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This is

The Wild Beauty

Praise for Wild Beauty: “No one does magical realism quite like McLemore, and this third novel, laced with slow-burning suspense, folklore, romance, and spun together with exquisite, luxuriant prose, proves it. .

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Table of Contents

[Intro chapter \(Mohamed\)](#)

Chapters

[1- THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS \(Mohamed\)](#)

[2- HE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, VOLUME 1: CALIFORNIA \(Mohamed\)](#)

[3- RANGE OF LIGHT \(Mohamed\)](#)

Book Intro

Written by:

[Mohamed](#)



The trees were tall, but I was taller, standing above them on a steep mountain slope in northern California. Moments before, I'd removed my hiking boots and the left one had fallen into those trees, first catapulting into the air when my enormous backpack toppled onto it, then skittering across the gravelly trail and flying over the edge. It bounced off of a rocky outcropping several feet beneath me before disappearing into the forest canopy below, impossible to retrieve. I let out a stunned gasp, though I'd been in the wilderness thirty-eight days and by then I'd come to know that anything could happen and that everything would. But that doesn't mean I wasn't shocked when it did. My boot was gone. Actually gone. I clutched its mate to my chest like a baby, though of course it was futile. What is one boot without the other boot? It is nothing. It is useless, an orphan forevermore, and I could take no mercy on it. It was a big lug of a thing, of genuine heft, a brown leather Raichle boot with a red lace and silver metal fasts. I lifted it high and threw it with all my might and watched it fall into the lush trees and out of my life. I was alone. I was barefoot. I was twenty-six years old and an orphan too. An actual stray, a stranger had observed a couple of weeks before, when I'd told him my name and explained how very loose I was in the world. My father left my life when I was six. My mother died when I was twenty-two. In the wake of her death, my stepfather morphed from the person I considered my dad into a man I only occasionally recognized. My two siblings scattered in their grief, in spite of my efforts to hold us together, until I gave up and scattered as well. In the years before I pitched my boot over the edge of that mountain, I'd been pitching myself over the edge too. I'd ranged and roamed and railed—from Minnesota to New York to Oregon and all across the West —

until at last I found myself, bootless, in the summer of 1995, not so much loose in the world as bound to it. It was a world I'd never been to and yet had known was there all along, one I'd staggered to in sorrow and confusion and fear and hope. A world I thought would both make me into the woman I knew I could become and turn me back into the girl I'd once been. A world that measured two feet wide and 2,663 miles long. A world called the Pacific Crest Trail. I'd first heard of it only seven months before, when I was living in Minneapolis, sad and desperate and on the brink of divorcing a man I still loved. I'd been standing in line at an outdoor store waiting to purchase a foldable shovel when I picked up a book called *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* from a nearby shelf and read the back cover. The PCT, it said, was a continuous wilderness trail that went from the Mexican border in California to just beyond the Canadian border along the crest of nine mountain ranges—the Laguna, San Jacinto, San Bernardino, San Gabriel, Liebre, Tehachapi, Sierra Nevada, Klamath, and Cascades. That distance was a thousand miles as the crow flies, but the trail was more than double that. Traversing the entire length of the states of California, Oregon, and Washington, the PCT passes through national parks and wilderness areas as well as federal, tribal, and privately held lands; through deserts and mountains and rain forests; across rivers and highways. I turned the book over and gazed at its front cover—a boulder-strewn lake surrounded by rocky crags against a blue sky—then placed it back on the shelf, paid for my shovel, and left. But later I returned and bought the book. The Pacific Crest Trail wasn't a world to me then. It was an idea, vague and outlandish, full of promise and mystery. Something bloomed inside me as I traced its jagged line with my finger on a map. I would walk that line, I decided—or at least as much of it as I could in about a hundred days. I was living alone in a studio apartment in Minneapolis, separated from my husband, and working as a waitress, as low and mixed-up as I'd ever been in my life. Each day I felt as if I were looking up from the bottom of a deep well. But from that well, I set about becoming a solo wilderness trekker. And why not? I'd been so many things already. A loving wife and an adulteress. A beloved daughter who now spent holidays alone. An ambitious overachiever and aspiring writer who hopped from one meaningless job to the next while dabbling dangerously with drugs and sleeping with too many men. I was the granddaughter of a Pennsylvania coal miner, the daughter of a steelworker turned salesman. After my parents split up, I lived with my mother, brother, and sister in apartment complexes populated by single mothers and their kids. As a teen, I lived back-to-the-land style in the Minnesota northwoods in a house that didn't have an indoor toilet, electricity, or running water. In spite of this, I'd become a high school cheerleader and homecoming queen, and then I went off to college and became a left-wing feminist campus radical. But a woman who walks alone in the wilderness for eleven hundred miles? I'd never been anything like that before. I had nothing to lose by giving it a whirl. It seemed like years ago now—as I stood barefoot on that mountain in California—in a different lifetime, really, when I'd made the arguably unreasonable decision to take a long walk alone on the PCT in order to save myself. When I believed that all the things I'd been before had prepared me for this journey. But nothing had or

could. Each day on the trail was the only possible preparation for the one that followed. And sometimes even the day before didn't prepare me for what would happen next.

Such as my boots sailing irretrievably off the side of a mountain. The truth is, I was only half sorry to see them go. In the six weeks I'd spent in those boots, I'd trekked across deserts and snow, past trees and bushes and grasses and flowers of all shapes and sizes and colors, walked up and down mountains and over fields and glades and stretches of land I couldn't possibly define, except to say that I had been there, passed over it, made it through. And all the while, those boots had blistered my feet and rubbed them raw; they'd caused my nails to blacken and detach themselves excruciatingly from four of my toes. I was done with those boots by the time I lost them and those boots were done with me, though it's also true that I loved them. They had become not so much inanimate objects to me as extensions of who I was, as had just about everything else I carried that summer—my backpack, tent, sleeping bag, water purifier, ultralight stove, and the little orange whistle that I carried in lieu of a gun. They were the things I knew and could rely upon, the things that got me through. I looked down at the trees below me, the tall tops of them waving gently in the hot breeze. They could keep my boots, I thought, gazing across the great green expanse. I'd chosen to rest in this place because of the view. It was late afternoon in mid-July, and I was miles from civilization in every direction, days away from the lonely post office where I'd collect my next resupply box. There was a chance someone would come hiking down the trail, but only rarely did that happen. Usually I went days without seeing another person. It didn't matter whether someone came along anyway. I was in this alone. I gazed at my bare and battered feet, with their smattering of remaining toenails. They were ghostly pale to the line a few inches above my ankles, where the wool socks I usually wore ended. My calves above them were muscled and golden and hairy, dusted with dirt and a constellation of bruises and scratches. I'd started walking in the Mojave Desert and I didn't plan to stop until I touched my hand to a bridge that crosses the Columbia River at the Oregon-Washington border with the grandiose name the Bridge of the Gods. I looked north, in its direction—the very thought of that bridge a beacon to me. I looked south, to where I'd been, to the wild land that had schooled and scorched me, and considered my options. There was only one, I knew. There was always only one. To keep walking.

Chapter 1

THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

Written by:

[Mohamed](#)

THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS My solo three-month hike on the Pacific Crest Trail had many beginnings. There was the first, flip decision to do it, followed by the second, more serious decision to actually do it, and then the long third beginning, composed of weeks of shopping and packing and preparing to do it. There was the quitting my job as a waitress and finalizing my divorce and selling almost everything I owned and saying goodbye to my friends and visiting my mother's grave one last time. There was the driving across the country from Minneapolis to Portland, Oregon, and, a few days later, catching a flight to Los Angeles and a ride to the town of Mojave and another ride to the place where the PCT crossed a highway. At which point, at long last, there was the actual doing it, quickly followed by the grim realization of what it meant to do it, followed by the decision to quit doing it because doing it was absurd and pointless and ridiculously difficult and far more than I expected doing it would be and I was profoundly unprepared to do it. And then there was the real live truly doing it. The staying and doing it, in spite of everything. In spite of the bears and the rattlesnakes and the scat of the mountain lions I never saw; the blisters and scabs and scrapes and lacerations. The exhaustion and the deprivation; the cold and the heat; the monotony and the pain; the thirst and the hunger; the glory and the ghosts that haunted me as I hiked eleven hundred miles from the Mojave Desert to the state of Washington by myself. And finally, once I'd actually gone and done it, walked all those miles for all those days, there was the realization that what I'd thought was the beginning had not really been the beginning at all. That in truth my hike on the Pacific Crest Trail hadn't begun when I made the snap decision to do it. It had begun before I even imagined it, precisely four years, seven months, and three days before, when I'd stood in a little room at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and learned that my mother was going to die. I was wearing green. Green pants, green shirt, green bow in my hair. It was an outfit that my mother had sewn—she'd made clothes for me all of my life. Some of them were just what I dreamed of having, others less so. I wasn't crazy about the green pantsuit, but I wore it anyway, as a penance, as an offering, as a talisman. All that day of the green pantsuit, as I accompanied my mother and stepfather, Eddie, from floor to floor of the Mayo Clinic while my mother went from one test to another, a prayer marched through my head, though prayer is not the right word to describe that march. I wasn't humble before God. I didn't even believe in God. My prayer was not: Please, God, take mercy on us. I was not going to ask for mercy. I didn't need to. My mother was forty-five. She looked fine. For a good number of years she'd mostly been a vegetarian.

She'd planted marigolds around her garden to keep bugs away instead of using pesticides. My siblings and I had been made to swallow raw cloves of garlic when we had colds. People like my mother did not get cancer. The tests at the Mayo Clinic would prove that, refuting what the doctors in Duluth had said. I was certain of this. Who were those doctors in Duluth anyway? What was Duluth? Duluth! Duluth was a freezing hick town where doctors who didn't know what the hell they were talking about told forty-five-year-old vegetarian-ish, garlic-eating, natural-remedy-using nonsmokers that they had late-stage lung cancer, that's what. Fuck them. That was my prayer: Fuckthemfuckthemfuckthem. And yet, here was my mother at the Mayo Clinic getting worn out if she had to be on her feet for more than three minutes. "You want a wheelchair?" Eddie asked her when we came upon a row of them in a long carpeted hall. "She doesn't need a wheelchair," I said. "Just for a minute," said my mother, almost collapsing into one, her eyes meeting mine before Eddie wheeled her toward the elevator. I followed behind, not allowing myself to think a thing. We were finally on our way up to see the last doctor. The real doctor, we kept calling him. The one who would gather everything that had been gathered about my mom and tell us what was true. As the elevator car lifted, my mother reached out to tug at my pants, rubbing the green cotton between her fingers proprietarily. "Perfect," she said. I was twenty-two, the same age she was when she'd been pregnant with me. She was going to leave my life at the same moment that I came into hers, I thought. For some reason that sentence came fully formed into my head just then, temporarily blotting out the Fuck them prayer. I almost howled in agony. I almost choked to death on what I knew before I knew. I was going to live the rest of my life without my mother. I pushed the fact of it away with everything in me. I couldn't let myself believe it then and there in that elevator and also go on breathing, so I let myself believe other things instead. Such as if a doctor told you that you were going to die soon, you'd be taken to a room with a gleaming wooden desk.



This was not so. We were led into an examining room, where a nurse instructed my mother to remove

her shirt and put on a cotton smock with strings that dangled at her sides. When my mother had done so, she climbed onto a padded table with white paper stretched over it. Each time she moved, the room was on fire with the paper ripping and crinkling beneath her. I could see her naked back, the small curve of flesh beneath her waist. She was not going to die. Her naked back seemed proof of that. I was staring at it when the real doctor came into the room and said my mother would be lucky if she lived a year. He explained that they would not attempt to cure her, that she was incurable. There was nothing that could have been done, he told us. Finding it so late was common, when it came to lung cancer. “But she’s not a smoker,” I countered, as if I could talk him out of the diagnosis, as if cancer moved along reasonable, negotiable lines. “She only smoked when she was younger. She hasn’t had a cigarette for years.” The doctor shook his head sadly and pressed on. He had a job to do. They could try to ease the pain in her back with radiation, he offered. Radiation might reduce the size of the tumors that were growing along the entire length of her spine. I did not cry. I only breathed. Horribly. Intentionally. And then forgot to breathe. I’d fainted once—furious, age three, holding my breath because I didn’t want to get out of the bathtub, too young to remember it myself. What did you do? What did you do? I’d asked my mother all through my childhood, making her tell me the story again and again, amazed and delighted by my own impetuous will. She’d held out her hands and watched me turn blue, my mother had always told me. She’d waited me out until my head fell into her palms and I took a breath and came back to life. Breathe. “Can I ride my horse?” my mother asked the real doctor. She sat with her hands folded tightly together and her ankles hooked one to the other. Shackled to herself. In reply, he took a pencil, stood it upright on the edge of the sink, and tapped it hard on the surface. “This is your spine after radiation,” he said. “One jolt and your bones could crumble like a dry cracker.” We went to the women’s restroom. Each of us locked in separate stalls, weeping. We didn’t exchange a word. Not because we felt so alone in our grief, but because we were so together in it, as if we were one body instead of two. I could feel my mother’s weight leaning against the door, her hands slapping slowly against it, causing the entire frame of the bathroom stalls to shake. Later we came out to wash our hands and faces, watching each other in the bright mirror. We were sent to the pharmacy to wait. I sat between my mother and Eddie in my green pantsuit, the green bow miraculously still in my hair. There was a big bald boy in an old man’s lap. There was a woman who had an arm that swung wildly from the elbow. She held it stiffly with the other hand, trying to calm it. She waited. We waited. There was a beautiful dark-haired woman who sat in a wheelchair. She wore a purple hat and a handful of diamond rings. We could not take our eyes off her. She spoke in Spanish to the people gathered around her, her family and perhaps her husband. “Do you think she has cancer?” my mother whispered loudly to me. Eddie sat on my other side, but I could not look at him. If I looked him we would both crumble like dry crackers. I thought about my older sister, Karen, and my younger brother, Leif. About my husband, Paul, and about my mother’s parents and sister, who lived a thousand miles away. What they would say when they knew. How they would cry. My prayer was different now: A year, a

year, a year. Those two words beat like a heart in my chest. That's how long my mother would live. "What are you thinking about?" I asked her. There was a song coming over the waiting room speakers. A song without words, but my mother knew the words anyway and instead of answering my question she sang them softly to me. "Paper roses, paper roses, oh how real those roses seemed to be," she sang. She put her hand on mine and said, "I used to listen to that song when I was young. It's funny to think of that. To think about listening to the same song now. I would've never known." My mother's name was called then: her prescriptions were ready. "Go get them for me," she said. "Tell them who you are. Tell them you're my daughter." I was her daughter, but more. I was Karen, Cheryl, Leif. Karen Cheryl Leif. Karen Cheryl Leif. Our names blurred into one in my mother's mouth all my life. She whispered it and hollered it, hissed it and crooned it. We were her kids, her comrades, the end of her and the beginning. We took turns riding shotgun with her in the car. "Do I love you this much?" she'd ask us, holding her hands six inches apart. "No," we'd say, with sly smiles. "Do I love you this much?" she'd ask again, and on and on and on, each time moving her hands farther apart. But she would never get there, no matter how wide she stretched her arms. The amount that she loved us was beyond her reach. It could not be quantified or contained. It was the ten thousand named things in the Tao Te Ching's universe and then ten thousand more. Her love was full-throated and all-encompassing and unadorned. Every day she blew through her entire reserve.

Chapter 2

THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, VOLUME 1: CALIFORNIA

Written by:

[Mohamed](#)

HE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, VOLUME 1: CALIFORNIA

HE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, VOLUME 1: CALIFORNIA

I'd done a lot of dumb and dangerous things in my life, but soliciting a ride with a stranger was not yet one of them. Horrible things happened to hitchhikers, I knew, especially to women hitchhiking alone. They were raped and decapitated. Tortured and left for dead. But as I made my way from White's Motel to the nearby gas station, I could not allow such thoughts to distract me. Unless I wanted to walk twelve miles along the broiling shoulder of the highway to reach the trail, I needed a ride. Plus, hitchhiking was simply what PCT hikers did on occasion. And I was a PCT hiker, right? Right? Right. The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California had explained the process with its usual equanimity. On some occasions the PCT would cross a road and miles down that road would be the post office where one would have mailed the box of food and supplies needed on the next section of the trail. Hitchhiking was the only practical solution when it came to fetching those boxes and returning to the trail. I stood near the soda machines up against the gas station building, watching people come and go, trying to work up the nerve to approach one of them, hoping I'd sense that I was safe from harm when I saw the right person. I watched old desert-grizzled men in cowboy hats and families whose cars were full already and teenagers who pulled up with music blasting out their open windows. Nobody in particular looked like a murderer or rapist, but nobody in particular didn't look like one either. I bought a can of Coke and drank it with a casual air that belied the fact that I could not stand up properly because of the unbelievable weight on my back. Finally, I had to make a move. It was nearly eleven, pitching steadily into the heat of a June day in the desert. A minivan with Colorado plates pulled up and two men got out. One man was about my age, the other looked to be in his fifties. I approached them and asked for a ride. They hesitated and glanced at each other, their expressions making it apparent that they were united in their silent search for a reason to say no, so I kept talking, explaining in quick bursts about the PCT. "Sure," the older one said finally, with obvious reluctance. "Thank you," I trilled

girlishly. When I hobbled toward the big door on the side of the van, the younger man rolled it open for me. I gazed inside, realizing suddenly that I had no idea how to get in. I couldn't even attempt to step up into it with my pack on. I'd have to take my pack off, and yet how? If I undid the buckles that held the backpack's straps around my waist and over my shoulders, there would be no way that I could keep it from falling so violently away from me that it might rip my arms off. "You need a hand?" the young man asked. "No. I've got it," I said in a falsely unruffled tone. The only thing I could think to do was turn my back to the van and squat to sit on the doorframe while clutching the edge of the sliding door, letting my pack rest on the floor behind me. It was bliss. I unclipped my pack's straps and carefully extricated myself without tipping my pack over and then turned to climb inside the van to sit beside it. The men were friendlier to me once we were on our way, driving west through an arid landscape of parched-looking bushes and pale mountains stretching off into the distance. They were a father and son from a suburb of Denver, on their way to a graduation ceremony in San Luis Obispo. Before long, a sign announcing Tehachapi Pass appeared and the older man slowed the van and pulled to the side of the road. The younger man got out and slid the big door open for me. I'd hoped to put my pack on the same way I'd taken it off, aided by the height of the van's floor as I squatted in the doorway, but before I could step out, the man pulled out my pack and dropped it heavily in the gravelly dirt by the side of the road. It fell so hard I feared my dromedary bag would burst. I climbed out after it and pulled it back to standing position and dusted it off. "Are you sure you can lift that?" he asked. "'Cause I barely can." "Of course I can lift it," I said. He stood there, as if waiting for me to prove it. "Thanks for the ride," I said, wanting him to leave, so he wouldn't be witness to my humiliating pack-donning routine. He nodded and slid the van's door shut. "Be safe out there." "I will," I said, and watched him get back in the van. I stood by the silent highway after they drove away. Small clouds of dust blew in swirling gusts beneath the glaring noon sun. I was at an elevation of nearly 3,800 feet, surrounded in all directions by beige, barren-looking mountains dotted with clusters of sagebrush, Joshua trees, and waist-high chaparral. I was standing at the western edge of the Mojave Desert and at the southern foot of the Sierra Nevada, the vast mountain range that stretched north for more than four hundred miles to Lassen Volcanic National Park, where it connected with the Cascade Range, which extended from northern California all the way through Oregon and Washington and beyond the Canadian border. Those two mountain ranges would be my world for the next three months; their crest, my home. On a fence post beyond the ditch I spied a palm-sized metal blaze that said PACIFIC CREST TRAIL. I was here. I could begin at last. It occurred to me that now would be the perfect time to take a photograph, but to unpack the camera would entail such a series of gear and bungee cord removals that I didn't even want to attempt it. Plus, in order to get myself in the picture, I'd have to

find something to prop the camera on so I could set its timer and get into place before it took the shot, and nothing around me looked too promising. Even the fence post that the PCT blaze was attached to seemed too desiccated and frail. Instead, I sat down in the dirt in front of my pack, the same way I'd done in the motel room, wrested it onto my shoulders, and then hunched myself onto my hands and knees and did my dead lift to stand. Elated, nervous, hunched in a remotely upright position, I buckled and cinched my pack and staggered the first steps down the trail to a brown metal box that was tacked to another fence post. When I lifted the lid, I saw a notebook and pen inside. It was the trail register, which I'd read about in my guidebook. I wrote my name and the date and read the names and notes from the hikers who'd passed through in the weeks ahead of me, most of them men traveling in pairs, not one of them a woman alone. I lingered a bit longer, feeling a swell of emotion over the occasion, and then I realized there was nothing to do but go, so I did. The trail headed east, paralleling the highway for a while, dipping down into rocky washes and back up again. I'm hiking! I thought. And then, I am hiking on the Pacific Crest Trail. It was this very act, of hiking, that had been at the heart of my belief that such a trip was a reasonable endeavor. What is hiking but walking, after all? I can walk! I'd argued when Paul had expressed his concern about my never actually having gone backpacking. I walked all the time. I walked for hours on end in my work as a waitress. I walked around the cities I lived in and visited. I walked for pleasure and purpose. All of these things were true. But after about fifteen minutes of walking on the PCT, it was clear that I had never walked into desert mountains in early June with a pack that weighed significantly more than half of what I did strapped onto my back. Which, it turns out, is not very much like walking at all. Which, in fact, resembles walking less than it does hell. I began panting and sweating immediately, dust caking my boots and calves as the trail turned north and began to climb rather than undulate. Each step was a toil, as I ascended higher and higher still, interrupted only by the occasional short descent, which was not so much a break in the hell as it was a new kind of hell because I had to brace myself against each step, lest gravity's pull cause me, with my tremendous, uncontrollable weight, to catapult forward and fall. I felt like the pack was not so much attached to me as me to it. Like I was a building with limbs, unmoored from my foundation, careening through the wilderness. Within forty minutes, the voice inside my head was screaming, What have I gotten myself into? I tried to ignore it, to hum as I hiked, though humming proved too difficult to do while also panting and moaning in agony and trying to remain hunched in that remotely upright position while also propelling myself forward when I felt like a building with legs. So then I tried to simply concentrate on what I heard—my feet thudding against the dry and rocky trail, the brittle leaves and branches of the low-lying bushes I passed clattering in the hot wind—but it could not be done. The clamor of What have I gotten myself into? was a mighty shout. It could not be drowned out. The

only possible distraction was my vigilant search for rattlesnakes. I expected one around every bend, ready to strike. The landscape was made for them, it seemed. And also for mountain lions and wilderness-savvy serial killers. But I wasn't thinking of them. It was a deal I'd made with myself months before and the only thing that allowed me to hike alone. I knew that if I allowed fear to overtake me, my journey was doomed. Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves, and so I chose to tell myself a different story from the one women are told. I decided I was safe. I was strong. I was brave. Nothing could vanquish me. Insisting on this story was a form of mind control, but for the most part, it worked. Every time I heard a sound of unknown origin or felt something horrible cohering in my imagination, I pushed it away. I simply did not let myself become afraid. Fear begets fear. Power begets power. I willed myself to beget power. And it wasn't long before I actually wasn't afraid. I was working too hard to be afraid. I took one step and then another, moving along at barely more than a crawl. I hadn't thought that hiking the PCT would be easy. I'd known it would take some getting adjusted. But now that I was out here, I was less sure I would adjust. Hiking the PCT was different than I'd imagined. I was different than I'd imagined. I couldn't even remember what it was I'd imagined six months ago, back in December, when I'd first decided to do this. I'd been driving on a stretch of highway east of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, when the idea came to me. I'd driven to Sioux Falls from Minneapolis the day before with my friend Aimee to retrieve my truck, which had been left there the week before when it broke down while a friend was borrowing it. By the time Aimee and I arrived in Sioux Falls, my truck had been towed from the street. Now it was in a lot surrounded by a chain-link fence and buried in snow from the blizzard that had passed through a couple of days before. It had been for this blizzard that I'd gone to REI the previous day to purchase a shovel. As I waited in line to pay for it, I'd spotted a guidebook about something called the Pacific Crest Trail. I picked it up and studied its cover and read the back before returning it to its place on the shelf. Once Aimee and I had cleared the snow away from my truck that day in Sioux Falls, I got inside and turned the key. I assumed I'd hear nothing but that dead clicking sound that automobiles make when they've got nothing left to give you, but it started right up. We could've driven back to Minneapolis then, but we decided to check into a motel for the night instead. We went out to a Mexican restaurant for an early dinner, elated with the unexpected ease of our journey. As we ate chips and salsa and drank margaritas, I got a funny feeling in my gut. "It's like I swallowed the chips whole," I told Aimee, "like the edges are still intact and jabbing me inside." I felt full and tingly down low, like I'd never felt before. "Maybe I'm pregnant," I joked, and then the moment I said it, I realized I wasn't joking. "Are you?" asked Aimee. "I could be," I said, suddenly terrified. I'd had sex a few weeks before with a man named Joe. I'd met him the previous summer in Portland, when I'd gone there to visit Lisa and escape my troubles. I'd been there only a few days when

he'd walked up to me in a bar and put his hand on my wrist. "Nice," he said, outlining the sharp edges of my tin bracelet with his fingers. He had neon punk-rock hair cut close to the scalp and a garish tattoo that covered half his arm, though his face was in precise contradiction to those disguises: tenacious and tender—like a kitten wanting milk. He was twenty-four and I was twenty-five. I hadn't slept with anyone since Paul and I had broken up three months before. That night we had sex on Joe's lumpy futon on the floor and barely slept, talking until the sun rose, mostly about him. He told me about his smart mother and his alcoholic father and the fancy and rigorous school where he'd earned his BA the year before. "Have you ever tried heroin?" he asked in the morning. I shook my head and laughed idly. "Should I?" I could've let it drop. Joe had only just started using it when he met me. It was something he did separate from me, with a group of friends he'd made whom I didn't know. I could've glided right past it, but something compelled me to pause instead. I was intrigued. I was unattached. In my youth and sorrow, I was ready to self-destruct. So I didn't just say yes to heroin. I pulled it in with both hands.

I was cuddled up with Joe, postsex, on his ratty couch the first time I used it, a week after we'd met. We took turns sucking up the smoke from a burning dab of black tar heroin that sat on a sheet of aluminum foil through a pipe that was made of foil too. Within a few days, I wasn't in Portland to visit Lisa and escape my sorrows anymore. I was in Portland falling into a drug-fueled half love with Joe. I moved into his apartment above an abandoned drugstore, where we spent most of the summer having adventuresome sex and doing heroin. In the beginning, it was a few times a week, then it was every couple of days, then it was every day. First we smoked it, then we snorted it. But we would never shoot it! we said. Absolutely not. Then we shot it. It was good. It was like something inordinately beautiful and out of this world. Like I'd found an actual planet that I didn't know had been there all along. Planet Heroin. The place where there was no pain, where it was unfortunate but essentially okay that my mother was dead and my biological father was not in my life and my family had collapsed and I couldn't manage to stay married to a man I loved. At least that's how it felt while I was high. In the mornings, my pain was magnified by about a thousand. In the mornings there weren't only those sad facts about my life. Now there was also the additional fact that I was a pile of shit. I'd wake in Joe's squalid room implicated by every banal thing: the lamp and the table, the book that had fallen and rested now belly-down and open, its flimsy pages buckled on the floor. In the bathroom, I'd wash my face and sob into my hands for a few fast breaths, getting ready for the waitressing job I'd picked up at a breakfast place. I'd think: This is not me. This is not the way I am. Stop it. No more. But in the afternoons I'd return with a wad of cash to buy another bit of heroin and I'd think: Yes. I get to do this. I get to waste my life. I get to be junk. But this was not to be. Lisa called me one day

and said she wanted to see me. I'd stayed in touch with her, hanging out for long afternoons at her place, telling her glimmers of what I was up to. As soon as I walked into her house this time, I knew something was up. "So tell me about heroin," she demanded. "Heroin?" I replied lightly. What could I possibly say? It was inexplicable, even to me. "I'm not becoming a junkie, if that's what you're worried about," I offered. I was leaning against her kitchen counter, watching her sweep the floor. "That's what I'm worried about," she said sternly. "Well, don't," I said. I explained it to her as rationally and playfully as I could. It had been only a couple of months. We would stop soon. Joe and I were simply messing around, doing something fun. "It's summertime!" I exclaimed. "Remember how you suggested that I come here to escape? I'm escaping." I laughed, though she didn't laugh along. I reminded her that I'd never had trouble with drugs before; that I drank alcohol with moderation and reserve. I was an experimentalist, I told her. An artist. The kind of woman who said yes instead of no. She challenged my every statement, questioned my every rationale. She swept and swept and swept the floor as our talk turned into an argument. She eventually became so furious with me that she swatted me with the broom. I went back to Joe's and we talked about how Lisa just didn't understand. Then, two weeks later, Paul called. He wanted to see me. Right now. Lisa had told him about Joe and about my using heroin, and he'd immediately driven the seventeen hundred miles straight through from Minneapolis to talk to me. I met him within the hour at Lisa's apartment. It was a warm, sunny day in late September. I'd turned twenty-six the week before. Joe hadn't remembered. It was the first birthday of my life when not one person had said happy birthday to me. "Happy birthday," said Paul when I walked in the door. "Thank you," I said, too formally. "I meant to call, but I didn't have your number—I mean, Joe's." I nodded. It was strange to see him. My husband. A phantom from my actual life. The realest person I knew. We sat at the kitchen table with the branches of a fig tree tapping on the window nearby, the broom with which Lisa had struck me propped against the wall. He said, "You look different. You seem so ... How can I say this? You seem like you aren't here." I knew what he meant. The way he looked at me told me everything I'd refused to hear from Lisa. I was different. I wasn't there. Heroin had made me that way. And yet the idea of giving it up seemed impossible.

Chapter 3

RANGE OF LIGHT

Written by:

[Mohamed](#)

RANGE OF LIGHT

CORVIDOLOGY

Kennedy Meadows is called the gateway to the High Sierra, and early the next morning I walked through that gate. Doug and Tom accompanied me for the first quarter mile, but then I stopped, telling them to go on ahead because I had to get something from my pack. We embraced and wished one another well, saying goodbye forever or for fifteen minutes, we didn't know. I leaned against a boulder to lift some of Monster's weight from my back, watching them go. Their leaving made me melancholy, though I also felt something like relief when they disappeared into the dark trees. I hadn't needed to get anything from my pack; I'd only wanted to be alone. Alone had always felt like an actual place to me, as if it weren't a state of being, but rather a room where I could retreat to be who I really was. The radical aloneness of the PCT had altered that sense. Alone wasn't a room anymore, but the whole wide world, and now I was alone in that world, occupying it in a way I never had before. Living at large like this, without even a roof over my head, made the world feel both bigger and smaller to me. Until now, I hadn't truly understood the world's vastness —hadn't even understood how vast a mile could be—until each mile was beheld at walking speed. And yet there was also its opposite, the strange intimacy I'd come to have with the trail, the way the piñon pines and monkey flowers I passed that morning, the shallow streams I crossed, felt familiar and known, though I'd never passed them or crossed them before. I walked in the cool of the morning to the rhythm of my new white ski pole clicking against the trail, feeling the lightened-but-still-ridiculously-heavy weight of Monster shift and settle in. When I'd set off that morning, I thought that it would feel different to be on the trail, that the hiking would be easier. My pack was lighter, after all, not only thanks to Albert's purge but because I no longer needed to carry more than a couple of bottles of water at a time, now that I'd reached a less arid stretch of the trail. But an hour and a half into the day I stopped for a break, feeling the familiar aches and pains. At the same time, I could ever so slightly feel my body toughening up, just as Greg had promised would happen. It was day 1 of week 3, officially summer—the last week of June—and I was not only in a different season now, but in different country too, ascending higher in the South Sierra Wilderness. In the forty miles between Kennedy Meadows and Trail Pass, I'd climb from an elevation of just over 6,100 feet to nearly 11,000. Even in the heat of that first afternoon back on the trail, I could feel an edge of cool in the air that would no doubt envelop me at night. There was no question I was in the Sierra now—Muir's beloved

Range of Light. I walked beneath great dark trees that put the smaller plants beneath in almost complete shadow and past wide grassy meadows of wildflowers; I scrambled over snowmelt streams by stepping from one unsteady rock to another, aided by my ski pole. At foot speed, the Sierra Nevada seemed just barely surmountable. I could always take another step. It was only when I rounded a bend and glimpsed the white peaks ahead that I doubted my abilities, only when I thought how far I had yet to go that I lost faith that I would get there. Doug's and Tom's tracks periodically appeared on the alternately muddy and dusty trail, and by midafternoon I came upon them as they sat near a stream, their faces registering surprise when I walked up. I sat next to them and pumped water and we chatted for a while. "You should camp with us tonight if you catch up with us," said Tom before they hiked on. "I already have caught up to you," I replied, and we laughed. That evening I strolled into the small clearing where they'd pitched their tents. After dinner, they shared the two beers they'd brought from Kennedy Meadows, giving me swigs as we sat in the dirt bundled in our clothes. As we drank, I wondered which one of them had taken the eleven ultrathin nonlubricated Trojan condoms I'd purchased in Portland a few weeks before. It seemed it had to be one of them. The next day when I was hiking alone I came to a wide swath of snow on a steep incline, a giant ice-crusting sheath that obliterated the trail. It was like the rockslide, only scarier, a river of ice instead of stones. If I slipped while attempting to cross it, I would slide down the side of the mountain and crash into the boulders far below, or worse, fall farther into who knew what. Air, it seemed, from my vantage point. If I didn't attempt to cross it, I'd have to go back to Kennedy Meadows. That didn't seem like an altogether bad idea. And yet here I was. Hell, I thought. Bloody hell. I took out my ice ax and studied my course, which really only meant standing there for several minutes working up the nerve. I could see that Doug and Tom had made it across, their tracks a series of potholes in the snow. I held my ice ax the way Greg had taught me and stepped into one of the potholes. Its existence made my life both harder and easier. I didn't have to chip my own steps, but those of the men were awkwardly placed and slippery and sometimes so deep that my boot got trapped inside and I'd lose my balance and fall, my ice ax so unwieldy it felt more like a burden than an aid. Arrest, I kept thinking, imagining what I'd do with the ax if I started to slide down the slope. The snow was different from the snow in Minnesota. In some places it was more ice than flake, so densely packed it reminded me of the hard layer of ice in a freezer that needs defrosting. In other places it gave way, slushier than it first appeared. I didn't look at the bank of boulders below until I'd reached the other side of the snow and was standing on the muddy trail, trembling but glad. I knew that little jaunt was only a sample of what lay ahead. If I didn't opt to get off the trail at Trail Pass to bypass the snow, I'd soon reach Forester Pass, at 13,160 feet the highest point on the PCT. And if I didn't slip off the side of the mountain while going over that pass, I'd spend the next several weeks crossing nothing but snow. It would be snow far more treacherous than the patch I'd just crossed, but having crossed even this much made what lay ahead more real to me. It told me that I had no choice but to bypass. I wasn't rightly prepared to be on the PCT in a regular year, let alone a year in

which the snow depth measurements were double and triple what they'd been the year before. There hadn't been a winter as snowy as the previous one since 1983, and there wouldn't be another for more than a dozen years. Plus, there wasn't only the snow to consider. There were also the things related to the snow: the dangerously high rivers and streams I'd need to ford alone, the temperatures that would put me at risk of hypothermia, the reality that I'd have to rely exclusively on my map and compass for long stretches when the trail was concealed by the snow— all of those made more grave by the fact that I was alone. I didn't have the gear I needed; I didn't have the knowledge and experience. And because I was solo, I didn't have a margin for error either. By bailing out like most of the other PCT hikers had, I'd miss the glory of the High Sierra. But if I stayed on the trail, I'd risk my life. "I'm getting off at Trail Pass," I told Doug and Tom as we ate dinner that night. I'd hiked all day alone—logging my second fifteen-plus-mile day—but caught up with them again as they made camp. "I'm going to go up to Sierra City and get back on the trail there." "We decided to push on," said Doug. "We talked about it and we think you should join us," said Tom. "Join you?" I asked, peering out from the tunnel of my dark fleece hood. I was wearing all the clothes I'd brought, the temperature down near freezing. Patches of snow surrounded us beneath the trees in spots shaded from the sun. "It's not safe for you to go alone," Doug said. "Neither one of us would go alone," said Tom. "But it's not safe for any of us to go into the snow. Together or alone," I said. "We want to try it," said Tom. "Thank you," I said. "I'm touched you'd offer, but I can't." "Why can't you?" Doug asked. "Because the point of my trip is that I'm out here to do it alone." We were silent for a while then, eating our dinners, each of us cradling a warm pot full of rice or beans or noodles in our gloved hands. I felt sad to say no. Not only because I knew it meant I was opting to bypass the High Sierra, but because as much as I said I wanted to do this trip alone, I was soothed by their company. Being near Tom and Doug at night kept me from having to say to myself I am not afraid whenever I heard a branch snap in the dark or the wind shook so fiercely it seemed something bad was bound to happen. But I wasn't out here to keep myself from having to say I am not afraid. I'd come, I realized, to stare that fear down, to stare everything down, really—all that I'd done to myself and all that had been done to me. I couldn't do that while tagging along with someone else. After dinner, I lay in my tent with Flannery O'Connor's Complete Stories on my chest, too exhausted to hold the book aloft. It wasn't only that I was cold and tired from the day's hike: at this elevation, the air was thinner. And yet I couldn't exactly fall asleep. In what seemed a fugue state, I thought about what it meant to bypass the High Sierra. It basically ruined everything. All the planning I'd done, the way I'd mapped out the whole summer down to each box and meal. Now I'd be leapfrogging over 450 miles of the trail I'd intended to hike. I'd reach Ashland in early August instead of the middle of September. "Doug?" I called into the darkness, his tent only an arm's length from mine. "Yeah?" "I was thinking, if I bypass, I could hike all of Oregon instead." I rolled onto my side to face in the direction of his tent, half wishing he would come lie next to me in mine—that anyone would. It was that same hungry, empty feeling I'd had back in that Mojave motel

when I'd wished I had a companion. Not someone to love. Just someone to press my body against. "Do you happen to know how long the trail is in Oregon?" "About five hundred miles," he answered. "That's perfect," I said, my heartbeat quickening with the idea before I closed my eyes and fell into a deep sleep. The next afternoon Greg caught up to me just before I reached Trail Pass Trail, my route off the PCT. "I'm bypassing," I said to him reluctantly. "I am too," he said. "You are?" I asked with relief and delight. "It's way too socked-in up here," he said, and we looked around at the wind-twisted foxtail pines among the trailside boulders; the mountains and ridges visible miles away under the pure blue sky. The highest point of the trail was only thirty-five trail miles farther on. The summit of Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous United States, was closer still, a short detour off the PCT. Together we descended Trail Pass Trail two miles down to a picnic area and campground at Horseshoe Meadows, where we met up with Doug and Tom and hitched a ride into Lone Pine. I hadn't planned to go there. Some PCT hikers had resupply boxes sent to Lone Pine, but I'd planned to push through to the town of Independence, another fifty trail miles to the north. I still had a few days' worth of food in my bag, but when we reached town I went immediately to a grocery store to replenish my stock. I needed enough to last for the ninety-six-mile section I'd be hiking once I made the bypass, from Sierra City to Belden Town. Afterwards, I found a pay phone and called Lisa and left a message on her answering machine, explaining my new plan as quickly as I could, asking her to send my box addressed to Belden Town immediately and hold all the others until I gave her the details of my new itinerary. I felt dislocated and melancholy when I hung up the phone, less excited about being in town than I thought I'd be. I walked along the main street until I found the men. "We're heading back up," said Doug, his eyes meeting mine. My chest felt tight as I hugged him and Tom goodbye. I'd come to feel a sort of love for them, but on top of that, I was worried. "Are you sure you want to go up into the snow?" I asked. "Are you sure you don't?" Tom replied. "You still have your good luck charm," said Doug, pointing to the black feather he'd given me back in Kennedy Meadows. I'd wedged it into Monster's frame, up over my right shoulder. "Something to remember you by," I said, and we laughed. After they left, I walked with Greg to the convenience store that doubled as the town's Greyhound bus station. We passed bars that billed themselves as Old West saloons and shops that had cowboy hats and framed paintings of men astride bucking broncos displayed in their front windows. "You ever see High Sierra with Humphrey Bogart?" Greg asked. I shook my head. "That was made here. Plus lots of other movies. Westerns." I nodded, unsurprised. The landscape did in fact look straight out of Hollywood—a high sage-covered flat that was more barren than not, rocky and treeless with a view that went on for miles. The white peaks of the Sierra Nevada to the west cut so dramatically up into the blue sky that they seemed almost unreal to me, a gorgeous façade.

"There's our ride," Greg said, pointing to a big Greyhound bus in a parking lot of the store as we approached. But he was wrong. There were no buses that went all the way to

Sierra City, we learned. We'd have to catch a bus that evening and ride seven hours to Reno, Nevada, then take another one for an hour to Truckee, California. From there we'd have no option but to hitchhike the final forty-five miles to Sierra City. We bought two one-way tickets and an armful of snacks and sat on the warm pavement at the edge of the convenience store parking lot waiting for the bus to come. We polished off whole bags of chips and cans of soda while talking. We ran through the Pacific Crest Trail as a conversational topic, through backpacking gear and the record snowpack one more time, through the "ultralight" theories and practices of Ray Jardine and of his followers—who may or may not have misinterpreted the spirit behind those theories and practices—and finally arrived at ourselves. I asked him about his job and life in Tacoma. He had no pets and no kids and a girlfriend he'd been dating a year. She was an avid backpacker too. His life, it was clear, was an ordered and considered thing. It seemed both boring and astounding to me. I didn't know what mine seemed like to him. The bus to Reno was nearly empty when we got on at last. I followed Greg to the middle, where we took pairs of seats directly opposite each other across the aisle. "I'm going to get some sleep," he said once the bus lurched onto the highway. "Me too," I said, though I knew it wasn't true. Even when I was exhausted, I could never sleep in moving vehicles of any sort, and I wasn't exhausted. I was lit up by being back in the world. I stared out the window while Greg slept. Nobody who'd known me for more than a week had any idea where I was. I am en route to Reno, Nevada, I thought with a kind of wonder. I'd never been to Reno. It seemed the most preposterous place for me to be going, dressed as I was and dirty as a dog, my hair dense as a burlap bag. I pulled all the money from my pockets and counted the bills and coins, using my headlamp to see. I had forty-four dollars and seventy-five cents. My heart sank at the paltry sight of it. I'd spent far more money than I'd imagined I would have by now. I hadn't anticipated stops in Ridgecrest and Lone Pine, nor the bus ticket to Truckee. I wasn't going to get more money until I reached my next resupply box in Belden Town more than a week from now, and even then it would be only twenty bucks. Greg and I had agreed we'd get rooms in a motel in Sierra City to rest up for a night after our long travels, but I had the sickening feeling I'd have to find a place to camp instead. There was nothing I could do about it. I didn't have a credit card. I'd simply have to get through on what I had. I cursed myself for not having put more money in my boxes at the same time that I acknowledged I couldn't have. I'd put into my boxes all the money I'd had. I'd saved up my tips all winter and spring and sold a good portion of my possessions, and with that money I'd purchased all the food in my boxes and all the gear that had been on that bed in the Mojave motel, and I wrote a check to Lisa to cover postage for the boxes and another check to cover four months of payments on the student loans for the degree I didn't have that I'd be paying for until I was forty-three. The amount I had left over was the amount I could spend on the PCT. I put my money back in my pocket, turned my headlamp off, and stared out my window to the west, feeling a sad unease. I was homesick, but I didn't know if it was for the life I used to have or for the PCT. I could just barely make out the dark silhouette of the Sierra Nevada against the moonlit sky. It looked like that

impenetrable wall again, the way it had to me a few years before when I'd first seen it while driving with Paul, but it didn't feel impenetrable anymore. I could imagine myself on it, in it, part of it. I knew the way it felt to navigate it one step at a time. I would be back on it again as soon as I hiked away from Sierra City. I was bypassing the High Sierra—missing Sequoia and Kings Canyon and Yosemite national parks, Tuolumne Meadows and the John Muir and Desolation wildernesses and so much more—but I'd still be hiking another hundred miles in the Sierra Nevada beyond that, before heading into the Cascade Range. By the time the bus pulled into the station in Reno at 4 a.m., I hadn't slept a minute. Greg and I had an hour to kill before the next bus would depart for Truckee, so we wandered blearily through the small casino that adjoined the bus station, our packs strapped to our backs. I was tired but wired, sipping hot Lipton tea from a Styrofoam cup. Greg played blackjack and won three dollars. I fished three quarters out of my pocket, played all three in a slot machine, and lost everything.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhAox6Zei8>

The Wild Beauty

A FANTASY STORY

A pretty school teacher (Lois Collier)---make that a very pretty school teacher---, a doctor (Don Porter) who disapproves of the white man's attitude toward Indians, and a young

Indian boy (Buzz Henry) do what they can in the modern west to keep Robert Wilcox and his henchies (the usual Universal suspects headed by Dick Curtis) from capturing and killing a wild horse herd so Wilcox can sell the hides. It all looks bigger than it is because director

American action film directed by Wallace Fox and written by Adele Buffington. The film stars Don Porter, Lois Collier, Jacqueline deWit, Robert Wilcox, George Cleveland, Dick Curtis and Robert 'Buzz' Henry. The film was released

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