access to this remote part of the world was difficult, but the forestry service had cleared the area to a large extent over many years and the work was slowly paying dividends. The forestry teams must have put in a mammoth effort. One huge trunk had been sawn off revealing growth rings dating back to the Middle Ages or further. Someone had marked notable dates on the rings, such as the world wars, Declaration of Independence and so forth.

Trooper was walking behind me. He had a metal mug strapped to the outside of his pack, which kept banging against the metal buckle. It was like walking in front of a Swiss cow.

"You like your coffee in the morning, huh, Fozzie?" Trooper said, breaking a spell of contemplative walking.

"Coffee in the morning should be made compulsory," I answered, smiling.

"I agree. But what is the fashion these days for putting other stuff in with it and ruining the whole drink?"

"Like syrups and stuff?" I asked.

"Yep. Vanilla flavour, hazelnut, cream, sprinkles, hell, even milk should be left out."

"Strong, thick and black, one sugar," I continued. "Just like motor oil."

"I've given up smoking and gambling but never, ever, coffee," he added.

"At least it's natural. I know it gets a bad rap sometimes but I think there's nothing wrong with it at all."

"And Fozzie, you know when you've found a coffee shop with good coffee?"

"They roast and grind it themselves?"

"Apart from that. They charge for refills. Free refills don't necessarily mean bad coffee, but if they're charging, it means it's the real thing."

I was contemplating a serious caffeine top-up in town when I approached

Deception Creek. It tumbled down through a slice of mountain and, although not particularly wide, was flowing quickly. The stepping stones looked slippery and the first one meant a leap of perhaps four feet. I eyed the route across the creek and crouched a little, ready to spring up to the first safe haven. Once there, it would be a balancing act to jump to the next boulder, and then a final vault to the far bank. I reached the other side and, aware of Trooper's propensity to fall, I dropped my pack in case I needed to rescue him from the currents.

Trooper eyed up the first and hardest boulder for an eternity. He kept making false starts and then backing down. I glanced around as I waited patiently, until I looked back to see him in mid-flight. His right foot landed on the boulder but didn't grip and he did the splits. A four-point plan rushed into my head. First, drag him out; second, dry him out; third, get him comfortable and warm; and fourth, run back to the two equestrians we had passed earlier and have them ride back and call mountain rescue. I rushed to the bank, where he had managed to curtail his fall. His face suggested he was in pain. I gestured as though to grab him.

"No, Fozzie! I'm good, I can get over!"

Feet now wet, he cautiously made it to my side and rubbed his shin.

"All OK?" I asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I thought I'd broken something when I landed but it feels OK."

We struggled through to Trap Lake and camped by the shore. We were taking a hammering. Exhaustion set in when we stopped in the evening. After getting into warm clothes, erecting shelters, building a fire and eating, all we were fit for was sleep. I watched the moon reflecting in the lake; a slight wind rippled the water's surface and blurred the reflection into a huge serpent. The tops of the pine trees painted an irregular border to the night sky above them. I watched the fire fade and the last, weak wafts of smoke rise and disappear as they left the light from the orange embers.

We reached Highway 2 late the following morning and spent a frustrating hour trying to catch a ride. Roadworks spilled on to the hard shoulder, leaving nowhere for vehicles to pull over, so we walked for a mile down the hill and tried again. A young guy soon stopped, eager to show off his new silver Mustang. We reached Skykomish and picked up our bounce boxes from the post office. An extra, warmer top and gaiters had also arrived.

"You're a bit late to be thru-hiking, aren't you?" came a voice from behind us. We turned round and Trooper recognised Jerry Dinsmore from his

previous hike.

"If you can wait until two o'clock, I can give you a ride when I finish work," Jerry continued. "Come down to the school when you're ready and I'll wait there."

We thanked him and sat outside the brilliant deli by the junction. It was a beautiful day and we warmed ourselves on the deck while wolfing down delicious, homemade breakfast muffins. So good were they, in fact, that we each ordered the same again, washed down of course by a couple of mugs of excellent coffee, refills extra.

I'd not found much internet access in this remote stretch of Washington. I sat hopefully with my iPod outside the library; it was closed but the Wi-Fi was on, so I was able to rattle off a few emails and update my blog. There was no news from Rockets and, strangely enough, I had no reception on my phone with which to check on him.

The Dinsmores' home, River Haven, lay eight miles down from Skykomish. Jerry, puffing on a cigar, gave us a brief description of how he ran things with his wife, Andrea. They had converted a large garage for the benefit of PCT hikers and there was ample room. We were the only ones there. We did our laundry, fired up the stove and brought provisions from the store. Several hiker boxes were filled with surplus food; if it were not for these, our cuisine for the section to Stehekin would have been a little limited.

"You're English, Fozzie, yes?" Andrea said when she came over to check we were comfortable.

"Yes, I am."

"Two English guys passed through last week and stayed for a few days to help build the new deck."

"They did?" I exclaimed, wondering who it could have been. "What were their names?"

"Nick and Chris. They've been walking since the start but missed a section between Crater Lake and the Bridge of the Gods. They said they intended to go back and finish this section to complete their thru-hike."

I couldn't believe my luck and this was a coincidence too good to miss out on. Not only had they missed the same section as I had, but they were returning to walk it, and they were fellow countrymen. I emailed Rockets the news, saying I intended to catch them and that he should join us. I asked Uncle Gary, who had walked for many weeks with them, if he could forward their contact details.

We ate well at the café over the road and slept like fallen logs. We woke in darkness to pack our bags and prepare for the ninety-nine-mile section to Stehekin. After giving our thanks and farewells to the Dinsmores, we went back to the café for breakfast.

“Be careful,” Andrea called out after us, “the weather’s turning for the worse. They say storms are rolling in.”

# Chapter 15

Monument 78

*A hiker whose desires stray from being on the PCT becomes an empty vessel stumbling across beauty without ever touching it.*
**Jake Nead**

We tucked into a quick breakfast at the café, and were lucky enough to catch a ride back to Skykomish with the deli owner. Seizing the opportunity to stock up on more fat, I promptly ordered four breakfast muffins wrapped in foil to take out, figuring the cold climate would preserve them as well as any fridge. I paid a brief visit to the library once more to see if there was any news from Rockets. There wasn't, so I emailed him our plans and returned to the deli. Trooper looked suitably pleased with himself as he introduced me to a local called Kathleen, who had offered to take us back to the highway at Stevens Pass.

"I need to walk my dogs and would love to come with you for a few miles, if that's OK," she offered.

"No problem," Trooper replied. He seemed a bit smitten, I thought from the look on his face.

"She's nice," he said, as we reached the highway and we adjusted our packs ready for the next stage.

"Then get her number," I said. "I think she likes you too."

Kathleen kept us company for an hour, and then kissed us both, wishing us good luck.

We had ninety-nine miles to Stehekin. After some discussion, we decided that allowing four days for the journey would be more achievable than three, bearing in mind the terrain and weather. Also the Stehekin post office, where we had mail, would be shut on the Sunday. We therefore adjusted our plan to knock out four twenty-five-mile days, arrive Saturday afternoon, take a zero on Sunday and pick up the mail on Monday morning.

The terrain was gruelling but beautiful. A pattern emerged – uphill, then flat, then downhill. At the end of the ascents we often glimpsed, through breaks in the trees, the land and lakes below. I wondered who had first discovered and named the waters. Some were obviously christened because of their shape – Heart Lake and Pear Lake to name just two. Other names

mimicked the appearance, such as Mirror Lake and Glass Lake. The origin of other, more curious names kept me guessing: Lake Janus, Sally Ann, Valhalla.

We reminisced about wrong turns we'd made and the time we'd wasted as a result. I proudly boasted that I'd only slipped up once, with Brains and Rockets at Kings Creek. Feeling well pleased with my natural navigation skills, I soon found myself munching on humble pie as Trooper called out from a couple of hundred yards behind me:

"Fozzie! You're going the wrong way! That's Cady Trail! The PCT is down here!"

I backtracked rather sheepishly, and watched with amusement as Trooper swung his pack on to his back – and fell backwards, caught off guard by its weight.

Looking down from Fire Creek Pass, we saw a huge storm front rolling in from the west. By the time we had descended a couple of hundred feet, it had cleared the ridge line to our left, the clouds whipping ferociously over the rock. We sped down the pass towards Mica Creek, where we'd spotted flatter ground nestling in the forest. It was dark as we filtered water and camped, just in time for the rain to fall and another mist bank to engulf us.

It was gloomy the following day, although the rain had stopped. Trooper was perhaps only a hundred feet ahead of me, yet had disappeared into the mist. As I passed Vista Creek, menacing skeletal trees appeared in the murk, like huge Grim Reapers. Occasionally a sign reassured us that we were on the right track. I pulled my jacket collar tighter and shivered, trying to fend off a chill that seemed to penetrate everything. The storm had passed, creating an eerie, oppressive environment, like the opening sequence to a 1950s horror movie. I longed to be warm. We spent most of our time cold and damp, only warming up around a fire at camp or in our sleeping bags. Waking up in the mornings, I opened the mesh panel to my tent vestibule and stayed in my bag while I boiled water for porridge and coffee, to stay warm as long as possible. Packing most of my gear away, I emerged only to take down my tent, and then we were off, using movement to generate body heat.

Making our way down the 3,000 feet from Dolly Vista to the Suiattle River, we again clambered unceremoniously over and under fallen trees, emerging at a wide expanse of sand and rock stretching out from the river. Shielding our eyes from the sunlight, we scanned the opposite bank for any hint of the trail, while following the occasional pile of stones left by others to

signal the way through. Trooper said that the last time he had passed through, the bridge had been washed away, and we hoped it had been rebuilt since. Unfortunately it hadn't. We wandered up and down the river bank, our feet sinking into the waterlogged soil, trying to find a place to cross. Eventually a fallen tree offered a slippery crossing point, and I cringed as Trooper cautiously stepped across and then decided to run the last few feet to safety. One slip would send him plunging twenty feet to a raging, icy torrent beneath him.

We raced up the incline as night fell, collecting water from Miners Creek. On reaching flatter ground, we turned on our head torches. For an hour we walked, turning our heads sideways to let the beams illuminate the forest around us, in the hope of spotting a flat clearing to make camp. Eventually we pulled up at the best option available, a meagre space in the trees, where somehow we managed to squeeze in both our tents. We talked of making the twenty-two miles into Stehekin the following day, and looked forward to drying out and getting warm.

Trooper had stumbled four times in as many days. We reached High Bridge mid-afternoon after good progress, but my right ankle was aching; after six months' walking, I feared I could have picked up an injury. We turned right over the bridge and hoped the Ranger station was occupied, for a possible ride into Stehekin. A padlocked door suggested otherwise, so we plodded off down the eleven-mile track to town.

After a couple of hours, a house appeared to our left, with several buildings resembling holiday cabins. No-one was at the house and the cabins were all locked, following the end of the season. Just as we were dejectedly walking back down the drive, a car pulled in and approached us. The window lowered and Martha stuck her head out.

"You PCTers?" she enquired. "You're a bit late, aren't you?!"

I looked at Trooper and smiled. If I had a dollar for every time I'd heard that over the previous few weeks, I'd definitely have a healthier bank balance.

"Yes, we are," I replied, smiling and trying to look cold and needy. "We were looking for somewhere to stay. Are the cabins still available or do we have to carry on to Stehekin?"

Her husband, Martin, leaned over from the driver's side.

"Follow us, we can help you out."

We trailed the car up to a beautiful log cabin in an expanse of grass, with a

vegetable patch to one side. Martin led us to the rear and a two-bed room in an outhouse above the log store.

"You're welcome to stay here," he said. "Give me a minute to turn on the hot water. There are showers next door and I'll bring you some logs for the fire. If you come to the house in about an hour, we can feed you."

I looked at Trooper, who looked speechless, as was I. We thanked Martin, and Trooper agreed to light the fire as I sat under a hot shower for ten minutes, letting the steaming hot water warm my chilled bones.

As we walked to the house, Tip, a border collie, intercepted us and demanded I play ball, which I obligingly did. We knocked on the back door and it creaked open, revealing Martha's kind face as she beckoned us in.

"Please, sit by the table. Coffee?"

"Yes, please," we replied in unison.

As she placed popcorn and vegetable nibbles on the table, her daughter, Misha, chatted to us. I thought how open the Americans were, compared to the typically reserved English. There were only a few occasions back in my home country when I had been so graciously offered somewhere to stay, a plate of hot food and good company. It's not that we English are unfriendly, we just don't take people in off the street and give them a bed for the night. I had experienced similar hospitality in other countries, and always made a point, when I returned to England, of doing the same if I saw a couple of wet cycle tourists or hikers. Americans, you cannot fault their affability.

Trooper, being vegetarian, winced as Martha placed a deer heart on the chopping board and started to cut it into bite-sized pieces.

"You both OK with deer heart?"

"I've never eaten the heart from anything but am more than willing to try it," I said. I looked at Trooper.

"I'm vegetarian," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "But by the look of that salad and rice you're making, I'll be fine."

She dusted the heart chunks with flour and carefully tipped them into a hot pan, the meat sizzling and spitting as it hit the oil. Having lit the fire and settled comfortably in a chair, Martin explained how he had lived in the cabin all his life; his father had built the place years earlier.

The table groaned underneath Martha's pan, salad, rice, vegetables and homemade bread. We wolfed it all down. The deer was excellent: not tough, as I'd feared, it melted in my mouth like a perfectly cooked steak. Martha didn't let us help clear up. She turned on the radio to contact people in town.

“Martin can take you down in the morning,” she said, turning to us. “I’m trying to arrange a ride back to the trailhead for you and I can probably get the postmistress to open up for you as well. If you come down around eight thirty and eat some breakfast, then we can leave.”

We thanked them profusely and returned to our little warm haven with full stomachs and warm limbs.

“Unbelievable,” Trooper exclaimed as we relaxed a little and read. “Incredible hospitality, I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

“I know,” I agreed. “If we hadn’t walked up that drive, we would probably be shivering in the woods again.”

As Martha dished out a breakfast of homemade pancakes consisting of buttermilk and rolled oats that had soaked overnight, maple syrup from their own trees, eggs and a fruit smoothie, I began wondering about the whole karma thing. Believe what you will, but I feel that whether you take someone in from a storm, such as we had experienced here, or do some work free of charge for someone in need, or even buy a friend a coffee or give your finished newspaper to someone else, the goodwill returns. Those that give freely in this life will be looked after.

The karma issue rolled around in my head for a few more minutes. How, I wondered, were our karma ‘points’ recorded? After all, to use an extreme scenario, if I were to stand on a street corner for a week handing out £10 notes to everyone who passed me, inviting them round to dinner, offering to clean their houses and do their shopping, then surely I’d rack up a fair-sized karma bank balance? I never expect karma to be directly returned from the recipient, that would be missing the point; I realise that it comes round in another form at some later time. However, would my altruism on the street corner earn me a set amount of points? Ten points for making someone dinner, fifteen for cleaning their house? Who was keeping the records? Could I expect my balance of, say, 235 points to be returned in equal value? Martha’s karma balance must be running into the thousands, I thought. Mother Teresa must have done pretty well too, and all those who volunteer their time for good causes. I made a note to try harder in the future; what goes around comes around.

Martin took us to Stehekin, via the bumpy road. We passed the famous bakery, which to our dismay was closed, and saw Lake Chelan through gaps in the trees. He dropped us at the boat landing. He said he would see us again, as it was a small town, and we thanked him. We checked in at a cabin

overlooking the lake, and ventured to the post office where the postmistress had indeed opened up. Inside a package she handed to me was a cigar – or 'stogie', as they are called – from Elk. He had written a short note:

"Fozzie, three requests, please. Firstly, smoke this stogie at the Canadian border for me. Secondly, send me a postcard from Stehekin, and thirdly, please sign the book at the monument for me. I was a dumbass and couldn't find it! Lastly, you are a savage badass, congrats on your accomplishment. Stay in touch, please – Elk."

It made me smile. I wrote him a postcard (he'd even left a stamp), tucked the stogie safely in my pack and went off to do some laundry.

Trooper was snoozing as I returned to the cabin. I quietly made myself a cup of tea (an Englishman must have his tea), grabbed my journal and sat outside on the deck. A gaggle of geese glided over the lake, and a solitary fisherman rowed out from the dock with his line in tow. I thought of the distance I had come and the distance still ahead. Four or five days to Canada and then a further two or three weeks in Oregon. I remembered an email I had received from a friend: "Don't worry, you'll breeze the last section and soon it will all be a distant memory." That was when I was in Packwood, feeling depressed. Still, I didn't want my quest to be over; I was sure I'd cherish the memories, and wouldn't want them to become faded and distant. I was among only a handful of hikers still on trail. Perhaps my companions were the last few left. I had come to the PCT to experience the adventure of a lifetime, a dream ten years in the making, and despite the hardships, I was still happy to be here, still marvelling at the adventure, still proud to be living it. I recalled that a man in the launderette had said earlier, "Rain for the rest of the week, snow at higher elevations, ninety per cent chance," and that Trooper had replied that the weather will do what it will – we can't change it – but we would make it.

I was reminded of a quote I had read in a book called *Zorba the Greek* some years earlier, that when we are happy we sometimes fail to recognise it, and it's only when we look back that we fully realise how happy we had been. Sitting on that deck in Stehekin, I was happy; but, more importantly, I was aware of my happiness.

I was interrupted by my phone beeping. A message from Rockets read: "Mucker, in Chelan, three hours' ferry ride from Stehekin. Will get in late morning."

Trooper was awake and I told him the news. After much discussion, we

reluctantly agreed that we couldn't wait. Time was now very much against us, storms were forecast with snowfall, and we had to get up in the mountains before it hit. I replied to Rockets: "Mate, we have to move early. Heading for Rainy Pass at day's end, catch us up, you always do."

I felt guilty, like a mountaineer abandoning his partner, but my goal was clear and I needed to move.

Journal entry:

I'm writing this from a cabin overlooking Lake Chelan at Stehekin, the last chance to get off trail and re-supply before Canada.

I look at what lies above me. There is a clear snow line down to 4,000 feet; the tops of the mountains are sprinkled with a fine layer before the clouds obscure the upper elevations. Solitary spectres of fine mist float across the lake and geese call to me to move. The hill flanks are coated in the greens of pine trees, the uniformity broken by the occasional gold of a lost maple. It is eerily quiet save for the occasional rustle of leaves as a gentle breeze toys with them.

I think about how far I have come, and how far I have still to go. The last two weeks with Trooper have been terrific; he's a fine walking companion. Tomorrow we leave at 7am for the final eighty-nine-mile stretch, whereupon he finishes his PCT thru-hike. Rockets has a confirmed case of E. coli and has been told by the doctor to leave the trail. He is ignoring this, telling me, "You can't keep Pockets down."

We stumble in here on Saturday the 23rd of October. Trooper has fallen four times today, a habit that is earning him the revised nickname of 'Tripper'. I have also picked up an injury. We are increasing our speed noticeably because we hear that snow is on the way, and we have one last section in Washington, but it's a tough one through the North Cascades. It's a case of when, not if, it snows. A few miles from Stehekin, my ankle started to ache, but I just put it down to over-exertion and figure a couple of days' rest and a re-supply will sort it out.

* * *

Martin and Martha had offered to collect us and take us back to the trailhead at High Bridge. We met in the café. Martha returned my gaze as we entered, looking concerned.

"Fozzie, there's bad weather rolling in. Forecast says four feet of snow

will fall.” Martin said nothing but his face suggested he was worried too. They both knew from experience how fruitless it was to warn us, though, stubborn as we thru-hikers were.

“The weather will do what it will,” Trooper said. “We have to move.”

“We’ll call you from Canada,” I added. “If you don’t hear from us within seven days then we may be in trouble.”

Martha smiled weakly. As we bounced back up the road, I wiped the condensation from the window and peered out at the mountains above us. It had snowed already.

If either of us had known then what the next few days had in store, I doubt we would have even left.

In my PCT research, I saw a series of videos made by two brothers who had hiked the PCT some years earlier. One of them had been plagued by blisters and foot problems since day one, and these never eased up for the entire hike. The brothers arrived at Rainy Pass, nothing more than a picnic area by the side of Highway 20. It was at mile 2,595, just 61 miles from the end of the PCT. After several months on trail, and with perhaps only two or three days to go before becoming a PCT thru-hiker, the guy quit, stuck out a thumb and got off trail. He was simply tired of nursing his feet.

I was dumbstruck; yes, I felt sympathy, but also disbelief. Little did I realise at the time how similar my own experience would be.

The day started innocently enough. Trooper and I both made slow progress up the 3,500-foot climb to the pass. Rain fell constantly, and a chill seeped through to our skin. Negotiating streams that had spilled on to the track, we concentrated on our breathing and focused on our target. Hunting the best route through a shallow creek, I placed my right foot on the ground and came to a shuddering halt. Pain shot up from my ankle, my leg buckled beneath me, and I fell. Trooper, tucked into his jacket, hadn’t heard me fall, so I picked myself up and carefully placed my foot back down. My ankle screamed again.

“Trooper!” I cried.

“You OK? What’s up?”

“My ankle. Think I’ve done something to it.”

We sat under a tree and ate lunch in the rain. I had not experienced joint or muscle pain like it before. At first I was convinced that I’d somehow broken the ankle, and then remembered the ache I had experienced on the approach to Stehekin. I was worried. Trooper said little, letting me deal with it in my

own way. We set off again, but as soon as I put weight on my ankle, I felt a searing pain. Trooper looked on anxiously, pausing and giving me time. I let the trekking pole take the strain and carried on hobbling, fighting the urge to return to safety. The rain turned to snow as we climbed, covering our heads and packs in a white powder. The temperature dropped further.

Two miles from Rainy Pass, I made the decision to get off trail and finish my thru-hike; I'd had enough. I thought about the brother who'd quit. For all that it made little logical sense, I now understood his decision to give up; his patience, worn unendurably thin, had finally run out. I said nothing to Trooper, but plodded on, looking up at the stark white landscape that lay between us and Canada. This was no mere dusting – it was deep snow. For whatever reason, I just wasn't in the frame of mind to carry on any more. I'll come back next year and finish off this section, I thought. I can be in a warm motel in a couple of hours.

"Trooper, I'm quitting here."

"You're what?!"

"My ankle is excruciating. I've had enough, and I can't go on any more."

"Fozzie, hold on. Give it time. Get in your tent, get warm, eat some food and think. Don't make a rash decision, you're four days from Canada and then you have Oregon, it will be a little warmer down there. See how your ankle is in the morning and then decide."

We smashed the ice covering a puddle and filtered its water. Snow continued to fall around us as we set up our tents, inflated our mattresses and puffed up our sleeping bags. I checked my watch for the temperature – minus seven degrees Celsius. I climbed into my bag with all the clothing I could wear, and cupped my hands round a mug of tea, idly observing a lump of powdered milk that had floated to the surface. Tapping the roof of the tent occasionally to let the accumulated snow slide off, I read until my eyes were too heavy. Then I zipped up my bag and drew the hood string tightly around my head.

Waking early, I called over to Trooper.

"You awake, Troop?"

"My mind is, I'm just waiting for my body to catch up. Go in thirty?"

"OK."

We hauled ourselves up to Cutthroat Pass at 7,000 feet. The snow got ever deeper, at times up to our knees. By some miracle, my ankle never gave out even a twinge during those four hours. However, what greeted us at the top

made me grimace – the PCT had all but disappeared. The snow had settled on the trail, leaving, at best, the faintest of indentations, a cupped line of settled snow. An icy wooden sign directed us further onwards. I checked my map and tried to picture the contours of the terrain ahead. My navigation, normally sound, isn't so great in the dark or the snow. Trooper asked if we should carry on.

"I can get us through but you'll have to bear with me and give me some space for the occasional error," I said, trying to sound confident. "I'm not good at navigation in these conditions, Troop, but you can pick out the trail occasionally." I pointed to the dip in the snow and showed him the map. "We have to keep this side of that ridge, about 200 feet down; look, you can just pick it out."

A faint trail cut through the side of the hill and disappeared off to one side.

"If we both concentrate, keep an eye on the dip and check the GPS occasionally, let's see how we go. We've got twenty-five miles to Harts Pass, there's a Ranger Station there and a road. I don't think we'll make it today but hopefully we can stay on the trail. If we're really struggling, then we have a get-out clause there, at least."

The weather had cleared and showed no signs of the forecast stormy weather. Through ever-deepening snow we pushed onwards, at times up to our waists. On the west-facing slopes, we guessed our way through drifts that had obliterated not only the trail but everything around it. My ankle continued to hold, and I figured the snow was cushioning my foot somewhat and also acting as a huge ice pack to numb the pain and reduce any swelling. We kept our down jackets on, rubbed our hands and blew into them to keep them warm and quickly put our gloves back on. Sunlight bounced off the snow and blinded us and we fumbled to find our sunglasses. We saw no-one, there were no footprints, and at that point I realised we were the last hikers on the PCT that year.

We carefully made our way down to Methow Creek, keeping away from the edge of the trail, where the land dropped away steeply. Pausing to take in water and calories, we shivered as our clothing struggled to keep in our body heat. Huge expanses opened out below us, green valleys dotted with forest and creeks tumbling down the hillside.

I slept badly, curled up in a foetal position with my hat and gloves on and my bag wrapped tightly around me. We were now nine miles from Harts Pass and progressing slowly, as we had done the previous day. Constantly

comparing the map to my field of view, I regularly checked the GPS and my compass. Somehow we were still on the PCT.

We stumbled in to Harts Pass and startled a couple of hikers sitting in their car, who looked as surprised to see us as we were to see them. We sat on the steps by the Ranger Station, which was closed for the winter, and took stock. The hikers came over and we filled them in on what we were doing. Offering us bananas, apples and cups of tea, they apologised for having eaten all the chocolate brownies. They looked genuinely worried for our welfare. They insisted on giving us their phone number, and pleaded with us to call them when we reached Canada. The weather, they informed us, was a mixed bag; sunny at times but with a fierce wind and low cloud.

We surveyed the area around us. There were a few picnic tables, some fire pits, a latrine and enough firewood to see us through the evening. It was now 5pm and nearly dark, the wind had picked up and the clouds were indeed hampering visibility. There were still thirty-one miles until monument 78, which comprised three wooden pillars marking the end of the PCT, and then another couple of hours to Manning Park. Trooper was a couple of days away from being a PCT thru-hiker.

We dragged a log near to a fire pit, to sit on, and spent some time stocking up the wood pile. As the flames came alive, I felt my body respond in kind, and we sat huddled with our palms facing the fire. I drank endless cups of tea and hot chocolate, ate my dinner and then cooked another to battle my hunger pangs. Trooper retired for the night early, and we agreed to also start early next morning; it was likely to be a difficult day.

At 4am I was rudely kicked into consciousness by my alarm. I peered under the fly sheet into the darkness, and could just make out snow falling and low cloud reducing visibility again. Staying in my sleeping bag, I drank some coffee and cooked an extra-large helping of porridge. I heard Trooper moving around and the clink of his spoon on a pot as he also readied himself for the rigours of the day. We emerged, rubbed our eyes, smiled at each other nervously and started to pack our gear away.

Merely one minute into the day’s walk, we were in trouble. Visibility was down to about fifty feet, a hard wind slammed into us from the east and snow streaked across our faces, forcing us to turn our heads and pull our hoods tighter. Low cloud whipped past and we strained to pick up a trail that was vanishing by the second. We could barely hear each other through the noise as we tried to pick up the dip in the snow where the PCT lay concealed

underneath. It was exhausting just concentrating. Trooper said that he would never have attempted this on his own, and that it was my navigation that had brought us this far. I put it more down to luck than skill, and was glad he was with me for company – since walking with him, I had never heard him complain, despite the battering we were taking.

It seemed to take forever for the sun to break through, and at one point I swore it would stay permanently dark. We were up at 7,000 feet, the cloud was at 5,000 feet and doing its utmost to block out any light. As sunlight slowly came, our field of vision improved a touch. I attempted to record a video, but the batteries failed within seconds in the cold, even though my camera had been snugly in my inside pocket.

We battled up hills and I waited for Trooper at the summits, while scanning the lie of the land and finding our position and route. Trooper was struggling, but I needed the time to navigate and rest myself. Simple tasks, such as reaching for my map or unwrapping a snack, were hampered by the cold that attacked our hands when we removed our gloves. Snow clung to our gaiters and boots and accumulated to form a solid coating of ice. Whenever we stopped, the cold sank in further, so we kept moving, even strolling around when we ate to keep from seizing up.

My sweet rations were depleting quickly. I'd calculated my allowance to see me through to Canada, but I was becoming so hungry and had developed something of a sugar addiction. I kept borrowing more than my allowance, so the next break or meal would be one or two candy bars short. Candy loans, as I called them, were becoming dangerous. At this rate, I thought, I'd be entering into negotiations for a food overdraft at breakfast.

"Trooper!" I called out through the wind.

"Fozzie?"

"If we get through this, then I'll buy you a beer."

"I don't drink."

"Oh, yeah. OK, I'll treat you to a huge steak dinner."

"Fozzie, I'm vegetarian."

We settled on a meat-free breakfast, the thought of which had me salivating for hours.

At mile 2,644 (for Trooper, at least), and near the top of a climb getting icier by the minute, we saw a suitable flat spot to camp, down in a small dip. I was getting fed up with the unremitting cold. My gloves were struggling, my hands cracked and bleeding. No matter what clothing I wore, the cold

penetrated through the layers and wore away at my resolve. The wood was too wet for a fire now, so the only heat we experienced was from food and drink. Over a mug of tea one evening, I calculated it must have been the warmest thing for a twenty-mile radius. We scraped back the snow to solid ground so we could drive in our tent pegs, and then made plans for Trooper's final day before trying to get some sleep.

We had 12.2 miles to the PCT finish and then eight miles further to Manning Park in Canada. Once we had surmounted Devils Stairway, a couple of miles away, it was all downhill to the border. The problem was one section called Lakeview. The two hikers at Harts Pass had warned us that there was a quarter-mile-long west-facing slope, renowned for accumulating snow. It was the last hurdle. As I rounded the corner, I realised they were right. A steep slope plunged down from my right to my left, the trail was non-existent and neither of us had our ice axes or crampons. The only saving grace was that the snow was soft, offering a certain amount of grip; if it had been ice, we'd have been faced with an angled traverse, like walking on a slanting mirror. We took slow, deliberate steps across, the snow up to our thighs, and cautiously glanced to our left at the 1,500-or-so-foot drop to the rocks below. The wind intensified once more and snow began to fall. Even the cloud lowered, as if some higher power were trying every mean trick to make us quit at the last stretch.

We reached the top of the staircase and sat on our packs. A lump of snow and ice encased each boot. I looked at Trooper; he grinned, and for good reason. In eight miles he would become a PCT thru-hiker, and it was all downhill now. After admitting he was not good in snow and had never camped in it, I was initially worried that he might come to grief. Barring some ascents where he fell behind a little, I could have not wished for a better companion through the toughest and most extreme conditions I had ever walked through. Upbeat to a fault, he had managed to make me smile even in the direst circumstances.

As we made our way down, the snow slowly disintegrated, the temperature rose a little and we peeled off our jackets. Water dripped from the trees above us and we skidded on wet mud and rock.

"There it is," Trooper said, stopping abruptly.

"There's what?"

"Monument 78. That's the finish of the PCT."

I moved my head from side to side, trying to look through the foliage.

Trooper handed me his camera and asked me to film his moment. He sped up in anticipation, finally reaching a small clearing with three wooden pillars on one side. He let it all go.

"Yes!" he cried. "YES!"

He looked briefly skywards and raised his arms above his head.

"Well done, mate," I said.

"Thanks, Fozzie. Could not have done that without you."

"Nor I you."

We spent an hour relaxing. There was no border control here, simply a clear-cut line of trees perhaps forty feet wide, stretching from one horizon to the other. It made me wonder if it was necessary to fell thousands of trees just to mark a boundary.

We found the trail register in a metal obelisk, and I duly signed my name as well as Elk's. Trooper scanned back through the pages to see who else had finished. I watched him beam as I lit the ceremonial stogie Elk had given me. After his successful second attempt, and unsuccessful first, Trooper had walked around 5,300 miles to be at that monument. I could only admire his resolve, and hoped mine would get me through the 300 or so miles I still had left in Oregon.

We followed forestry tracks for another two hours and emerged on to a road where we turned right. A mile further on, we pulled in to the most welcoming Manning Park Hotel. We ate heartily, and Trooper kept his promise of buying me a celebratory meal and a bottle of wine. We chuckled as the waitress asked us if we would like any water.

"Yes, please," I replied. "But no ice, I've had enough of that stuff to last a lifetime."

For the first time in days I was warm and well fed. I looked forward to getting back to Crater Lake to knock off my final section in Oregon and also earn my place as a Pacific Crest Trail thru-hiker. It had been the hardest week of my life, with my ankle nearly ending my adventure and in those violent conditions; but I was proud to have pushed through. I was on an immense high, buzzing with excitement.

I had no inkling then that the news I would receive in the morning would send my world crashing down around me.

# Chapter 16

A New Strength

*How can we return to our normal lives and ever hope to achieve the high we have experienced out here?*
**Nick 'The Brit' De Bairacli Levy**

I woke early and picked up the phone to call my parents.

"Dad, I made it to Canada, just have to do that section in Oregon. Is Mum there?"

"She's at your nan's. Well done."

I detected something unusual in his voice and dialled my nan's house. My mother answered and immediately broke down in tears as she handed the phone to my sister.

"Sis, what's going on? What's wrong?"

"Keith, Nan died this morning. She had a stroke a couple of weeks ago and has been in hospital since. She couldn't really talk but understood what we were saying and nodded her answers. We didn't want to worry you with it, which is why we didn't call; we thought she would be OK. Bruv, we asked her if she wanted you to finish the walk for her and everyone. You will probably miss the funeral but she nodded that she wants you to complete it – she definitely wants you to finish."

My sister was also trying to hold back the tears and then I broke down too. My mum came back on the line.

"Keith, you must finish the walk now for Nan – she wanted you to finish. Go and complete it for her."

I choked back a few tears, trying to come to terms with the news. My high had come down to earth with a thump.

"OK, I will," I said. "I'll do it for Nan."

Replacing the receiver, I fought back more tears. I had enough reasons of my own to finish the walk, but now I was walking for my nan's memory. After a couple of hours I had calmed down and felt strangely uplifted, even managing to smile. The shock and grief had abated and I somehow felt a new strength within. Before I'd left, I'd said goodbye to her.

"See you when I get back," I had said to her as she kissed me on the cheek.

“Bye, Keify.”

Initially it felt as though I had broken a promise to her, that I had lied, but I took comfort in knowing that she would never have held that against me. Now I had her strength with me, and I could feel it. In a moment of clarity, I felt she would be right there by my side as I attempted to finish off the PCT.

Nan and I had never shared a word in anger in all of the years I had known her. She had struggled to bring up three children through a world war, scraping together enough money to live on. My walk seemed to pale in comparison to her toil, and I reminded myself that, if it were not for her, I wouldn’t even be doing the PCT. A new determination surged through me; an invigorating feeling. I took a deep breath and watched the snow float down outside.

“OK, Nan, let’s go finish this thing.”

Apart from the usual thru-hike niggles such as the expense of the trip, occasional cold and constant hunger, I’d always had this additional anxiety: what would I do if someone back home, especially immediate family, died? If my mother, father or sister fell ill or died, and I didn’t make it back to them in time, my world would collapse. I worry about it before I leave and it troubles me when I walk. I hate saying farewell to loved ones for fear that it could be the last goodbye.

Now I finally knew how it felt to lose someone and not be there to bid farewell.

Uncle Gary had sent an email with the contact details of Nick Levy. Nick was walking with his mate, Chris, and they were the only other Englishmen on the trail that year. I knew they had missed the same section, from Crater Lake to the Bridge of the Gods, as I had, and I hoped they were returning to finish it off. I sent Nick an email.

“Nick, rumour has it you and Chris missed a section from Crater Lake to Cascade Locks. By some coincidence, so did I and I am looking to finish it off. Fancy some company?”

My phone beeped a few minutes later.

“Fozzie! We’re in Vancouver, heading to Seattle soon. Definitely doing the final stretch, come join us!”

Trooper and I packed and caught the Greyhound to Vancouver, the nearest transport hub. I slept most of the way until we arrived mid-afternoon.

Vancouver was bustling, but when I left the station to find some food, I found downtown depressing. Light rain was falling and leaves carpeted the

park like a giant Turkish rug. Concrete hemmed me in, traffic hooted, sirens blared, people shouted, dubious-looking characters lurked on street corners. I grabbed a sandwich and sought solace back in the park, sitting on a bench and trying to feel at home among the trees. Civilisation felt somehow wrong after months in the woods. Smoking a cigarette outside the station, I broke wind out of habit, and smiled as people turned round.

"Sorry," I offered. "Been out of touch for a while."

The 7pm to Seattle hissed as it pulled up, and Trooper and I boarded. Water trickled down the windows separating me from an alien world. I was way out of my depth, and longed to be back on the PCT. Seattle, a more affable city perhaps, seemed to welcome us both as we walked from the station. It was Halloween, so finding a room might not be easy. We walked into a well-known hotel and leant on the reception desk.

"Hi," Trooper said. "We need a room for one night, how much are you charging?"

The receptionist looked us up and down rudely.

"180 dollars for the night."

I interjected.

"You're taking the piss, mate; don't judge people because they have a rucksack."

We walked off and found a Best Western; in my experience, they usually charged a little more but they were well-run establishments. We were both pleasantly surprised by the very reasonable $70 room price. Trooper was leaving in the morning to return to California. I called Nick and agreed to meet him and Chris in a couple of days for the early morning bus to Portland, and then onward transport to Cascade Locks. I had a day to get organised, replace some gear from REI, clean myself up and find some coffee houses.

"Fozzie, give me a call when you get to Crater Lake," Trooper said, as he left by taxi early in the morning. "My sister lives in Oregon and I plan on coming back to visit in a couple of weeks. There's a good chance I can collect you from there."

It was a nice gesture on his part. Crater Lake was in the middle of nowhere, and the thought that we might not have to try to get a ride out of there in the middle of autumn was a small comfort.

"Thanks, Trooper, it's been a blast. Thanks for the company."

I returned to the hotel and was lying on the bed when my phone rang. 'Rockets' flashed up on the screen.

“Mucker!” he said. “Where are you?”

“Seattle, heading out tomorrow with Nick and Chris,” I replied.

“Stay there! I’m coming down.”

A block from the hotel, I stumbled across a great health food store, where I gorged on salads, beans, pulses, grains and fruit, drank a load of water and rested as best I could. I re-supplied, bought warmer gloves and socks and prepared for the final 330 miles.

Rockets arrived in the afternoon and I laid out my plans. He seemed eager to join us, but was still lethargic from the E. coli.

“I have to leave in the morning, mate,” I said. “Come with us but I have to leave tomorrow. I’ve cut it fine as it is. I shouldn’t have made it through Washington but somehow I did; now I need to polish off Oregon before the winter strikes down there as well.”

When I left in the morning, he wasn’t ready. I shook his hand and walked up to the Greyhound station with his familiar words ringing in my ears:

“Go, I’ll catch you up.”

Despite their rucksacks and typical thru-hiker appearance, Nick and Chris walked straight by me in the waiting room, and I failed to recognise them, too. We shook hands and briefly discussed our plans for the final section with renewed excitement.

They both lived near me, in Sussex, south England. Nick, the more outgoing of the two, basically lived for his next adventure. He was thirty-three and worked as carpenter. A Mohican adorned his head, two fat rings pierced his ears and countless tattoos decorated his stringy frame. Conventional this man was not. He looked like a cross between a benefits scrounger and the sort of bloke you wouldn’t buy a used car from. Appearances are deceptive, however, and contrary to my snap character judgment, Nick turned out to be priceless. Born to a Jewish mother and Moroccan father, he nurtured a love and respect for the outdoors, and was highly intellectual. Nick would not only have an opinion on any topic you cared to mention, but he’d also reel off a string of facts and statistics to back his view up. Whether it was the cooking habits of ancient Greeks, how to repair fridges in the African bush, or where to rent a hedge trimmer in Mongolia, Nick knew something about it. His erudition showed up my comparative ignorance. Sometimes I thought he was just making stuff up, but he spoke with a confidence that suggested otherwise.

Chris had joined Nick for the adventure. He was younger, at twenty-four,

and less of a conversationalist than Nick (not that that would be difficult). He had never even been out for a day hike back home; the PCT was his first hiking adventure, and one hell of a baptism it was too. He was stockier than Nick, but still slim, and his stomach had a tendency to inflate alarmingly when he ate. And, boy, did he know how to eat!

After a series of bus journeys and local rides, we arrived at Cascade Locks late in the afternoon. It seemed warmer, and as I looked up I saw that snow had not yet fallen on the higher ground. We crammed in some last-minute calories at the supermarket; I stocked up on candy for fear of running out again. We left the Bridge of the Gods south-bound, heading for the woods and our final 330-mile section of the PCT. With darkness falling we hiked a couple of miles only and set up camp by the promisingly named Not Dry Creek.

Nick and Chris made a well-oiled team, and I admired their organisational skills as they set about their respective camp tasks. Chris treated water while Nick prepared their food. Together they set up their two-man tent, and as light rain fell, we all chipped in to start a fire. Campfires, I was soon to learn, were a regular staple for them both. It took a little planning every evening, but I soon warmed, as it were, to the reward of a crackling fire. I thought I was a pretty accomplished pyromaniac, but Nick was quite the expert. As we gently fed a smouldering pile of damp wood, the flames would flicker occasionally and then go out, with only a weak puff of smoke for our efforts. I would have given up after ten minutes, but Nick and Chris persisted, spurring me on, until eventually a small fire burst into life. With the rain still falling, we sat near the warmth and I marvelled at Nick’s persistence. Every couple of minutes he glanced over to check the fire was still burning. Occasionally he’d feed in some more fuel, blow a little life into it and generally nurse it as one would a sick relative. As the skies cleared a little, stars flickered into life, and we decided to risk the elements and sleep cowboy-style.

At 3am the forest around us reverberated from a huge crash. All three of us sat bolt upright as if we were Jacks and someone had just opened our boxes.

“What the hell was that?” we cried in unison.

Being half-asleep, my immediate thought was that a bear had charged through the forest, but as I came around, I realised no bear could ever make such a thundering noise. We shone our lights around but, seeing nothing,

cautiously fell back to sleep. I woke thinking I had dreamt the whole event, but soon saw it was very real.

Walking around the camp, we found a freshly fallen tree that we had not seen the previous evening. We suspected it had been hit by lightning, but the skies had been clear and storm-free. Maybe the tree's time had simply come. Nick, deepening the mystery, said he'd seen something that looked like an asteroid, complete with blazing green tail, shortly after the event. We all also recalled hearing a crash in the next valley over, just after the tree fell. Maybe I was reading too much into this, but we all agreed that something weird had happened that night. My time with Nick and Chris was off to an interesting start.

Over the next few days we got to know each other better, having gelled pretty well from day one. We walked at around the same pace, required a similar amount of time before we rested and were happy with our mileage totals for each day. The weather held, and I looked forward to the evenings most of all – round a fire, relaxing.

We left Salvation Camp Spring, hoping to make Timberline Lodge twenty miles away. The exterior of this huge hotel was used in the movie *The Shining*, and it attracted a lot of outdoors folk who hiked or skied in the area. It was also renowned for laying on one of the best breakfast buffets on the entire trail. However, our hopes of getting there by the evening were disappointed. Some days on the PCT, one can reel in a twenty-mile day in what seems like no time at all. Other times the same distance seems to take an eternity. That day was in the latter category.

Mt Hood, with its near-perfect symmetry, completely dominated the skyline. The contours on my map were fairly regular until they reached the base of the mountain, and then all hell broke loose. Ridges, ravines, glaciers and cols jostled for position amid a jumble of lines. It was a cartographer's nightmare.

We also hit snow. Oregon had received its first fall a couple of weeks before, but thankfully it was only up to a couple of feet deep and receding; the lower elevations seemed untouched. However, it made navigation difficult and although we walked for nearly ten hours, we were frustrated at every turn. As night fell, we unanimously agreed that we were off course, albeit somewhere in the approximate vicinity. My journal at the end of the day simply said 'lost'.

We agreed to camp and wait for sunrise to get a better fix on our position.

However, even finding somewhere flat to sleep was a battle. The foothills of Mt Hood rose and fell all around us like a rumpled carpet, but eventually we came upon a couple of level areas sheltered by trees. Our spirits lifted momentarily, before Nick brought them down again.

“Shit, we forgot to get water.”

None of us even remembered having seen water in the previous few miles, so we built a fire and began melting snow. This is not as easy as it sounds; it has to be collected away from overhanging branches, to avoid detritus from the trees such as bark pieces and pine resin. The top surface is no good because it may have collected contaminants, so we used the lower layers. Melting snow also requires a lot of fuel. We didn’t have enough alcohol, so we continued to gather as much wood as we could, and before long we had enough for all of us. The water then had to be strained to remove the last of the impurities. Finally we sat around the fire warming ourselves and watching our dinners bubble.

My sleeping area was so small that if I turned to my left I went uphill, and a little too far to my right and I’d have rolled about fifty feet down a snow slope. On the plus side, I did have a natural pillow where the ground rose slightly, and my feet were a little elevated. It was like sleeping in a hammock.

We packed quickly as the sun rose, eager to get to the lodge and have a feast. We spotted the cables of a ski lift and followed them until suddenly the lodge loomed into view. I had spoken to Logic a few days earlier; she lived nearby and had asked me to call when we reached Timberline so that she could come and join us. When she pulled into the car park I barely recognised her in civilian clothes, but she greeted me with a welcome hug.

Retreating inside we found the buffet, one that could have fed an army, and I watched in amazement as Chris demonstrated his eating capabilities. He ladled a generous portion of batter into the waffle machine and, when cooked, spooned some fresh fruit on top and added a large dollop of cream. Having wolfed that down, he went back for another helping. And then another one. ‘Dessert’ followed: a huge plate brimming with bacon, sausage, hash browns, scrambled eggs and toast. Then another one of those as well. I was struggling after just one plate. Nick merely raised his eyebrows at the display of gluttony; he’d seen it all before. Chris would have made a prime candidate for the beaver buster. Logic demanded we stay with her that night and agreed to meet us at Highway 26 a few miles further on.

As we lost altitude, the temperature rose, and we found ourselves stripping

down to T-shirts. It was like summer again. Oregon was hitting us hard, though. We'd been lulled into thinking this beautiful state was easier going, and some of the time it was, but at other times it was punishing, especially with the snow. I sensed a change in the air also; the temperature was fluctuating. The days were a mixed bag of cool and warm, the nights cold. Winter was clearly imminent, and we were playing a dangerous game with the autumn. Hikers were enjoying the last days before the snow, while skiers impatiently waited for the first powder.

We emerged from the forest to find Logic by her car, reading some pages from her studies.

"Slight problem," she announced. "I locked my keys in the car!"

She had called her boyfriend, Ben, but he couldn't make it for a couple of hours, so we all scanned the area for pieces of discarded wire. Nick spent thirty minutes prodding, pushing and pulling, and eventually he earned his car thief wings. We returned to Logic's house a few miles away, where she made us feel more than welcome. She'd only ever intended to complete a portion of the PCT, and returned home shortly after. Her house sat on a quiet road with beautiful views of the Oregon mountains.

I wonder how I would have coped without trail angels. Whether simply providing a water cache or offering their house as a free hotel, they demonstrated overwhelming generosity.

Trail angels were fewer and farther between now, as the thru-hiker season was over. During the first couple of months, water caches had been a regular sight. I topped up on calories many times from previous hikers and locals who'd taken time out to sit in the heat for a weekend, dishing out food. The Saufleys, Andersons, Heitmans, Dinsmores and others – all wonderful people who simply offered hospitality for a small donation or often free, and expected nothing else in return. I couldn't do what they do. If I had twenty hikers staying at my house every night, fond as I am of them, I'd go nuts.

Ben dropped us back at the trailhead the following day and wished us luck. The clocks had gone back an hour, so darkness was falling at 5.30pm, which meant stopping around 4.30pm to make camp in the fading light. Compared with the height of the summer, when we could walk till past 8pm, we now had four hours less to make any headway. Now, twenty-mile days were excellent progress.

We passed a south-bounder who had enough gear to support all three of us, including a rifle. His pack, he told us, weighed a hefty thirty-seven kilos;

twice ours, which were around eighteen kilos. Most of the weight came from his food supplies, consisting of heavy army surplus packs. His rifle was for protection against bears, although they were mostly preparing for hibernation. We chatted with him for five minutes and suggested politely that he could halve his pack weight just by getting off trail every week or so to re-supply, and by losing the gun. I left him wondering how the hell he was going to get to the Sierras, let alone make it over them.

During the afternoon, it started to snow as we climbed steadily to our target for the day, Skyline Road, where I had a shelter symbol marked on my map. We eventually located it: a simple, three-sided hut with a huge fire pit on the exposed wall. Piles of wood lay around the area as though the last of the campers had left in a hurry. A lonely picnic table had been squeezed inside. We set about making a fire and restoring some life into our feet.

There were perhaps four inches of snow around us and it was still falling. The following day we needed to ascend to 6,500 feet, a climb of about 1,000 feet. Normally this wouldn't be particularly daunting, but we were concerned about the snow conditions higher up.

I rose early, despite the cold, and took a short stroll around the area. More snow had fallen, and there were numerous frozen puddles, which I had to break through to gain access to water. Surrounded by forest, Breitenbush Lake had frozen over. The cone-shaped Campbell Butte rose from the far shore. Animal tracks littered the snow in a maze of crisscrossing lines. All was silent.

I was now in similar territory and conditions to those I had experienced in Washington with Trooper. We did not know what lay above us, but the situation was not likely to improve with altitude. Again I scolded myself for leaving my hike so late. Discussing the timings of our adventure, Nick and Chris put forward the intriguing notion that we had come out to experience the PCT and live in the woods for a few months – everyone else had finished, but we were still out here, so in a way we were the winners.

But … to win, we still had to finish. And to finish, we still had to beat the winter and conquer another 217 miles.

We left at 7am. Three miles in, winning seemed a rather distant notion. As we climbed, the snow became deeper and continued to fall. Snowdrifts were up to our thighs, we lost the trail numerous times and the three miles took three hours. We put our packs down and took stock. This wasn't like Washington. There was far more snow, the temperature had plummeted and

we were still climbing. At this point, a mile an hour would be good going, and we were facing long, tiring days where ten miles would have been excellent progress.

Not only that but also the PCT had, to all intents and purposes, disappeared off the face of the earth, even though I took regular GPS readings to try and find it. We unanimously agreed to return to the hut, where we built another roaring fire and ate, to try to restore some morale and re-group. We were in a bit of a pickle, though, if we couldn't even find the trail. With plenty of concentration, map reading, GPS checks and observation, we might have been able to cover ten miles in a day if we were lucky. It was almost mid-November, however, and at that rate we'd be walking until the middle of December – assuming conditions remained the same, that is, which they wouldn't.

"We could road walk it," I said.

"How do you mean?" they replied in unison.

"There's a rough track leading up to this campsite so vehicles can get here. That track must at some point spill out on to a road; once we get our bearings we can road walk all the way to Crater Lake. OK, so it's not the PCT; but as far as I'm concerned, it still means we can walk from Mexico to Canada. We won't have to worry about navigation, and the road will be at a lower elevation so should be snow-free. The surface will be harsher but we can crack out some serious mileage. We'll be passing plenty of places to eat, so we can carry less food, there'll be more motels and, of course, more chances to drink coffee."

The guys looked at me and then at each other for a few seconds. Nick scratched his beard and Chris raised his eyebrows. Slowly, they smiled.

"Road walk!" Chris piped up, and Nick nodded in agreement.

I had become fond of these guys. Many hikers would have given up and gone home by now; indeed, many had. It is said that eighty-five per cent of thru-hikes aren't completed. We were still there, though: the last PCTers of the year. It made me proud to be English, proud of my stubbornness and proud to be walking with two like-minded fellow countrymen.

Nick was used to hardship on adventures. In previous travels, he'd survived winters and existed on a budget so meagre that I wouldn't have even attempted the journey. As I got to know Nick and Chris, I developed a strong respect for both of them. Living with other hikers for twenty-four hours a day is not easy, requiring patience, diplomacy and forgiveness. Not a single bad

word passed between us. It was an English team effort – the British bulldog fighting spirit.

I was also becoming used to their habits. Nick was the talker. I joked that he held records not just for long-distance walking, but also long-distance talking. I enjoyed solitary walking in silence, but after a few days of being with Nick, that became something of a distant memory. We took things easy, with regular cigarette and snack breaks, and sometimes we just sat and talked for an hour. We didn't know when we would get to Crater Lake, but we knew we would get there.

The first obstacle was finding the actual road, to even attempt the road walk. We hiked down the track, as we lost altitude, the snow turned to rain, the surface gradually thawed and we put on our waterproofs. The guys had jackets and trousers made of a waterproof material that was excellent at shedding water, but none too durable. Over time, their waterproofs had been snagged on bushes and the seat had worn where they sat down, with hilarious results. Chris's waterproof trousers had so many rips and tears that, as he put one leg forward, it would emerge from the material, which, a second or so later, attempted to catch his leg. Nick's jacket was in no better state, sliced and slit as though he had been mugged by someone with a very sharp knife. Various pieces of yellow duct tape were unsuccessfully trying to hold the garments together, and as I walked behind them I laughed at the strips of tape and material blowing around aimlessly in the wind. The guys were also wearing running shoes – ideal for the drier, hotter sections, but now they had permanently cold and wet feet. I had been wearing my waterproof boots for a while, and even they were struggling to keep out the moisture.

Nick's violent phase, as I called it, kicked in around 2pm. "He does it every day, sometimes several times," Chris commented. Nick seemed to need constant mental stimulation, and if he didn't get it, he got comically angry. To vent his frustration, he would suddenly lash out with his trekking pole at innocent bushes and branches that he had taken an irrational dislike to. In between blows, he'd use his pole as a spear as though he was hunting a fleeing gazelle in the African bush. The whole display lasted for some minutes.

Sometimes Nick would speed off to dissipate some excess energy, so Chris and I spent many an hour chatting. He never appeared stressed, took each day at a time and just did what needed to be done. He walked a solid and steady pace, had good stamina and never, to my knowledge, complained

about anything.

After two hours descending the track, we hit tarmac. A country road intersected us but we had no way of knowing where it went or where it had come from. Following the compass, we continued south through the pouring rain. Though we moaned about the snow, at least it merely settled on our bodies, whereas the constant rain soaked through us with a mighty chill.

We passed a sign saying that Detroit was eighteen miles away, which lifted our mood a little. The thought of at least drying out at a motel and getting some decent food inside us edged our speed up. A ranger truck passed and stopped, and the two occupants got out to chat with us for a few minutes. They confirmed the mileage to Detroit, offered us a ride, which we declined, and described the little town. A good motel, a couple of nice eateries and a store, they said. We also learnt that it was on the main road down to Crater Lake, with a few towns along the way. On we went, cowering from passing vehicles as they sent up showers of spray.

Road signs constantly reminded us of the remaining mileage. On those flat roads, we knew our average speed, and it was easy to calculate our arrival time. As we reached the highway, Detroit appeared through the rain and mist, and we huddled under a shelter outside the store. A hot dog and coffee solved the immediate hunger and thirst crisis, and we smoked a cigarette outside, discussing the next move. The motel, we were assured by the store owner, had recently been refurbished and was excellent. The bar was friendly and served basic but filling grub. There was also the café, which came similarly highly recommended. None of us needed much persuading to get inside the motel, dry out and warm up.

As we checked in, the motel owner strolled off to prepare the room and I called after her.

“Can you please switch on any item capable of producing heat and turn it up to the maximum?”

Chris laughed as she waved back in acknowledgement, and by the time we entered the room, a wall heater was firing out a welcome blast of heat. As we took off our wet items of gear and hung them on anything resembling a hook, the windows rapidly steamed up. I collapsed into a hot bath and slowly felt the warmth penetrate my limbs and drive out a stubborn chill. After days outdoors in the winter, we were tiptoeing around on the floor complaining about the cold tiles!

Spirits restored, we ventured over to the bar to revive them further, by that

marvel of pick-me-ups, alcohol. A line of perhaps fifteen guys stretched along the bar, and Nick had to politely squeeze between two of them to get some drinks.

"You guys doing the PCT?" said Brad, one of the locals. "You're a bit late aren't you?"

The eight blokes to Nick's left shifted along the bar, and the other seven to his right did the same. Brad brought three stools over and we jostled in. The bartender placed a pitcher of beer in front of us.

"On the house," he said, smiling.

We spent a couple of hours in the bar that evening, and I have fond memories of the occasion. Ensconced in classic American hospitality, we felt the stress of the previous few days melt away in a sea of Pale Ale. We felt like minor celebrities, amid the compliments and encouragement from the other patrons.

"I take my hat off to you three," said Brad. "I live here and I'm lucky if I get one day a month to go for a walk. You guys come to my country and experience the woods for six months, something I'll probably never be able to do. It makes me proud to live in this country when people like you travel a huge distance not just to get here, but to hike. Best of luck to all of you, I'm truly inspired."

People left, and others arrived. The cook dished up an admirable burger and chips, as the whole focus of attention in the bar centred on us and what we were doing. Later we staggered back to the motel, half expecting to sign autographs.

Our gear was still wet the following day, and the newsreader looked depressed as she informed us, and Oregon, that the day would be a washout. We decided to take a zero. Returning to Cedars Bar once more, we were fed an excellent breakfast. Oliver, the owner, offered to take our laundry away to wash. I must admit that I didn't envy him opening the contents of that bag.

A lazy day ensued, checking emails, keeping warm (something of a novelty at this point), eating and sleeping. The weather forecast changed from 'occasional rain' to the slightly perkier 'occasional showers'.

Journal entry:

Wet! Resting in the Lodge Motel in Detroit. Been thrown out of the mountains! Too much snow to carry on any further. We discuss the options, settling on a road walk to Crater Lake, and then the few miles further to

where we left the trail at Mazama Village. There is no other option really. We now have 157 miles to walk on the road, which means only one thing: blisters. I know this from my experience on previous road detours. I'm looking forward to it, though. I think it will be a novelty not to worry about navigation, and we should pass plenty of places that serve real food.

Nick and Chris are good company. We laugh a lot, and we need to laugh to maintain morale; the weather is either wet or cold. I think about, among other things, the desert; it was brutal at the time, but now I yearn for the warmth, and have fond memories of those days in a T-shirt. The sun rose early and set late. The spring flowers burst into bloom to survive another season before the heat finally made them retreat underground for another year. It reminded me of my hike; it was never intended to be a race against the weather, but it became one. I remember that hummingbird hovering two feet from me. The beauty of it was mesmerising.

My friends have finished the adventure, some many weeks ago. They are back to their normal lives, and I hope they're planning their next thru-hike. I miss them, in particular Stumbling Norwegian, Sugar Moma, Hojo, Logic, Burnie, Your Mom, Pony, Pigpen, Evo, Gabe; really, everyone I shared time with. The messages I receive from them and from friends and family back home are encouraging – they spur me on. Only a few more days left and we can call ourselves thru-hikers.

# Chapter 17

Crater Lake

*It's more than just walking. There's a whole culture that goes along with the people. You know how you want the world to be? It's like that on the Pacific Crest Trail. People are helping people.*
**Monty 'Warner Springs Monty' Tam**

We set off on Highway 22 south-bound. A quick look at a map in the supermarket confirmed we needed to stick on that road until it merged with the 20, then the 97 for most of the way before we took a small side road on the final approach to Crater Lake. A few towns and smaller settlements clung to the road such as Sisters, Bend, La Pine and Chemult. They were well spaced and made good, two-day targets. We hoped to reach Sisters, fifty-eight miles away, the following day. We lost a small amount of weight from our packs by taking less food, hoping to supply as we travelled.

Our morale was high and we felt cheerful. We knew we were closing in on our target, that all the hard physical effort over the previous months was going to pay off. Very soon we could call ourselves thru-hikers. The rain had cleared and we walked in sunshine. An occasional cloud wandered past, the air was lush with the smell of fallen leaves, and steam rose from the tarmac as water evaporated, catching chinks of sunlight filtering through the trees.

We warmed up, peeled off a layer, put on sunglasses and started to get used to this new environment. The road was not busy but we had to pay attention to what was approaching. It was too easy to feel safe there, a dangerous attitude when road walking. Every few seconds we'd check oncoming traffic just in case a lorry forced us on to the verge. The road started to play games with us. Sometimes we walked on a softer, gritty surface to the side, which cushioned the feet somewhat and crunched nicely. More often than not, we had to walk on the asphalt, as grit was in short supply. Crash barriers sheltered cars from drops or bridges and these squeezed us dangerously between their steel surface and passing traffic, so we usually tried to get on the other side. Painted white lines became mesmerising and I would slip into a trance, just letting them flash by one by one across my field of vision.

Bends were few and far between. Often we faced a long stretch of road

disappearing over the next horizon, which never seemed to get any closer until finally we hit it, crested the hill and saw more of the same. Trees dripped water, which plinked on our heads, and we splashed through the occasional puddle. At last we stopped for a coffee in Idanha.

“What are you guys up to?” asked the waitress.

“Walking the Pacific Crest Trail,” Chris said. “We’re on the road to Crater Lake because of too much snow up there.” He nodded up towards the hills.

“Awesome!” she replied, scratching her head and nodding. I could tell she had absolutely no idea what we were talking about.

Making good progress on a road isn’t difficult, as roads always follow the path of least resistance and we didn’t have to descend to rivers and ascend again because bridges took them out of the equation. We skirted mountains, rather than going up to the top and down again. We had no need for maps; road signs calculated distances for us and there were few uneven surfaces on which to twist a misplaced ankle.

It is, however, monotonous. Pleading for even a small morsel of stimulation, I played my old trick of getting a brief glimpse of drivers as they flashed by and trying to guess who they were and where they were going. I smiled at the attractive women and awarded myself bonus points for a reciprocated grin. I tried my best to look mischievous when the police approached, just so I might be questioned. If I was struggling mentally, Nick must have been near breaking point: his violent phase kicked in a little earlier each day and lasted just that little longer.

We walked at different paces, which meant we were usually well spaced out. Whenever Chris reached the brow of a hill half a mile ahead of me, or Nick disappeared round a corner, I wondered if I was walking too slowly. Equally, if I was ahead, I thought I was walking too fast or perhaps the others had slowed down. The person up front pretty much dictated breaks so the other two could catch up, but we generally walked for two hours, covering six to eight miles, and then rested. During one section, five miles passed in no time and I felt as if I had glided along with absolutely no effort whatsoever. Had I reached walking enlightenment?

In an attempt to make our situation more acceptable, Nick rigged his iPod inside a small case with a built-in speaker and we sang along to some Kate Bush or Nick Cave, our voices occasionally drowned out by a passing lorry. His other method of not going mad was indulging in a little trekking pole balancing. He pulled this off admirably, even in the forest, but on the

smoother and uninterrupted road where there were no obstacles he was flying. The challenge was to balance the tip of the pole on one finger and keep it upright for as long as possible while still walking. He had developed ingenious tactics, which we borrowed: keep the eye focused on one part of the pole (I stuck a small piece of duct tape just below the handle for the purpose) and block out your surrounding field of vision. Dangerous though this doubtless was, the risk of collision with a car was sometimes deemed necessary in the pursuit of a record.

A couple of walking hours had usually elapsed before the first event took place. Nick would steadily keep an outstretched arm in front, delicately balancing the pole, often for many minutes on end. Occasionally he would experience a loss of concentration or a slight breeze would throw him off – and then the fun started. At times he would have to stop dead in his tracks or hit reverse to prevent the pole from tipping back. Then he might have to speed up to catch up with it as it threatened to fall to the front. I lost count of the times Chris and I observed and laughed as we watched Nick break into a sprint and disappear down the road, trying in vain to stave off defeat. If a sideways tilt caught him off guard he'd think nothing of running sideways into the forest, down an embankment or over scrub. All would go quiet for a minute as he vanished into the pines, before a simple "Bollocks" floating out of the trees confirmed that the game was over.

I reflected on the previous 202 days. All the excitement at the beginning, meeting my fellow hikers at the kick-off party, those hot few weeks in the desert or standing at the top of the world. Fondly remembering all the people I had become acquainted with, I wondered where they were now. Hojo, Stumbling Norwegian, Your Mom, Burnie, Elk and a few others had sent me texts saying they had finished. I caught up with the others through their blogs or email.

We drifted up hills and walked through occasional shallow snow before descending to a wet, shiny road again. The light faded, we donned head torches, the last in the line wearing his so the light shone behind us, just in case, and we started to search for somewhere to sleep. Dense forest lined both sides of the highway, dropping down into a dank darkness. We passed a campsite, now closed, but ventured further to make some miles and then took a side track to get away from the traffic noise. This offered no flat areas, so we returned to the turn-off, walked over to the other side and dipped down the bank. Fallen trees and leaves hampered the search but eventually we

squeezed into the best area we could find. I pitched my tent between two fallen limbs and, on opening the vestibule, was confronted with a bright orange fungus with a patterned head that looked like a face winking at me; it watched me all evening. Tyres hissed from the road and slowly the traffic faded.

We had done well the first day on the road and pulled in twenty-eight miles. This left thirty-one to Sisters, a long day but achievable despite shortening daylight hours. However, by 3pm we calculated a dismal seventeen miles had passed under our boots. We ate a late lunch sitting on a solitary bench by a panoramic point overlooking the mountains. Occasionally a car pulled in and the occupants spilled out with cameras to admire the view. Some eyed us warily; others ventured over and made conversation or tentatively offered us food, as though we were wild animals. One elderly couple spent a good fifteen minutes chatting, showing apparent, genuine interest. As they walked off, I overheard the wife say,

"What are they doing?"

"I have absolutely no idea," the man replied.

Lights started to blink ahead of us as we approached the final section to Sisters but it took an hour to reach them. Traffic slowed on the approach to the town and we began to see pedestrians from time to time. In a burger bar, we took advantage of the 'buy one, get one free' option, warming our backs against a radiator as we ate.

Our feet were on fire. Walk half a mile to work every day on concrete and it would never bother you. Do it for ten hours, however, and it's a different story. Similarly, slapping a wall with your palm doesn't hurt, but do it for hours on end and you'll feel it. Despite all our conditioning over hundreds of miles, the blister was making an unwelcome comeback – and as we sat in the burger bar, we grimaced as we stretched out a sore limb. It was like being back at the start. Calves, tendons and thighs all ached and the pain shot up into our backs. Thank God for ibuprofen.

Reginald at nerve centre HQ had only just got on top of dealing with the temperature drop from the mountains before a long string of messages from Angela down in the feet arrived.

"I think he must be walking on concrete or something," she started. "I thought it would be temporary but I'm experiencing hours and miles of shock to the feet, the soles are getting tender and I've got to deal with the first blisters for 780 miles. Anything you can give me down here?"

“They’re on a road walk, apparently,” Reginald answered, “and we’ve got another few days of it as well. It’s temporary, don’t worry; the diet is a little better, so take what you need from the minerals and nutrients cupboard.”

Sisters Inn and Suites was just down the road next to the supermarket, so we checked in for the night. We did a small re-supply and Nick and Chris prepared meals for the coming section. They usually concocted their own recipes by buying a staple such as rice or couscous, then adding spices such as garlic powder, cumin or nuts. At camp they might add a cured meat or empty in a can of fish. Nick sat by the window with five Ziploc bags, carefully measuring the same amount of each ingredient for them, while Chris sat on the bed chopping various additions and every now and then handing Nick more for each bag. They offered to do the same for me but I declined because I enjoyed my little cooking ritual each evening.

Later, I went for a wander around Sisters, a place well regarded by thru-hikers. Towards the centre of town, I came upon older buildings and an assortment of restaurants and curious little shops. Christmas lights were already up and tinsel hung from window displays. A few late holidaymakers strolled around and chatter spilled out from bar windows. I reached the end of town and looked south, thinking the mountains around Crater Lake would be visible, but they were hiding 127 miles distant below an orange horizon.

Temperatures had risen slightly as we left Sisters and set off to cover the twenty-three miles to Bend, also held in high hiker esteem. We walked in T-shirts through flat, agricultural land, where fields dotted with cows or horses and pale yellow dry grass met the roadside. Cars started to honk and a couple of motorists stopped, asking if we needed anything.

“My sister met you at the motel back in Sisters and told me what you three are doing. That’s amazing!”

Word was circulating that three mad Englishman were road-walking to Crater Lake. We entered a few bars and the waiting staff welcomed us before we had opened our mouths.

“You’re the three Englishman! Come in, sit down, you must be starving!” She flapped around us like a worried mother hen looking after her brood. We just lapped it all up; if nowhere else, we were famous along a small ribbon of tarmac in Oregon.

At another roadside café, we were shown to a table in the corner and customers nudged each other and nodded our way, returning our smiles.

“You’re doing what?” exclaimed one guy as we brought him up to speed,

a section of rump steak hanging from his startled mouth. “What … er, how, why, no, wait, you’ve walked from Mexico? That’s impossible!”

Most of the clientele got busy discussing our plans, the road options and the weather outlook. The waiter came over with the bill and placed it on the table. A red pen had crossed through it, with the words ‘paid’ underneath.

“Guys, it’s your lucky day. Your bill’s been paid.”

We abruptly stopped eating our apple pie.

“Huh?” Chris said.

“One of the locals was listening to your story. He used to hike but can’t any more because of a bad injury. He asked me to tell you that it was his pleasure listening to you and he would be honoured if you would allow him to meet your bill. He’s left; he didn’t want to be known.”

I sat back in my chair, feeling a little humbled and emotional. ‘He can’t hike any more’ echoed in my mind over and over again and I realised how lucky I was. Lucky to even have two legs that worked. We thanked the waiter and left in a grateful, contemplative silence.

We had received good reports about Bend from other hikers, but as we entered the outskirts, it was hard to see what all the fuss was about. A nondescript collection of garages, one or two food stores and supermarkets – hardly enough to justify the claim that it was one of the best trail towns. We had stopped at an intersection, not knowing which way to head, when a woman appeared next to us, waiting for the lights to change so she could cross. It was a rarity to see a pedestrian; most people didn’t venture out without their cars.

“Do you know where the town centre is?” asked Nick.

“Yes, it’s about a mile, I can show you the way if you like.”

We followed her for a short distance and she directed us left at another intersection.

“You can’t miss it,” she said. “It goes straight to town.”

Slowly the out-of-town shopping areas dwindled, to be replaced by houses. The Deschutes river curled up to the road and turned back to run along the rear of some houses at the town’s edge. The ugly duckling started to turn into a swan and our town expectations were slowly met.

Nick stopped to chat to a local, who immediately offered us a place to stay and get cleaned up. I needed to write and send an email to *Country Walking* magazine who had requested a piece on El Camino de Santiago in Spain, a walk I had completed some years earlier. Kelly insisted we stay with him, so

we all bundled in the back of his van.

“Don’t worry, Fozzie,” he said. “There’s a great café with internet just around the corner from me.”

He showed us his home, which turned out to be one of the houses that backed on to the river. There was a small jetty where we sat with a beer, watching the sun go down. Kelly apologised because he had to go out, but left us a key and told us to make ourselves at home.

We ate at the café, where the owners took a keen interest in our adventure and amid the cacophony of rowdy drinkers I somehow managed to concentrate and spent two hours writing the magazine piece. Even the barman asked them to keep the noise down a little.

“There’s an English writer in here trying to work,” he said. “Keep the noise down a little, guys!”

Returning to Kelly’s, I joined Nick and Chris on the jetty for more beer and we idled away an hour just watching the river drift past.

We never did see Kelly again, as he returned in the early hours, but we left him a thank-you note. Oregon hospitality was turning out to be priceless. Word seemed to be getting around about our mission and more and more cars were hooting at us as they sped past, to which we would raise a trekking pole in recognition.

We were detained in Bend by my coffee habit and the proliferation of establishments serving an excellent espresso; I think I stopped at three of them, much to the bemusement of the guys. We scrambled up a steep embankment by the railway to reach Highway 97 and continue our road walk. A long, straight road disappeared over the horizon some three miles away but the 97 was kind. There was less traffic and a soft soil stretched right up to the verge, which made for easy walking.

The amount of litter and discarded items was astonishing. Nick was like a radar and would regularly stop to examine an object to see if it was worth keeping; frankly, I never managed to fathom why such items appealed to him. We came across numerous lighters (most of them working), food scraps, old mobile phones, CDs and quite a few plastic bottles filled with a dubious-looking liquid we assumed was urine. Passing roadworks, the construction team stopped to chat and offered us hot drinks from their flasks.

Nick was also strangely drawn to abandoned buildings. If he spotted anything in the forest that appeared to be manmade out of concrete or wood, he’d disappear to investigate. If this happened near the end of the day, I’d

groan because I knew he'd want to sleep in it. I reckon his fondness for such buildings went back to his budget travelling days without a tent, so anything with a roof meant shelter and a dry night's sleep. We often queried why he'd want to sleep in an abandoned building, with perhaps a dead animal or a pile of excrement sitting in the corner, when he could pitch his tent. I guess it was too hard a habit to break.

We had fifty miles left to Mazama Village, Crater Lake and the end of our hike. Word had reached us of an impending storm. The trail by the lake itself topped out at around 7,700 feet, so we knew that if it rained where we were, then it would be sure to snow up there. We hoped to reach our finishing point before the snow did. A cold wind was already blowing down from the mountains but as we looked to our right we could see no sign of the white stuff on the peaks. Fresh from my triumph against the elements in Washington, I had begun to regard myself as invincible. Snow didn't scare me any more; I didn't particularly enjoy it, but I knew it shouldn't be a problem.

After a brief cigarette and M&M's break, we continued walking. The guys were in front by a short distance and I took a cursory look behind to see if any lorries were approaching and also to see how far we had come. A sheriff's car was not so much approaching as apparently, slowly, tailing us. A bear dashed across the road behind him. At least drivers had some entertainment, I thought. Those coming from the opposite direction would have first seen three English guys with backpacks being followed by a police escort and then a bear scampering across the road. When the police car driver caught my eye, he accelerated past and pulled in a few yards ahead of Nick, who was in front. The sheriff stopped, got out and started talking to Nick and Chris. I arrived half a minute later.

"What's going on?" I enquired.

"Apparently," Nick explained, "we've had an altercation with a gentleman back down the road."

I looked at him, then at Chris. I don't know which one of us looked more perplexed; even the sheriff started to look puzzled.

"Huh?" was all I could think of saying, but then added, "We haven't seen anyone for at least an hour."

The sheriff attempted to shed some light on the situation.

"We received a call from a gentleman saying you had shouted abuse at him a couple of miles back. Do you know anything about this? His dog was

going crazy."

"Oh, the dog!" I said, as realisation suddenly dawned. "We passed a house and there was a dog looking through the gate at us, so we whistled at it, but not out of aggression or anything. You know, you see a dog in the park and you sometimes whistle at it. We didn't even see anyone else."

The sheriff scribbled on a pad and had a quick conversation with someone on the radio.

"What are you guys doing anyway?"

"We're walking the Pacific Crest Trail, but got snowed out of the mountains above Detroit, so we're finishing it off by road walking the section down to Crater Lake," Chris explained.

"You know there's a storm blowing in, don't you? Snow higher up." We said we had heard. "Our phone call," the sheriff said, "was obviously a misunderstanding; I'll go see the guy and ask him to stop wasting our time. Guys, good luck, I wish you well."

Generally I don't get on well with those in authority but I do, strangely, enjoy encounters with the American police. There's the odd officer who thinks he rules the world, but on the whole they're a reasonable bunch, and this guy was no exception.

We were making better progress than expected and suddenly La Pine looked within reach as long as we could do thirty miles that day. We put our heads down, forgoing breaks, and cracked out nine miles in two and a half hours. La Pine was basically a trucker stop. An old-fashioned motel in a rather fetching shade of pink bordered the highway, and Gordy's restaurant and bar over the road looked like it might serve up a decent dinner. Nick charmed the woman on reception into giving a healthy discount for cash and we holed up in our art deco-styled room as a frost crept up to the front door. The push-button TV needed several minutes to reach operating temperature but there were gallons of steaming hot water with which to have a bath.

A couple of drinkers propped up Gordy's bar, and an empty dining room didn't bode too well. Stuffed animals hung on all the walls and I wondered if the owner had more of a penchant for taxidermy than for cooking. As I perused the menu, an elk was eyeing me cautiously, two raccoons seemed to be sizing me up and a very large black bear held his paws by his head in a posture of surrender. It was a little creepy. Thankfully, the owner was a good cook and we tucked into 'breakfast' at dinner.

We had calculated just forty-four miles left to Mazama Village, which we

knew was achievable in two days providing the weather held. However, after a quick check on our road map, I announced my maths needed a little adjustment and in fact the figure was nearer sixty-eight. Highway 97 carried on a further thirty-eight miles to an intersection, where we needed to turn right on to the 138. Fifteen miles up this road the entrance to Crater Lake would appear, and from there it was a further fifteen miles to Mazama Village. Two days suddenly seemed a little ambitious, even with easy walking on the road; moreover, once we hit the Crater Lake National Park turn-off, there was a good chance it would be covered in snow. The snow plough, we were told by a local, only clears the highway, not the park roads, which were now closed for the season.

The side turning on to the 138 also apparently housed a motel and another restaurant. Although the finances were taking a bit of a battering, our stomachs were full and we were warm at night. Sleeping in a tent in freezing temperatures, however, does condition you to the cold. Snuggling up under blankets in a warm motel room doesn't. As we emerged from our haven, we shivered and jumped up and down. Ice covered the car windows and dusted long blades of grass, making them curl downwards like white talons. Postponing our exercise in warming up to operating temperature, we ducked into Gordy's again for breakfast.

The adventure I had hoped for did not consist of road walking, but sometimes plans have to be altered to fit circumstances. In an ideal world, my hike would have been in total wilderness, all conveniences necessary for re-supply and food would be clustered around a road crossing every week and then I'd be back in the hills. My hike would have started at Mexico and weaved north to finish at the Canadian border. Skipping a section to return and complete it wasn't part of the plan either. I had wanted to do a pure hike, start at the start and finish at the finish, and the other guys had had the same ambition. We were confident of completion, but we would rather have followed the natural course of the PCT and not been snowed off. Yet, aware that a very small proportion of our hike was off trail, we never once considered reaching Mazama and not calling ourselves PCT thru-hikers.

Although Highway 97 had never even crossed my mind before, I didn't begrudge her company. She was looking after us, keeping us warm at night and filling our stomachs. By now we had become known on the highway, and were waved at, beeped at, given the thumbs-up out of windows, fed for free, not charged for coffee and offered a roof for the night. It may not have been

the wilderness, but it was pure entertainment.

After finally emerging from Gordy's, we crunched along on ice and grit. It had turned much colder, perhaps a sign of the imminent storm. Cloud blocked out any hope of warmth, the wind was increasing and leaves flew across the road as if trying to escape.

After a disappointing seventeen miles that seemed to last an eternity, we reached Chemult, essentially a garage and a drive-in coffee shop. I walked up to the window in search of an espresso and startled the woman inside.

"You're supposed to be in a car!" she joked.

"I wish," I replied.

"What are you guys doing?"

After I'd given her the shortened version, she handed us each a coffee, gave me a hand-crocheted beanie and called her husband.

"Wait five minutes and you two can have one as well," she added, pointing to Nick and Chris.

We had only managed another three miles by the time we reached the turn-off for Highway 138 and the Whispering Pines Motel. 'Whispering' was a bit weak as a description; 'howling' was more appropriate. We checked in, relaxed a little and then ventured through the gale to the diner on the opposite side of the road. Although about to shut up shop, the cook knocked us up a quick burger and chips.

According to the owners at Whispering Pines, this was the storm that had been forecast; the snow was pretty certain to start in the early hours, and Crater Lake, higher up, would already have received a plentiful coating. We got our heads down for an early start and the final 30 miles to our finish.

At 4.45am, Nick hesitantly drew the curtain back and pressed his nose to the glass.

"Raining," he announced.

As I did the same, all I could make out was a solitary street light illuminating the road junction. The rain came in waves and water trickled down the cold window. An occasional car speeding past sent a fine spray skywards, obscuring the street light. We all harboured mixed feelings: anticipation at finishing together with hesitation about going out in the rain and probably snow. My stomach fluttered with butterflies. We wrapped up in waterproofs, made sure our pack contents were protected and gingerly stepped out. It was still dark and noticeably colder. We had fifteen miles before the turn-off for Crater Lake Park, all of it on a slight incline. I pulled

the draw cord on my jacket hood tighter and slapped my arms to warm up. Gradually, the slick, shiny, black bitumen began to change. Rain slowly stopped falling and instead started floating around us as snow, which settled on our shoulders. The moisture from the rain on my jacket started to freeze and I found myself encased in a coating of ice, which cracked as I bent my arm. The splashing of feet turned to crunching as black faded to white. The higher we ventured, the colder and whiter it became, until everything was virgin silver. It had taken just an hour to walk straight into winter. Ice crystals formed on my beard and flakes rested on my eyelashes. There were no tyre tracks until a snow plough suddenly came towards us, sending up a huge arc of snow on to the verge. It was barely light but he saw us and graciously stopped until we had passed, puzzlement plain to see in his face.

When we eventually reached the Crater Lake Park entrance, our ploughed road ceased and we encountered a strip of pure white powder stretching away through the trees. A solitary latrine offered us some shelter for a few minutes as we ate some food and smoked cigarettes. Cringing, we drank some water, which was barely still liquid. It was already painfully cold and we had further still to climb.

The road was our main focus of attention. Our road map lacked detail, so we clung to this fast-disappearing black strip. On the short sections where the road cut through some sheltering trees, we could see it well enough, but once we emerged it took all our concentration to pick out the narrow, black ribbon that wound up to the lake. The snow was starting to drift, and our only clue that we were still on tarmac came from tufts of grass and vegetation poking through the surface at the sides. It was now about a foot deep and the clouds had merged into a grey mist, cloaking the tops of the trees. Nick’s knee was troubling him; he had taken a week out right back at the start to rest it and it had not really troubled him since. Now, though, having to pull his legs out of the snow with every step, it was becoming painful and he was lagging behind Chris and me.

Finally, we reached the crater. What greeted us took our breath away. A giant caldera six miles wide, flanked by peaks and filled with the purest blue water, glittered and sparkled. The blue was beginning to recede as an ice sheet spread. Below us, the conical symmetry of Wizard Island broke the surface. We sat on the cold, hard ground for an age and just looked, speechless, a hint of a smile cracking our frozen faces. There was no need for words, nor could I have found the right ones to describe the vision that I had

been dreaming about for months. We were nearly at the end. Nearly.

The last few miles down to Mazama Village couldn't be that difficult, we thought. The western side of the lake, however, had received the full brunt of both wind and snow. Only the occasional morsel of open road peeped out of the drifting snow, which came up to our waists. We constantly checked ahead to try and catch a glimpse of black poking through white, sometimes walking at the side, but the ground sloped away from us and threatened to whip away our feet.

Nick was having a rough time. He spent most of the afternoon hobbling, in between fairly frequent stops to try and rest his knee. Either Chris or I shadowed him as the other walked ahead and pushed through a route. He didn't complain, just told us how it was and got on with it, albeit slowly. Several months of solid walking and then his knee gives up on the last day! He had no choice; he had to struggle on or be left in the freezing cold. It was painful progress and we were all exhausted. You don't walk through snow, you plough through. Most of the time we were knee to waist deep. We'd take a step forward and guess whether the snow would compact and hold the foot or whether we would sink further, as invariably we did. Drag the trailing leg out of the hole, keep it bent to clear the surface, place it down and repeat the whole process. We were at the edge of energy reserves, dangerously cold, disheartened and on the verge of calling it a day. The only solace was that we were expecting to see Trooper at Mazama after I had arranged for him to meet us. Being an Englishman, I was not part of the 'we cover 90% of all Americans' promise by my mobile provider, so I had no way now of contacting him. I had only known Trooper for a few weeks; the guys were worried whether he would turn up.

"Trooper will be there," I told them. "And, if he has to go back to his motel, he'll be there waiting in the morning."

We knew Mazama Village would be a ghost town; it shuts down out of season, so there would be no chance of food or board. After thirty miles in these conditions, our only reward would be sleeping out in them.

Gradually we descended, too tired to even rest and eat. Slowly the snow thinned out, until we were back hopping from one section of road to another. We stamped our feet to dislodge ice encrusted on our boots, brushed the snow off our shoulders and somehow staggered the last few miles to a small cluster of buildings. It was dark as we stood by the road intersection where I had been with Rockets some weeks earlier. I was startled at how everything

had changed. On my last visit, I had been sweating in shorts and a T-shirt. Now I was wearing most of what I was carrying. Trooper was nowhere to be seen but it was now 9pm. A few tyre tracks ribboned and swirled around the intersection and then a ranger pulled up.

"You Fozzie?"

I raised my eyebrows in surprise and smiled.

"Yes!"

"Guy called Trooper wants you to know that he was here waiting for you. He said he'll come back at nine tomorrow. Where you guys going to sleep? Will you be OK?"

"We'll be fine," I replied. "Thanks for the message."

In better spirits, we put up the tents, fluffed up our bags and blew up our mattresses for the last time that year. Before long, we were huddled in our tents, watching steam rise from our stoves as I had done way back down on the first morning in the desert chill. Cupping my mug, I sipped delicately at the hot chocolate. There had been no celebration. We were so tired we had completely forgotten we had even finished.

# Chapter 18

The Original Question

*Days like today I'm a half step from putting on my pack and wrapping my hands around those trekking poles. I just want to go back to what makes sense to me. Back to where I'm happy. Back to where I'm the best me I've ever known.*
**Dave 'Upchuck' Ferber**

I woke up grinning. After completely forgetting to celebrate our finish, the realisation dawned that I was now a Pacific Crest Trail thru-hiker. I poked my head out of the tent to bright sunlight bouncing off fresh, crisp snow. I didn't care about the cold any more, the exhaustion or the hunger; I had beaten all of the odds. California couldn't stop me, Washington didn't hold me back and Oregon tried but failed. I felt like a seven-year-old waking up on Christmas day, eager to get out of bed and open my presents.

The guys were up before me, and after a quick breakfast and breaking camp we strolled down to the road junction where I needed to organise a quick task before Trooper arrived.

At the beginning of my trek I had continued to hound Chris, the proprietor at ÜLA, for pack sponsorship. I knew it was a futile exercise; it just turned out to be a bit of a joke between us. Attached to the last email I had received from him was a photo of a woman carrying one of his packs. It was taken from behind and she was naked. The email message was simple: "She gets one, you don't."

From time to time during the hike, this email flashed into my mind and made me smile; walking 2,650 miles also gave me ample time to plot a little revenge. The guys agreed with my plan. After setting Nick's camera up on his tripod, we stood in line with our backs to the camera and dropped our trousers. The lens clicked and we checked the photo: it was perfect. Three guys wearing ÜLA packs and displaying three pairs of butt cheeks. A few days later I sent this to Chris, again asking for a free pack. I heard nothing for a week, so I sent him another email asking if he had received it.

"Yes, Fozzie, I received your message," he replied. "I've just got out of therapy and no, you still don't get a freebie."

What Chris does not yet realise is the more he resists, the more of a

challenge it is. One day…

True to his promise, Trooper came sliding down the road and skidded to a halt in front of us, beaming.

“I told you you’d make it!” he cried. “You must have been through hell and back!”

“I think hell would have been a little warmer,” I replied with a satisfied grin.

I introduced him to Nick and Chris and we bundled in to his car and headed for Ashland, the nearest transport hub, from where we could continue our journeys. In England we don’t know how to drive in snow because we rarely receive any snowfall. Trooper took off down the hill as if he were on a rally stage, while I held firmly on to the door and looked skywards for help.

Chris had chosen to travel down to Los Angeles and Nick to San Diego for different reasons but both decided that sun was the major factor. I had to get back to San Jose, collect my belongings from my relatives, wind down for a couple of days and get a flight back home. We stopped at the first diner and ate like wolves, treating Trooper to his meal, as he wouldn’t accept any money for fuel. Chris needed to get to a different bus station and, as Trooper had agreed to take him there, it was time to say our farewells. Chris lived a few miles from me back home – as did Nick – so I knew I would see him again. I gave heartfelt thanks to Trooper, who lives near Campo; we said we would see each other at the next kick-off party. Nick and I waited for our bus to Sacramento, where we would go our separate ways.

Too tired to talk but not tired enough to sleep, I gazed out of the bus window as darkness fell and city lights appeared. While Nick slept, I answered a few voicemails from friends demanding news and watched the world flash by. Sacramento was uninspiring, especially in the middle of the night; and after an hour’s waiting, Nick boarded his onward bus with a thumbs-up and a smile. Before I knew it I was back at the home of Aunty Jillian and Uncle Tony, booking a flight back home to the UK.

Journal entry:

Back home.

Nearly four weeks back in England now. I still sleep with my head torch by the bed. I’m way too hot in the house and have to open the windows, even in this weather. I still wake up for a brief moment, thinking I have to walk twenty-five miles, and feel strange when I’m not wearing my trail gear.

On the plus side, it's great not to be cold for seven days at a time. I love not being restricted in a sleeping bag, I can have a coffee pretty much whenever I want and I don't have to filter my water. When I go for a walk in my local woods, I still take a mental note of where the water is and find myself looking at clearings between the trees sussing out suitable places to camp. Without my pack, I walk quickly and have to remind myself to slow down, that I'm in no rush.

The transition back to 'normal' life is going relatively smoothly. I don't appear to be suffering from the post-travel depression that usually dogs me when I return from such an adventure. However, I do miss the trail. Being out there in the wild has left a mark on me. Leaving my humdrum life behind was easy. OK, sometimes I yearned to be back in civilisation, but in the main, I relished being lucky enough to have witnessed the wilderness at its best.

I am more patient now. Few things are worth becoming stressed about, and after a trip of this kind you realise that most situations in life are not as bad as they appear. Spending time outside nurtures you; it seizes hold of you and lures you to a peaceful, serene, natural-feeling environment. The logistics of the PCT can be complex, but once you are out there, they are all worth the effort.

So, what now? I'm back doing my decorating, which is bearable, but I daydream between brush strokes. I think about the next walk; and there *will* be a next walk. All the national trails in Great Britain in one attempt? A walk around the coast of Great Britain, maybe? Or how about all 3,200 miles of the classic European E1 hike from Italy to Norway (or the other way round)? There are also numerous other long-distance paths in Europe I have my eye on, with a possible 2012 start date. My thoughts also return to America: the Appalachian Trail and the Continental Divide Trail beckon, along with the prospect of becoming a Triple Crowner. I may not be walking at the moment but life's good when you're planning the next adventure. Or I think about the Himalayas, the Far East, Scotland. Each has its own unique perspective, and each should be experienced. This isn't a competition, though; it's an education.

* * *

The transition back to everyday life goes well for some hikers. Others struggle with it. Flyboxer revealed his post-hike experience:

“In some ways, I felt like my post-PCT experience was more interesting than my actual hike. I could probably write a small book about it but I will try and summarise it in a couple of paragraphs.

“I finished my actual hike on 3 November after hiking south-bound from Idyllwild to Campo. I had hiked from Idyllwild to Manning Park from May 22 to October 13. I thought I had done a pretty good job budgeting my trip. I tried to keep zeros to a minimum, didn’t waste a lot of time in town and didn’t go overboard staying in motels. However, I had a couple of unforeseen expenses that basically wiped out the money I hoped to have saved for my post-hike transition. I found myself unemployed, almost broke and homeless in San Diego. A good friend of mine lived there, but I didn’t want to crash at his place while I was looking for work. I got the vibe that I wasn’t welcome to do that anyhow, so I decided to live in my car. I missed how the trail seemed to consume my day, physically, mentally and emotionally. I found this gaping hole screaming to be filled once I finished. For the first few days in San Diego, I felt lost. I was spending most of my time walking all over the city because I still wanted and needed to walk. I was a wanderer. I felt more akin to the homeless than my working peers. I found myself hanging out naturally in places where most homeless people hang out. In parks, near the water and on benches. I was still in survival mode, I guess, and my eyes were constantly looking for natural shelters and places to sleep in the city. It felt very strange, something I had never done before. I still had my beard, didn’t have access to a regular shower and people began talking to me who never used to before, mostly homeless folks.”

I felt lucky when I first read this experience – at least I had a room to stay in. Flyboxer continued:

“I knew that I needed structure, so I tried to set up a daily routine. My day seemed to revolve around the toilet. It’s amazing what a person can take for granted when they have a place to live. On the trail, I tried to stay hydrated, almost over-hydrated; it didn’t matter. You stop and pee wherever you want. Now I found myself keeping my liquid intake to a minimum, because I got tired of having to look all over for a public toilet. The park restrooms were always filled with creeps, and weird stuff seemed to be taking place in them all the time, which was very disheartening. I started drawing a lot. I’d just hang out in the park and draw for hours; it was very therapeutic and gave me something tangible to look at when the day was over. My computer was in

my storage unit in Los Angeles, so I had to use the library computers in the city to look for work. The city's libraries felt more like a mental institution than a library.

"My car's brakes were completely shot, so I had to spend $600 to get them fixed, just so I could drive up to LA to get my computer and look for jobs. A trip up there and back would cost another $100. Driving was the only thing that helped me feel normal, but I had to keep it to an absolute minimum. For a start, gas was expensive. Also, having found a good parking spot where I felt relatively safe to sleep at night, I didn't want to lose it and have to find another place to sleep. I was keeping an eagle eye on my bank account, watching the numbers fall day after day. I was in a race against my account.

"I started going to daily mass at the Catholic church in Little Italy. It forced me to wake up early, was predictable and so gave me a feeling of normality, and that I was starting the day right. After one morning mass, I watched a homeless man exit the church in a front side door no-one else used. Why did he take that exit? I wondered. I decided to do the same, and discovered a sparklingly clean private restroom in a courtyard along the side of the church. Hallelujah!

"Once I got my computer back, I started going every day to a café, where I could take full advantage of the free Wi-Fi to start looking for work. My life fell into a routine. Each day I went to mass in the morning, then drew in the park for a couple of hours. I looked for jobs, went for a long walk around the city, went back to a different café in the afternoon, allowing myself a cup of coffee or two, looked for more jobs or wasted time online, went for another long walk in the evening and then called it a day. It was amazing how hard it was to fill my day. I craved normality.

"Often I would walk down by the waterfront at night and look at the people eating in the restaurants. It was a life that seemed almost unattainable at this point. My heart ached, wondering what I had become. I would see my peers who were going to work, eating lunch. That too seemed out of my reach. It was as if I had fallen. At the same time, paradoxically, I carried this fire within, this wholly satisfying feeling of accomplishment, knowing that I had completed the PCT. It was pure *1984*-style doublethink: carrying two contradictory notions in my mind at the same time.

"I had been living in my car for a month in San Diego and experienced a new low when a homeless man actually gave me a dollar. I couldn't believe it. What was happening? It was almost comical. I tried to refuse it, but the

man had collected $45 that day, begging down by the waterfront, and was going to sleep in a hotel room for the night. ‘I have everything I need for today,’ the man said. ‘Take the dollar.’

“A few days afterwards, I received good news. I got a job offer. Although I wanted to live in San Diego, the job was in northern California. Unable to wait any longer, I took it. By the time I left San Diego, picked up the rest of my belongings in LA and arrived, I was down to my last few hundred bucks. I was in a completely new town, didn’t know a soul, and for the first couple of weeks was unbelievably lonely. I tried to keep my situation to myself. I put my things in storage, applied for membership of a gym in order to access the showers and opened a PO box. My monthly expenses were $80. I started work immediately, worked out and showered at the gym in the morning, went to work during the day and ate at a café at night. I didn’t have enough money to rent a room, so I continued to live in my car. When my first paycheck arrived, I cried with relief and a sense of achievement. Now my routine became solid, like hiking the trail, but naturally different in many ways. The PCT had given me the knowledge and confidence to survive, the patience to work towards a goal and the determination to face difficult circumstances.

“Four months later, I was finally able to get out of my car and back under a proper roof. I’ll never forget how it felt to sleep in my own room again, to use my own toilet and shower, to cook on a stove with gas! It was all luxury to me – anything other than a meal and shelter was sheer indulgence.

“Despite it all, I’m hoping to hike another long trail soon. I am currently planning an attempt on the CDT. Hopefully this time, I will be in a better place financially post-trail.”

Most hikers’ post-trail experience is not as hard as Flyboxer’s. I had given up my rented house, my possessions were split between two friends’ garages and I had a little money left, though not enough to rent anywhere, so I moved back with my parents. My work picked up quickly and, despite my fears that my business might have suffered after I’d left it for seven months, I enjoyed the busiest year of work ever.

The problem with this successful period of work ever was that I wasn’t doing a long-distance walk. Putting by funds for a walk is a necessary evil, unless you’re rich or have financial sponsors. To save money you have to work: it’s a terribly unfair arrangement. I often wonder who invented money, and what idiot thought up the notion of exchanging money for goods and

services. Did they have the remotest idea what they were getting us into?

It's a common pattern among hikers. Do a long-distance walk, live free (in spirit) for a few months, forget about your worries and then return. Realise just how many useless possessions you actually own, find somewhere to live, get a job and then the process starts over again. I don't dislike my life back in town; I would just rather be up in the hills. Post-trail depression is also intensified by the weather, as most hikes take place in the summer months, bringing you back to the comfortless gloom of autumn or winter. Daylight recedes, the cold sets in and you're not where you want to be.

We carry on cooking our meals in one pot over one burner, the heating gets turned off and the bedroom window stays open. Except possibly for the occasional reunion with a favourite pair of jeans, we continue to wear our hiking clothes because we know they are the most comfortable. We take a shower when we think we smell enough and wash our clothes when they look undeniably grubby. Rising in the morning, we try reluctantly to come to terms with the fact that there is no trail waiting for us.

It's a long, slow transition, or perhaps more of a reluctant acceptance until gradually we get back into the nine-to-five and settle grudgingly back into society.

"What has changed me most is that I am way simpler than I ever was, although I was pretty simple to begin with," Sugar Moma explains. She continues:

"I can still live off 200 to 300 bucks a month and I sleep in my sleeping bag almost every night. I shower no more than two or three times a week and only when I'm in a city! I still cook and eat out of my one pot. I'm always longing to hike, and when I'm in the city I walk everywhere. Poor Kharma (her dog) doesn't get driven much any more.

"My feelings after getting off the trail? Oh my God, so mixed. Sad because it's over, happy not to have to get up every day and plan my miles, missing my hiker friends a lot (they're the ones who know how I'm really feeling), confused about what to do next, where to go, do I want a real job with a home or do I want to gypsy everywhere and keep on adventuring?

"I've always loved nature and what Mom gives us. I respect it more now and appreciate every moment I have with her; rain, snow, sunshine. I keep a smile on my face always, even when I'm sad or angry. It not only makes me feel better, it makes everyone around me feel good too!

“Did I learn anything on the trail? So many things: be creative with your food, drink lots of water, smile always even when your feet are killing you, stop and smell the roses, don’t sweat the small stuff, be grateful for the big stuff, which is usually little anyways. Relish the moments you have simple things that most people don’t appreciate every day: a soft bed, long hot showers, a real meal that someone else cooked! The company of someone you haven’t seen in a long time, transport, a chair to sit on, pretty dresses, heater when it’s cold out, fresh clean laundry – shall I go on?

“Getting off the trail made it difficult for me to go back into the city and be a part of so-called society again. People that haven’t hiked a long trail just don’t understand. I’ve been called lazy, a runaway from society and the real world. I look at it differently. I hiked 2,650 miles, with everything I needed on my back – that’s hardly lazy. It took a lot of planning, configuring and mental drainage, not to mention the physical part of actually walking and carrying everything all that way. Sleeping in the rain and the snow, wondering if the bears and mountain lions would be attacking me for food at night, finding scorpions in my bag in the morning, dealing with sore feet and running out of important items, knowing I still had fifty miles to the next town before I could do anything about it. I have learned to appreciate every day as it comes and as it is; not too many people can accept that. I’d rather be in the mountains, with nothing but necessities, than in the city with the hustle and bustle. People too busy to stop and see what’s around them, too stressed out to notice the beautiful flowers growing right in their yard or people sleeping on the sidewalk in the cold or homeless children hungry on the streets. Things I didn’t see before, I see it all now, *all* of it.”

It’s interesting that Sugar Moma picks up on others calling her lazy and a runaway from society and the real world. Long-distance hiking or any adventure of long duration tends to confuse people who don’t take part in it or may even make them bitter. We seem to be brainwashed into thinking that there is an acceptable way of living our lives, and anyone that moves off that path or makes their own choices against the grain is not normal.

I’ve experienced it myself. Even though most of my family and friends now accept my wanderings and encourage them, nearly all of them struggled at first. I, too, was often labelled as lazy and accused of running away from my problems. As Sugar Moma says, the one thing you cannot accuse a thru-hiker of is being lazy. One year of planning, logistics, securing sponsorship,

saying goodbye to people you love and then *walking* 2,650 miles with everything strapped to your back? Anyone who can put forward a good argument for labelling this as lazy I would love to hear from.

I suspect that underneath the accusations lie the difficulties many people have in grasping the notion of leaving their everyday lives to go and do something they really want to do. OK, so hiking isn't to everyone's taste but we all have passions, loves, fixations and pastimes that need feeding, whether it's mountaineering, fishing, yoga, cooking or riding a horse.

I fully appreciate that most of us are perfectly happy in our careers, bringing up children, paying the mortgage and not ever wanting to leave for several months, regardless of the reasons. I have no argument with this choice (in fact, I'm a little jealous) and equally I understand that some of us can't (or feel they can't) leave because of these commitments. I am not married (probably never will be), do not have kids (that I know of), don't have a mortgage and I am my own boss. These weren't conscious decisions I made so as to free me to fulfil my adventurous instincts, but they worked out perfectly for me. I can't get married because I'm terrible in a relationship, I don't like the tie of a mortgage, kids drive me nuts and I became my own boss because I hate people telling me what to do.

Elk summed his hike up from a different angle:

"Shortly after the PCT, I returned to Utah and I tried to get a job with a wilderness therapy program I had worked for previously. My old boss strung me along for a few months until I realised this wasn't going to happen.

"I had a little money left over, so I scrounged and saved while putting resumes together to try and get another job. After near on a hundred attempts, I got a job with my current employer. Now I'm OK.

"However, between the time I was unemployed and when I found a job, I had some realisations about my old job, my life and the period I took off for the trail. It sounds basic but I understood, finally, that it doesn't matter how much energy you put into something, the return you want is not guaranteed. It's important to be proactive but, even then, one needs to understand that it's how you react to certain situations that counts. This is sometimes even more important when you decide to not react at all.

"In short, I finally realised the importance of making a timely decision and not allowing my emotions to make my choices.

"Currently I'm working with the commercial fishing industry as an

oceanic observer. I have short hair and I shaved my beard. In other words, I'm really lame but I'm no longer hungry. I can't begin to describe how great the trail was for me."

Elk, Sugar Moma, Flyboxer and most of the others I met on trail realise where their hearts belong: out in the wild. They will work for a while until the bugs hit them again (if, indeed, it ever leaves) and then they'll set off on another hike. At some point, probably when our knees give out, we'll call it a day and then we can all look back and be proud at what we have achieved. No sitting in that rocking chair I mentioned and regretting what we didn't do.

Like some of the others, I also began to resent my life back in town. When I made the decision to tackle the PCT, one of my goals was to be completely open to circumstance. Let me elaborate. None of us is truly free; we only ever attain steps towards freedom, some more than others. In our everyday lives it's extraordinarily difficult to live freely. We follow familiar patterns: wake up, have breakfast, go to work, get back, chill out and go to bed. Imagine being able to get out of bed, look out of the window, be met with a beautiful day and decide to discard your normal pattern and simply follow whatever course you want – just for one, short day.

Perhaps you decide to go for a stroll in the park? You see an old man sitting on a bench looking a little sad. Instead of walking by, you think about sitting next to him and trying to cheer him up, so you do. You chat for a while and leave him smiling, feeling better about the day. He has told you about a path leading off into the woods that you don't remember even being there. You take it. It leads to a stream winding through a copse bursting to life in the early spring. Flowers poke through the soil, you smell onions and then discover a huge swath of wild garlic. Picking a few leaves, you decide to cook some soup with them later. And so it carries on…

I wanted to nurture this freedom, take advantage of random events on the trail, and for the most part I did, making as few plans as possible. Even then, of course, I wasn't completely free. I was entertaining one big, overall plan after all; to walk from Mexico to Canada. But in between those two points, I tried to pander to random events. Walking the PCT I came as close as I ever will to being truly free.

I'll leave the last post-hike word to Hojo:

"I remember getting back to my folks and being kind of a zombie. I was

exhausted physically, mentally, emotionally and I think I slept for a full day. It took a couple of months for me to recover physically, and when I did, the enormity of what I had just accomplished began to set in. I also remember getting up at 5.30am every morning for a few months, feeling like I had to break camp, make breakfast and put some miles in!

"When I see a map of the United States these days it makes me smile. I've always been patriotic but I think I have a bit more national pride these days. Having walked both coasts of this great nation (I did the Appalachian Trail in 1998), I know it to be an amazing place filled with incredible people and spectacular scenery.

"I remain grateful for the opportunity to pursue my dream of hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. Sharing the experience with family and friends (I hiked three days and thirty-three miles with my father near Lake Tahoe) and making new friends along the journey remains a highlight of my thru-hike. It's an incredible accomplishment, made extra special by the fact that I'm a cancer survivor.

"Since finishing the PCT, I've been fortunate enough to give a presentation on my thru-hike and led a college-level backpacking course in West Virginia.

"As I write this, I'm sitting in my ski patrol dispatch building. It's thirty-five degrees and raining outside (essentially the weather I hiked through Oregon in). I didn't particularly like it then and I don't care for it now. It remains my least favourite weather to be outside in!"

Hojo, Sugar Moma, Elk, Flyboxer and 99% of the people I met on trail will be friends for the rest of my life. Most of them live in the States, so I won't get to see them regularly, but I shared a strong connection with them. They were all there for their own different reasons, apart from walking the PCT, but I felt as close to them after just a day in their company as I am to people I have known for years. Hiking makes for the strongest bond I know.

I'm asked many times why I hike. People wait for my answer with an expectant look on their face, as if they think I have discovered the meaning of life or have reached some sort of enlightenment. Of course I haven't; if only it were that simple. However, spending so much time in the wild does change a person. It doesn't matter if the challenge is the Pacific Crest Trail, the Appalachian Trail, sailing around the world, climbing Everest or crossing the Sahara – adventuring for an extended period of time opens one's eyes. When

we look back as an outsider to the lives we left, we can act as an impartial observer and see what we are doing wrong, what we can improve on and what we are doing right. Call it a reality check, if you like. Sometimes we are aware of how we can improve our lives, but when we are actually embroiled in them, changes are difficult to make. An escape to nature is a perfect time to take one step back and study the situation we have left. Invariably we return as improved individuals with passionate ideas on how to be better people.

So, I shall take you back to the beginning and the promise I made to answer, as best I can, *that* original question: why?

Be free
Eat as much as you like
Become super-fit
Meet like-minded people
Meet some idiots
Give up alcohol on trail
Make up for lack of alcohol in town
Experience pristine wilderness
Don’t pay rent
Appreciate people more
Have no time for losers
Live by what you carry
Realise just how much of what you own is completely pointless
Not have to wake up to an alarm clock
Forget about TV
Leave your phone turned off for days
Sleep under the stars every night
Sleep under the sun during the day
Go and do it in reply to people saying “You can’t do that!”
Take a bath in a lake
Lie under the sky at night and feel yourself fall away into infinity
Because you can
Know exactly what you want for breakfast, and how you want it, without looking at the menu
Lose weight
Gain muscle

Laugh at the confused expressions of people in town when you tell them what you're doing
Figure out what you actually want to do for work
Have the guts to go and do it
Make up stupid names for other people
Have other people make up stupid names for you
Cleanse your body by drinking loads of water
Accept and be at one with your stink
Realise how bad town people stink
Learn perseverance
Learn stubbornness
Learn how to never, ever, ever give up
Implore others to never, ever, ever give up
Actually enjoy a McDonald's
Wear one pair of underwear and socks for a week
Watch your hair do amazing and crazy things without products
Grow a beard
Be amazed at the hospitality of others
Be a shoulder to cry on
Find a shoulder to cry on
Be a shrink
Be a super-human, indestructible hiking machine
Have time to think
Cook a filling meal for £1
Be at one with and learn to respect wildlife
Scare yourself shitless by meeting a bear for the first time
Be the furthest you've ever been from anyone else
Make genuine friends for life
Become mildly famous
Gain respect
Sleep outside more times in a year than you slept indoors
Become hypnotised by camp fires
Breathe clean air
Experience being speechless at a view
Sit in a public place having not washed for nine days and snigger to yourself at other people's reactions
Get asked to leave public places

Enjoy bananas
Appreciate stuff you haven’t seen for ages
Don’t look at your inbox for a week
Try and catch up with your inbox after a week
Get to wear tights and be accepted
Get to wear a kilt and be accepted
Get to wear tights and a kilt at the same time
Shop for a lot of gear and for once be confident that it will all get used
Get sponsored with free gear
Become a porridge expert
Avoid relationship commitments for six months
Meet the person of your dreams
Pinpoint who always has chocolate and quickly make friends with them
Discover wild food
Repair anything with nothing
Realise what it’s like to be homeless
Understand why our fixation with money is the root of all evil
Be at one with yourself
Don’t work for six months
Actually have the time to read your camera manual
Sing at the top of your voice
Read a book a week
Run away from your problems
Discover the pleasures of dark chocolate-covered almonds
Learn to accept ramen noodles
Escape from ramen noodles
Do gear comparisons
Have a genuine excuse to make a video of yourself
Accept being cold
Accept being wet
Accept being too hot
Moan at how cold, wet or hot you are
Sleep outside at well below freezing
Drink two litres of water in one go and still be thirsty
Escape from the media
Believe in conspiracy theories
Make up your own and scare people

Accept anything offered to you
Give freely
Hug people and mean it
Be hugged and know they mean it
Invent disgusting new recipes based on the food you carry
Have others confirm it
Feel alive in a forest with the wind around you
Realise the outdoors is where you are supposed to be
Nurture a deep loathing for batteries
Miss your favourite beer, discover new ones and get a new favourite
Learn how to push just that little but further
Play frisbee at 12,000 feet with drops all around you
Instigate longest frisbee flight ever recorded from same place
Make your dreams come true
Have others appreciate and accept you for who you are
No reason at all except you wanted to
Be as free as you will ever hope to be
And, finally, be at one with yourself

Any questions?

## Praise for *The Last Englishman*

"I'm not sure if Keith Foskett knows it but he has penned a hiking classic. I just wanted to pack up my bags and head off into the wilderness."

**– Spencer Vignes** (*The Observer*)

"Fewer people have hiked the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail than have climbed Everest. In *The Last Englishman*, Keith Foskett tells of his seven-month hike from Mexico to Canada, crossing desert and mountain and meeting everything from eccentric hikers to rattlesnakes along the way. Easy to read and at times laugh-out-loud funny, it will make you want to pack your rucksack and go."

**– Rosie Fuller** (*Adventure Travel* magazine)

"Of all the thru-hikers, Keith Foskett is the darnedest, do-or-die doggedest, and his book reflects not only his determination but also his appreciation of the Trail itself, the opportunity that put him on it and the hazards, human or otherwise, he met along the way. A fine read, entertaining, exciting and full of humour."

**– Ingrid Cranfield** (Author: *At Last Michael Reeves*)

"*The Last Englishman* takes you on a gruelling walking journey on the Pacific Crest Trail. The characters read so much like a well-crafted fiction novel, it's hard to believe they are the living, breathing people that exist in this world. Laugh (and cry) your way through the trials of wilderness walking, the elation of new friendships and the revelations of a life well embraced.

"Take this experience with the author and be reminded of the importance and eventual hilarity of being truly alive, where the journey is all there is, and which leads you triumphantly back to yourself."

**– Kimberlie Dame** (Author: *All Who Wander – Living outside of it all*)

"An entertaining account of a walk along one of the world's most challenging and spectacular trails."

**– Chris Townsend**

"The Pacific Crest Trail is one of the most beautiful and diverse long distance trails in the world. *The Last Englishman* allows you to experience this amazing trail through the eyes of a thru-hiker. If you cannot take the time

to hike the trail, then you should definitely take the time to read about it."

**– Jennifer Pharr Davis** (Ex-record holder for the fastest thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail)

"Fozzie is a grand adventurer and also a grand story teller. From rattlesnakes, snowstorms to all the interesting people he meets along his journey, this book will have you staying up late turning pages to see what happens next."

– **Teresa Dicentra Black** (Author: *One Pan Wonders*)

"It's rare to find a book that captures the experience of long distance backpacking so well, and that is also fun to read. Fozzie's account of his Pacific Crest Trail hike is educational, inspirational and hilarious. A must-read for aspiring thru-hikers and outdoor adventure seekers."

– **Erik Asorson** (Author: *The PCT Atlas)*


CANADA
FINISH - Manning Park (2664)
Stehekin (2575)
Stevens Pass (2472)
Snoqualmie Pass (2403)
Seattle
WASHINGTON
Portland
Cascade Locks (2155)
OREGON
Sisters (1993)
Crater Lake NP
Ashland (1731)
Etna (1611)
THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL
2656 Miles from Mexico to Canada
Old Station (1382)
Belden (1294)
Sierra City (1201)
CALIFORNIA
Tuolumne Meadows (945)
NORTH
Mt. Whitney
Kennedy Meadows (704)
Mojave (560)
Agua Dulce (455)
Wrightwood (370)
Big Bear (265)
PACIFIC OCEAN
Warner Springs (109)
START - Campo (0)
MEXICO

# Acknowledgements

Writing a book and attempting a thru-hike are similar in many ways. They are both long journeys involving some heartache, lots of persistence and patience. Both require little steps to reach a far-distant goal, covering a little ground each day until eventually the finish is in sight. However, a writer has many allies fighting with him to make that journey a little smoother and it's a pleasure to be able to give them credit here.

Apart from acknowledging individuals who helped me with the actual writing, I also need to express gratitude to those who put up with my unsociable lifestyle but are proud, I hope, of what I have become. Thanks therefore to:

Mum and Dad, for their continued support and understanding of my raging wanderlust since I first realised it was too strong to resist (not that I ever wanted to). Ideally, from their point of view, I'd be married with two kids and a solid job but I think they've accepted that this is what I'm happy doing.

My sister Tracey and nephews Thomas and Liam, whom I don't get to see often enough.

For work on the book:

My editors Ingrid and Adam Cranfield, who again have taken a raw rock and honed it into a far more polished stone. I will remember where the apostrophes go in the next book, I promise.

I enlisted the voluntary help of a few proofreaders who deserve recognition: Katie Bryant, Big Foot, Tradja, Chris Partridge, Mumfa, Obs the Blobs, Sugar Moma and Amy Lou.

Spencer Vignes, Rosie Fuller of Adventure Travel magazine, Ingrid Cranfield, Chris Townsend, Jennifer Pharr Davis, Andrew Skurka and Kimberlie Dame for supplying endorsements.

Those who helped out with the words of wisdom at the beginning of each chapter – Charlie 'Hojo' Mead, Michael Thomas 'Lion King' Daniel, Mahmood 'Cedar Elk' Mokhayesh, Patti 'Sugar Moma' Kulesz, Shane 'Jester' O'Donnell, John 'Tradja' Drollette, David 'Walker Texas Ranger' Allen, Jennifer Pharr Davies, Patrick 'Wideangle' Pöndl, Ned Tibbits, Jake Nead, Nick 'The Brit' De Bairacli Levy, Monty 'Warner Springs Monty' Tam, and Dave 'Upchuck' Ferber.

Jennifer Pharr Davies and Andrew Skurka for permission to use their quotes.

Rockets for the photo on the front cover and all his photographic work on the website.

Faye Fillingham for help with the front cover design.

For all the people who made the hike possible and enjoyable:

All the trail angels en route who took time out to help the thru-hikers and smooth their passage.

Alex Johnson for at least trying to get me a discounted flight.

Uncle Tony, Aunty Jillian, Rudy, Hayley and all my relatives over in the US for feeding me, giving me somewhere to stay, running me on errands and generally acting as a first-class HQ.

The countless drivers who picked up a dirty, smelly hiker and went out of their way to take me to a shower.

My hike may not have even happened had it not been for the generosity of my sponsors, who ask nothing except for a little recognition and advertising space:

Shane Ohly at Inov-8, Niels Overgaard Blok at Backpackinglight.dk, Richard Codgbrook at Smartwool, Francesca Sanchez at Olympus, Aimee Gasparre at Nalgene, Rand Lindsley at Trail Designs, Jake Bennett at Numa Sport Optics, Road Java at Stickpic, Erik Asorson at Blackwoods Press for the *Pacific Crest Trail Atlas* and Seamus at Sportkilt.

Not least, my heartfelt thanks go to all the thru-hikers I met. You are very much a part of my Pacific Crest Trail memories, as well as honorary members of Hiker Trash! I feel privileged both to have met you and to continue to know you:

Dicentra, Space Blanket, Kara, Gabe, Mojave, Cheeks, Ben, Mad Hatter, Upchuck, Wyoming, Bob, Logic, Stumbling Norwegian, Sugar Moma, Dinosaur, Swayze, Hojo, Jess, Tradja, Burnie, Alex, Elk, Charmin, Grey Fox, Spiller, Flashlight, Vadar, Pyjamas, Pigpen, Pony, Your Mom, Yvo, Lo, Bones, Borders, Professor, Vicki, Dennis, Jake, Scorpion, Trooper, Steve Climber, Turbo, Stanimal, Big Foot, Wideangle, Tomer, Littlebit, Walker Texas Ranger, Flannel, Chad, Justin, Flyboxer, Indie, Answerman, Humming Bird, Flashback, Grinder, Uncle Gary, Stax, Black Gum, Ursa Major, Pockets (aka Rockets), Brains, Jolly Green Giant, Dan, Splizzard, Chrissie, Dodge, Mr Green, Dozer, Jack Straw, The Pro from Dover, Spartan, Wreckless, Crow, Dundee, Karma, Detective Bubbles, No Pain, Chris and Nick.

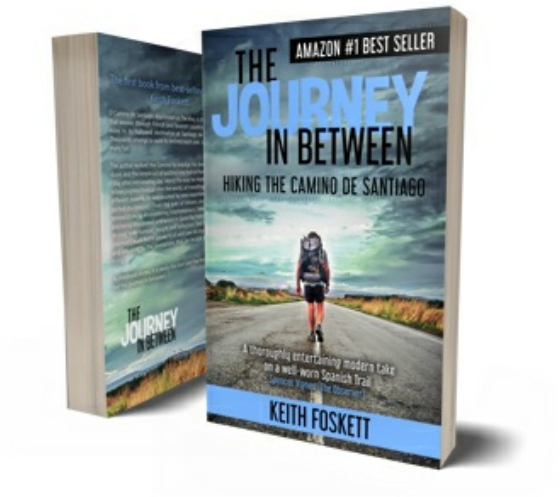
And, lastly, an apology if I have missed anyone out. If that’s you, please let me know, but in the meantime consider yourself thanked.

**One last thing...**

When you turn the page after this section you'll be greeted with a request from Amazon to rate this book. Ratings are very important to me and they help make my books successful.
I'd really appreciate a minute of your time to do this.
Thanks!

* * *

*The Last Englishman* is my second book. *The Journey in Between*, my first book, follows my adventures on El Camino de Santiago in France and Spain, also known as The Way. *Balancing on Blue* sees me take on the renowned Appalachian Trail.
You can get them both on Kindle by tapping the books.




You can join my website and be one of the first to receive news on new book releases, and occasional discounts, including free books. There's no spam, your email is safe and I won't bombard you with emails.

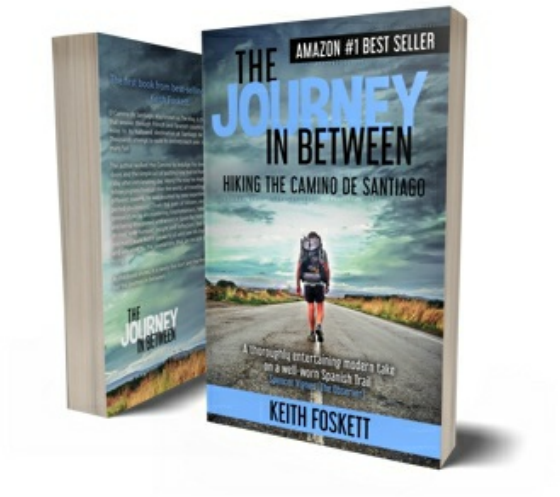
**FIND OUT MORE**

You can follow me on social media here:

**READY FOR ANOTHER?**

**FREE DOWNLOAD FOR A LIMITED TIME!**

***FIND OUT WHERE IT ALL STARTED...***




**1000s of downloads - a consistent #1 bestseller on Amazon**

★★★★★

***'A thoroughly entertaining modern take on a well-worn Spanish trail.'***
**Spencer Vignes (The Observer)**

FIND OUT MORE

Please turn the page to review this book. And thanks!