

# Bedtime Stories of Adventure

Ikse Jenna Mennen

Published January 2025

Cover art by Ikse Mennen

Formatting by Jean-Canot Walker

Editing by:

Jean-Canot Walker

Solange Walker

Allison Hanson

Suzanne Bosman

Rachel “Thaïs” Andersen

SJ Kim

Photo Contributions:

Jean-Canot Walker

Solange Walker

Allison Hanson

Suzanne Bosman

Rachel “Thaïs” Andersen

Susan Hough

Elysée Stansbury

Adele Hart

Emily “Aïcha” Kelly



## Table Of Contents

<b>Foreword.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Mississippi.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Horse River.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>SuzieQ at Deep Creek Hot Springs.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>The Casual Evac.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>The Saga of Meander Creek.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>The Green River.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Wildfire in Big Bear.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>The Hidden Munro.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Rattler in Fairview.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>SuzieQ in the Red.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>A Month Of Dirtbagery.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>The Bear.....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>A Word From Canot.....</b>	<b>81</b>

# Foreword

From 2014-2024, I worked at a wonderful summer camp in the Northwoods of Minnesota called *Les Voyageurs*, where we spoke French and went on canoe trips in the Boundary Waters between the U.S. and Canada. I'd previously attended as a camper, and *Voyageurs* was very formative for me. Many of these stories are from my time working at *Les Voyageurs*, and most of the crazy adventures happened on our longer *Immense Voyages* with the four-week campers (sometimes lovingly referred to as the "credit kids").

Storytelling was a big part of the *Voyageurs* tradition. Our director, Dahveed, is an amazing storyteller, and had many harrowing experiences from his ten years living in Cameroon to draw on for material. I heard lots of his stories, as well as stories from my other counselors, when I was a camper. When I became a counselor, I wanted desperately to be a great storyteller like Dahveed – an impossibly high bar. But in time, I found my own storytelling voice, nowhere near as grandiose and exciting as Dahveed's, but apparently good enough for the kids to like and ask eagerly for more. Sometimes I would find myself telling story after story in the canoes while we were paddling. I'd wrap up a story, drink some water, and promptly be asked for another. I love an audience, and I was usually happy to oblige for as long they wanted to hear about it.

I also told many of these stories to 5th and 6th graders when I worked at an outdoor science school called High Trails, near Big Bear, California. They were slightly modified, of course, to be age-appropriate, and I often made them happier and less scary to help the young ones fall asleep in an unfamiliar environment.

There's a delightful little book by James Loewen called *Up a Creek, With a Paddle*. It's a collection of anecdotes from his younger days working at a canoe camp, and he wrote it when he knew he was dying of cancer. It's clear that these little stories were a parting gift to the world, some small way to keep James Loewen in the world after James Loewen was gone. I, also, am dying of cancer, and also worked at a canoe camp... I feel very strongly that these stories are a part of my own personal mythology, and that recording them feels like a way to give myself to those I'm leaving behind. So this little collection is inspired by James Loewen, and is for those who love me, and those who've ever listened to one of my stories.

At times, I struggled a bit with knowing who my audience would be, and how much I need to explain what *Voyageurs* or High Trails is, and who the cast of characters are. I tried to explain enough that anyone could follow along. Really, what you have to imagine is that I'm telling these stories in the Boundary Waters to a couple of rustling tents full of smelly teenagers, after a long day of paddling. I'm wearing head-to-toe rain gear and a mosquito net over my hat, and I'm watching the last lazy streaks of sunset disappear from the solstice sky.

At *Voyageurs*, we follow a West African tradition of storytelling, where the storyteller begins by telling their audience, "*Histoire!*" (story!) And the audience answers back "*Raconte!*" (tell it!)

Are you ready?

*Histoire!*

*(Raconte!)*

# The Mississippi

Summer 2015

This story is about a very bad trip I had on the Mississippi River. I hesitate to tell this one at camp, because it's not a good look for our program. But I always assure the kids that this would never happen today, and that the particular circumstances surrounding that summer will not be repeated. Particularly, we had a different director than we do now. Let's call him Jean-Pierre. I don't want to trash his name, and I try to make it clear that I have a great deal of respect for this person. He's great at base camp, very pedagogical, with lots of deep knowledge about teaching French and about the fur trade. But the wilderness tripping aspect was never his strong suit, and my understanding is that in the past, other members of his core staff – his assistant dean, and whoever else – did that part for him. I happened to start working for him in 2015, right after all of his experienced core staff had moved on to other things, so trip logistics was, let's say, an overlooked element in a chaotic summer.

That summer was the first summer that the Voyageurs National Park required permits. Back in the bad old days before then, all the campsites were first-come-first-serve. This did allow for a certain amount of freedom, but mostly it was really difficult for us in canoes to compete with motorboats. Not unoften, a motorboat would race us to a site, and of course win, and we felt awfully bullied. Pick on someone your own size!

This is a slight tangent, but just to tell you what it was like: once, when I was a camper, we'd been searching for hours for a campsite on the east side of Namakan, and everything was taken. We were almost to My Island, when a motorboat sped up and passed us to take it first. I was in a canoe with Louis, my counselor, who was furious at this motorboat stealing a site from children in canoes! He said, "Let's go, let's go!" and we paddled as fast as we could to the near shore of My Island. The motorboat zoomed out of sight around the corner to the site, which was on the other side. Louis shoved a tarp in my hands and pointed through the woods. "Run! Run like the wind! Get there before he does!"

So I ran a short way through the woods, and popped out on the beach on the other side just as the motorboat was drifting into the bay and up to the dock. I spread the tarp out on the sand and looked

## *The Mississippi*

up at them. “Sorry, this site is taken!” I said sweetly. They cursed at me, but left, and we were thrilled with our victory.

All that to say, I was happy about the change in park policy. Dahveed, the director of the first half of the summer, had gotten permits, and everything had gone well. But Jean-Pierre, the director of the second half, apparently didn’t know about the change, and thus did not reserve permits. By the time our trip was approaching, it was too late – the park was booked up. We all wondered what we would do, but he was unfazed. “Don’t worry! We used to do other trips all the time. We will go back to doing trips on the Mississippi River and the Turtle River.” (When I told this to Dahveed years later, he laughed indignantly and said “Yes, and there’s a reason we *stopped* doing trips there!”)

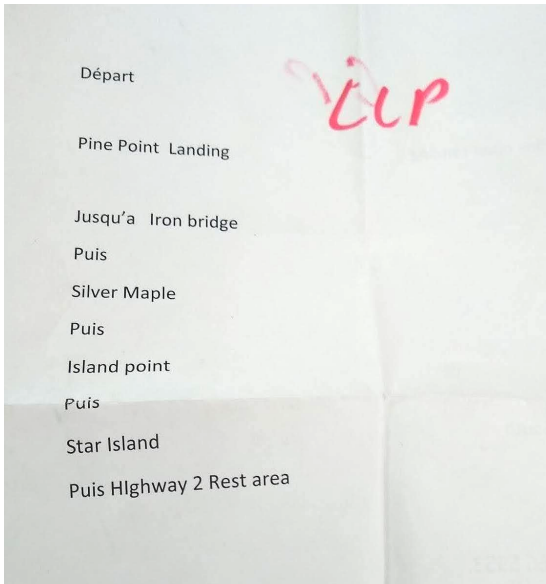
Now, there were a few other factors at play here. We had a very young, very inexperienced staff. As I mentioned, Jean-Pierre’s core staff had recently moved on, and so anyone with more than a year’s experience was now trying to run the show. I was twenty. It was my second year as a counselor, and I had been starting to earn more responsibilities during the first half of the summer, but was definitely not in charge. I was not a Wilderness First Responder (WFR) – the standard certification to have to be a medic on a backcountry trip – and had not been trained to be a trip leader. Jean-Pierre, for some reason, thought that I was a WFR and a trip leader. He had heard that I’d worked for Dahveed and just assumed I’d been there much longer than I had. So my team for the trip was me, another 20-year-old named Anouk who had worked a couple weeks at *Voyageurs* the summer before, and another young-ish counselor named Chloë who had worked at *Lac du Bois* but knew nothing about camping. When I asked Jean-Pierre who our WFR and our trip leader were, he looked at me, surprised. “You are!”

“But I’m not a WFR!”

He considered this. “Well, the Mississippi River is frontcountry. You’ll have cell service the whole way, and you’ll never be far from a road. You have common sense and experience. You’ll be fine!”

Almost none of those things turned out to be true.

## *Bedtime Stories of Adventure*



Jean-Pierre was unable to find good river maps, so he gave us county road maps that had the Mississippi River on them as a faint blue line. The maps were not even waterproof, nor did they have campsites marked on them. Our trip plan was given to us as a series of hazy recollections by Jean-Pierre, who had done these trips a decade or more ago. His descriptions of our itinerary went something like this: “There’s one site called Silver Maple, and another called Iron Bridge. You’ll have to keep your eyes out on the left – it’s kind of high and grassy. If you hit County Road 7, you’ve gone too far. I think Silver Maple is somewhere in this section –” and he would gesture to several miles of twisty turny river.

Apparently, that summer we didn’t have any working radios or SPOTs for emergency communication. (Or maybe just no one knew how to work them or charge them, because I think we’d been using them during first half just fine.) But Jean-Pierre assured us that we’d have cell service.

So off we went, onto a river I’d never canoed before, with no river maps, the sketchiest trip plan ever, no radios or SPOTs, no WFR, and me, a 20-year-old first time trip leader in charge. What could go wrong?

From the very beginning, the Mississippi River was disastrous and unpleasant. Up there near the source, it is very narrow and full of reeds and wild rice. It is easy to lose your way, find a dead end, and have to backtrack to find the main channel again. You can’t even tell which way is downstream without looking down into the water to see which way the plants in the water are pointing. It’s narrow and winding, so there was rarely anywhere to gather the whole group up, all five canoes or however many we were. We’d group up together to make sure we still had everyone, and then as soon as we took off again, everyone was on their own. Once you made your way around a narrow bend, the reeds blocked sight and sound of everyone else. Even our emergency whistles could not be heard from one riverbend to the next. It made for slow going, as we were always afraid of losing canoes, but communication and regrouping was so difficult.

## *The Mississippi*



*The thick vegetation of the Upper Mississippi River*

Another issue was that the river is bordered by thick mud and grasses, not actual land. We quickly realized that it was impossible to get out of the canoes for a pee break, after one of our campers, a big clumsy guy named Guy, tried to get out on what looked like a grass hummock, and sank up to his chest in mud. I remember squatting deeply in the bottom of my canoe and pulling him out by his hands above his head. He came out covered in mud and leeches, and we had to spend some time salting all the leeches off of him. So we learned to do everything in the canoes. We ate snacks and lunch in the canoes, and we even learned to pee off the canoes. One person would put their butt off to the left, the other would put their butt off to the right, and they'd pee straight into the river. It was the least concerned we'd ever been about privacy, as a matter of necessity.

It still was only the first day. We were getting very tired and hot and hungry, and would dearly have loved to eat dinner. But we still hadn't seen anything other than mud and reeds surrounding the narrow channel. Visions of us sleeping in the canoes were starting to float through my head, when

up ahead, we saw something that looked a bit like solid ground. There was a faded wooden sign that *probably* used to say No Trespassing, but all I could see was a faint circle with a slash through it. But it didn't look like a place that was regularly occupied, so we decided to check it out. It was definitely not 100% dry land, but it was a lot closer than anything else we'd seen so far, so we decided to camp there. We put our tents in the driest spots. Some of the land was really just clumps of grass with pits of mud in between to catch the unsuspecting person who stepped wrong. It was a pretty miserable place to camp, and I wanted to reassure the kids that the other campsites would be better, and should have latrines and picnic tables and real ground, but honestly, I didn't know what it would be like, so I didn't promise them anything.

That night I spent some time looking at the map, trying to figure out how near or far we might be from Iron Bridge, where we were supposed to be camping that night. It was pretty much impossible to tell where we were based on the road map, and I had no cell service, so looking at Google Maps couldn't help us either. So much for the Mississippi being "frontcountry!"

The next day, I was determined that we'd make up for lost time. I tried to get us up early and be ambitious in our packing up and paddling. Sadly, all did not go according to plan. Our group of kids was very young – mainly 13- and 14-year-olds – and had little camping experience; nor did my fellow counselors. I was new to being in charge and probably wasn't doing a good job structuring things and setting the kids up for success. So to my chagrin, we got a slow start, and were not fast paddlers either.

We made it to Iron Bridge around lunchtime and ate there, on picnic tables, standing on real ground! What a concept. Stupidly, I decided we had to push on to the next site, Silver Maple, despite the fact that it had taken us a day and a half just to get to our first site. I had not yet learned that trip leaders get to use their judgment to make changes to the trip plan. I thought the trip plan was just what we had to do, and if we had stayed at Iron Bridge, we would've been too far behind and unable to catch up! Now I know that we could've simply shortened our trip and gotten picked up somewhere else, but I didn't realize that then.

That afternoon, there were a great many strainers that slowed our progress even more. Several times we all had to get out of the canoes and wrestle them over downed trees blocking the river. Looking back on it, I think that's actually the only time I saw those kids having fun and working together on that trip. Soon enough, the left bank of the river became a residential area, where people's houses and yards backed right up to the river. On the right, it was muddy bogland once more. We continued



## *The Mississippi*

to pee out of the canoes, given the choice between that and peeing on people's lawns, though it became less and less private.

Once again, the hour was getting later, the kids exhausted and hungry, and still no sign of Silver Maple. I was dead-set on finding the site and making up for our delay, but Anouk wisely stopped me; she reminded me to look at the kids and see how they were doing. Not well. I appreciated the reminder, as I was so focused on needing to continue, that I forgot that the kids wouldn't have the same stamina I did. So we discussed what to do, and eventually decided to go up and knock on some doors until someone agreed to let us camp on their lawn.

We stopped at a beautiful, flat green lawn that could've held ten tents, thinking to ourselves, *this is perfect!* Anouk and I walked up through the backyard from the river and knocked at the door. It was answered by an older man. We explained that we were guiding a trip, and were unfamiliar with this section of river and hadn't been able to find our campsite. I asked if he knew of Silver Maple. He said no. I asked if he knew of anywhere else to camp, hoping that this gentle hint would cause him to offer his own yard without me having to ask.

He brightened. "Well, actually! The land right next to mine is owned by a school. They're gonna build a gazebo there, but they haven't done it yet, so the land's just sitting empty. You're tax-paying citizens, so I'm sure they wouldn't mind if you used it!"

I was disappointed he wasn't offering his own perfect lawn, but we followed him down to check out this school land. It was a small hillock of a peninsula next to his lawn. On one side was the Mississippi, and on the other was a horrible fetid mosquito swamp. The peninsula was small and entirely a hill. There were zero flat spots for tents, but I figured we could make do by pitching them all in a line on top of the hill. And the entire hill was covered in poison ivy – like, nothing *but* poison ivy. It was probably the worst campsite I've ever seen – and I've seen a lot of terrible campsites!

But what could we do? We were low on options, so we felt we had to accept his offer of staying there. Before he headed back to his house, he gripped my shoulder and stared at me, and in a serious low voice, intoned: "Don't forget to bury your wastes." (Funny enough, there wasn't even really anywhere *to* bury our wastes! I think we actually ended up pooping in the trees on the edge of his lawn and burying it, because there was nowhere to go on the peninsula.)

## *Bedtime Stories of Adventure*

So we set up our tents on the ridge of our tiny hellacious hummock. The kids were beyond grumpy. So far, everything about this trip had been a failure, and not at all in a fun way. I didn't blame them for being grumpy; I was too. I only hoped that tomorrow we'd catch back up to our agenda.

The next day's destination was Island Point. I don't actually think we ever saw Silver Maple, so who knows if that site still existed or had been decommissioned years ago. That day's journey took us through the large Lake Bemidji. The Mississippi River flows in on the southwest corner of the lake and out the southeast corner. It was a very windy day, and I knew that Lake Bemidji might be a problem, so I instructed the kids to all stay tucked against the south shore of the lake as we traversed. But as soon as we got out on the lake, that plan was abandoned, as the gusts and rolling whitecaps swept us merrily off into the big lake. It was quite scary – a size of lake not to be messed with, and the wind so strong we were truly not in control of where we were going. At first, I tried to fight it, but quickly realized that even were I able to gain the south shore, the other canoes would not have such luck. But I remembered that on the north shore of the lake is a state park! So I thought, why not let us get swept north to the park and spend the night there? Maybe even two! It could be a great re-set for the trip. This was probably the first good idea I'd had as a trip leader. Fortunately, the wind was perfect for that new goal. It swept us straight onto the beach of Lake Bemidji State Park without any steering from us at all.

The kids were overjoyed to have toilets and tent pads. I finally had service, and called Jean-Pierre and told him about our mishaps. I asked if we could spend two nights at the state park to rest up. He said that was just fine, and wherever we ended up by the last day, he could figure out a road to meet us at and pick us up.

But the next day was even windier. I recall 70 mph winds, and the lake looked like the ocean. The kids amused themselves for a long time by standing on the beach and throwing a frisbee out over the water, to have the angry winds hurl it back onto the shore.

The day after, it was still extremely windy, but I felt we had no choice but to leave – we weren't just going to stay at the state park until the end of our trip! We had to go on. So we packed up. I explained to the kids that the most important thing was to keep the canoes pointing straight into the waves, because if you let yourself get caught sideways, you'd surely capsize. The waves were scariest by the shore where they were breaking, so I suggested we hold the gunnels, run out into the waves, jump in, and paddle like mad until we were out beyond the breakers.

## *The Mississippi*

We had this one kid, Guy, the one who'd gotten stuck in the mud and leeches the first day, who was so clumsy he'd managed to flip a canoe every single day of the trip. Impressive, since I've seldom seen that happen before or since! He must have just had a growth spurt and didn't really know yet where his arms and legs were. But I pride myself on having great balance, and I've never capsized without meaning to, so I took Guy in my canoe, and we went first. I figured if we didn't flip, then it should be okay for the rest of the group too. We did make it out past the breakers, paddling furiously, and once we had a moment to look behind us, I saw that the second canoe had already swamped and Duluth packs were rolling around in the shallows with the waves.

This wasn't gonna work, I realized. We turned around and helped get all the stuff out of the water. Unsure what to do next, I slunk off to call Jean-Pierre. He suggested that we set camp back up for one more rest day in the park. The next day – the last day of our trip – he'd come with a van and canoe trailer and bring us half a day's paddle away from our base camp. We'd canoe up the Turtle River into Turtle River Lake and arrive home. That way, even though we'd had an odd journey, the kids would hopefully feel some amount of victory by paddling themselves back home. I thought this was a great idea.

In the morning, we packed up, and Jean-Pierre brought us to a bridge over the Turtle River. I know I didn't have a map, but he assured me it wasn't far – all we had to do was canoe upstream, and we'd eventually emerge on the lake. Then we'd paddle past Russian camp, cross the lake, and we'd be home. The Turtle River was even smaller than our first day on the Mississippi – it was bushwhacking the whole way, and so dense with wild rice. There had been wild rice on the Mississippi too, but not quite so prolific. And it turns out, some people are allergic to it! Poor Guy's face swelled up, all red and puffy, his eyes swelled shut and leaked pus, and he sneezed and sneezed and sneezed.

I was not a WFR, and was quite worried that this could become anaphylaxis, but I didn't really know what to do about that. I guess I must have had lifeguard training, so I knew to use an EpiPen if his airway did close up, but I didn't even think to give him Benadryl in the meantime. All I could think was that there would be a nurse at Russian camp, so if we could get to Russian, it would be someone else's decision. So I pressed us on, as swiftly as the group could be pressed, until at long last we arrived on the Russian beach. The rest of the group ate lunch on the beach while I took Guy to the nurse. The nurse was quite unfazed, gave him 4 Benadryl, and told him to take it easy.

We were still in this crazy multi-day windstorm with gusts up to 70 mph. It hadn't been a big deal on the tiny little Turtle River, but now that we were on a lake again, it was daunting – maybe even a

little traumatizing, given all the trials we'd had so far. Turtle River Lake is not huge, and to see it with massive whitecaps like that was really something special.

My co-counselor, Anouk, brave woman that she is, had arrived at the end of her rope, and had a breakdown in contemplating the traverse we were about to attempt of the lake. I took her aside and gave her time to cry and breathe, and told her she could have the strongest canoe partner of the campers. As she composed herself, I went back to the group and decided to give them the biggest pep talk I could possibly infuse them with. I told them how brave and strong they were, and how challenging this was going to be, but what badassess they would be for succeeding. How proud I was of them for overcoming obstacles so far, and many other grandiose, semi-true things. Honestly, most of them had been pills the entire trip, who had not worked together, cultivated a positive attitude, contributed to the group, or stepped up in times of need. But it wouldn't hurt to start now.

And now I do deeply regret having attempted to cross the lake at all, when I could've simply called Jean-Pierre to come pick us up and drive us around the lake. It didn't even occur to me to do that, but I also just felt that these kids had met nothing but failure after failure on this trip. All of them were new to camping, and I didn't want them to go home with the idea that camping is miserable and hard and never ever goes the way you wanted it to go. I wanted so badly for us to have this one victory. So off we went. I took the weakest one – little Didier, who was only twelve and had these little stick arms and was such a lily dipper of a paddler.

As soon as we were on the lake, it was every canoe for themselves. I was paddling as hard as I possibly could, and was barely making progress toward the *Voyageurs* dock, narrowly avoiding getting swept away into the big part of the lake. I knew there was nothing I could do to help out anyone else, so hopefully they'd all put their backs into it and make it to the other side. Because Didier's stroke was so weak, I was having us paddle five strokes as hard as we could, then switch sides, and repeat. I was J-stroking like mad, and somewhere in that battle, I heard and felt a *pop* and a sharp pain in my shoulder. But there was no giving up halfway, or we'd be swept out into the big part of the lake, so we pressed onward. Though the canoes were scattered across too much water to make me feel comfortable, miraculously, they all made it. When we arrived at *Voyageurs* base camp, that was it for me – I had hit my breaking point, and began to shake and sob. Fortunately, there were other counselors there who were able to take over and help the group recover and set up their own tents again.

Years later, I learned that I'd actually torn my rotator cuff that day. It never healed. For a long time, I thought it was a pinched nerve and hoped it would get better on its own, but it did not. I still have

## *The Mississippi*

pretty good use of my shoulder – better now after PT – but I do not recommend rotator cuff injuries!

I told Jean-Pierre that our trip had gone terribly, and that I never wanted to do a trip on the Mississippi ever again. He listened sympathetically, but said, “Well, how about next session?” Because, well, he still didn’t have permits for the park, so where else were we going to go?

So two weeks later, I went out on the Mississippi again. That trip was better from a logistics perspective, and much worse from other perspectives. There was a mental health incident on that trip which means it is a story I don’t share. After the two of these trips, it took me a long time to forgive the Mississippi River and appreciate her again, now that I live on her shores in St Paul. And I am very thankful that we now do our trips in Voyageurs National Park, the Boundary Waters, and other lovely places that are not wild rice leech swamps.

# The Horse River

Summer 2017

In the summer of 2017, Dahveed found a new trip for us to do with the credit kids at *Les Voyageurs*. He had never done that exact loop before, but had read about it on some Boundary Waters forum and was very excited about the possibility. We would put in at Nina Moose, head east into Crooked Lake, paddle up the Horse River, and exit out of Mudro Lake.



That year we had good enrollment, and there were two credit groups. Solange and Ngwesse led one, and Elysée and I led the other. Elysée's and my group was just us and four girls. It ended up being an intensely feminist *brigade*, both because of who we were, and because we encountered a very weird amount of sexism on this particular trip. The name we chose for ourselves was "*Juste des filles avec des canots*" – just some girls, with some canoes. I can't remember what order we encountered these weird sexist men, but on this trip we had:

- A group of men who actually asked us how we got the canoes to the other side of the portage. Such a confusing question! Presumably because we were all female, and on the small side? But this led to a great inside joke about how that's what the red button on the SPOT device is for – we press it whenever our tiny female muscles can't do a portage, and some burly men in helicopters come and do it for us!

- A couple of men came through a portage in a thunderstorm, while we were waiting under a tarp for it to blow through. As they were loading up, I approached them to advise that they wait until there's been no thunder for at least twenty minutes. They proceeded to condescendingly tell

me that they were sure I was a great trip leader, but they would be heading out anyway. A part of me wanted them to be struck by lightning, just a little.

- Some men who passed us as we were taking a snack break told us how impressed they were with us – again, condescending and clear that they were impressed because we were female. When we passed them on a portage later, they were stunned that we were going faster than them.

Anyway, that's not what this story is about! The girls were great. They were on the older side, and one of them was emo and sarcastic and so funny, which is my favorite kind of student to have. I think she was the one who said that it felt like me and Elysée were their lesbian moms. We were touched.

The first big event of the trip happened in Thursday Bay, in Crooked Lake, on our rest day. We had regular radio check-ins with the other *brigade*, three or four times a day. At 7pm, I turned on the radio for our evening check-in, and got a very worried Solange on the other end. She told me that they had done solos, and that when they picked DuBois up from his solo, his hands were hugely swollen, and that she was concerned about anaphylaxis. DuBois had taken a nap in the grass, and was like that when he woke up. I was a Wilderness EMT, so I was the medical authority among us. It was extra tricky when I couldn't even see the patient to do my own assessment, but Solange was a Wilderness First Responder, and she gave me a good patient report. I, too, was concerned for anaphylaxis, as it sounded like DuBois's lips were swollen, and he described his airway as "probably 80% open?"

Anytime the airway is compromised, that's very concerning, especially in the backcountry. An airway can go from 80% open to 20% or 0% quite quickly. Epinephrine is a tool we have to buy us time, but in the backcountry setting, it's going to take longer than 15-30 minutes to get out of there, so you better hope that the Benadryl starts working right away. My training told me that any time there's any swelling of the airways, lips, or tongue, that it's anaphylaxis, and you should Epi, Benadryl, and get out of there as fast as possible – press the big red button on the SPOT!

But, we were both reluctant to pull the trigger on that, as it seemed DuBois was stable for the moment. Solange was standing by with the epinephrine and Benadryl. Eventually Ngwesse came on the radio and told me a key detail that persuaded me not to pull the trigger – he informed me that DuBois was eating dinner, happily on his second bowl. Ah. That paints a different picture. People starting to go into anaphylaxis don't happily eat two bowls of dinner, I think. So I advised Solange to give DuBois the max dose of Benadryl, keep the EpiPen close at hand, and check on him

regularly. If things changed for the worse with his airway, she should Epi and press the red button. I told her I'd keep my radio on that night, so she could reach me with any questions.

We were actually camped fairly far apart from each other that night, or I would've gone to check on him myself. And all that radio talk at such a distance had drained our batteries severely. I knew that we might exhaust all of our battery on this, but I figured, if we got through this, it would be okay to not have radio check-ins the rest of the trip – this was more important.

That night, we had one of the worst thunderstorms I've ever camped in, and I've camped in some really bad ones! I learned later on that in that storm, someone a couple lakes over from us died from a tree falling on their tent. It's one of the only times I've actually clung to another person in abject terror, as lightning flashed and thunder boomed loud and bright around us. Our tent was also fairly close to a tall white pine – not really where you want to be in that situation. We should've gotten out of the tent and dispersed ourselves, but we did not. The storm was so intense that it had put me in a state of primal fear, the kind where you can't make good decisions – where you feel like the thin nylon walls of the tent are somehow offering you some protection from the scary stuff outside.

We slept poorly, needless to say. But in the morning, we were all still alive, and so was DuBois. We set out from Thursday Bay through the Basswood River, Basswood Falls, and the Horse River. It was a brutally hot and sunny day, one of those days where you just can't put on enough sunscreen, no matter how often you reapply. The Horse River was especially brutal. It felt like we were just frying on the river with no escape, nowhere to get off the river into the shade of some trees. The water was swift and the current was against us. In most places in the Boundary Waters, it doesn't really matter if you're going up or downstream - the current isn't strong. The Horse River is one of the only places I've encountered in the Boundary Waters where it does matter. So the loop Dahveed had read about online, that he reversed because it would be an easier vehicle transfer, or something? We should have done it in the original direction. In many places, the water was shallow enough that we needed to get out and walk the boats upstream, and there were many spots we had to portage that weren't marked as portages on the map. With aluminum canoes like we have, we probably could've avoided portaging much more had we been going downstream. But going upstream, the swift but shallow water was too difficult to navigate.

At long last, we arrived at Horse Lake. It was dinnertime, but still blazing hot. Horse Lake is pretty close to the put-in at Mudro, so we were worried that having arrived on the lake so late, there would be no campsites left. Sure enough, as we paddled lethargically around the whole lake, every site was taken. The last one that we checked was on the southwestern edge, and we'd saved it for last



## *The Horse River*

because even on the map, you could tell it was going to be bad – it was surrounded by marshland. But, that site, lucky enough for us, was open. Had it been any other day, we would have kept going, but it must have been 8pm already. (This might not be true, but I remember thinking that we'd been in our canoes for thirteen hours that day.) As we were headed into the site, a loon surfaced nearby, close enough to tell how disconcertingly huge they are, and how very red their eyes. I wasn't sure if it was real or if I was hallucinating at that point.

The site was truly the worst site I've seen in the Boundary Waters. It was crawling with every type of bug – ants, termites, wasps, flies, mosquitoes, and beetles of all kinds, living in the logs of the campfire area, and swarming around the air. It was not remotely possible to be comfortable outside of a tent, so we set up camp as quickly as we could. We hadn't eaten dinner, but none of us could stomach the idea of cooking, nor did we feel particularly hungry – we were all too heat-exhausted. We could've probably tried swimming, but the water was yucky by the site, all fishy-smelling and full of algae – we would've had to paddle back out into the open water for a swim to be appetizing, and we simply didn't have any gas left in the tank. Elysée and I mandated that everyone eat at least half a bagel, which the kids protested mightily, but we did let them eat in their tents. There were no trees to hang a bear bag off of. We put our food bag on top of a chest-high bush and called it good. I'd never done such a half-assed bear hang before, but we were out of options and completely out of energy to deal with it. Then we went and laid in our tents, tired and thirsty and hot and achy. I tried to refill my water at the beach, but the water was too fishy, simply undrinkable, so instead of paddling out to get fresh water, I went without water for the night, which really goes to show the level we were at.

In the tent, laying down and radiating heat, Elysée and I discussed the other group. We were worried about them. They had started out behind us that morning, and we hadn't seen them all day, so we knew they had just as long a day as we did. We thought that if they came by, desperate for a site, that they should stay with us. Though it's not allowed for two groups to meet up in the Boundary Waters, this felt like it qualified as an emergency. And though the site was terrible, there was actually room for more tents. We pulled out the radio, hoping to connect with them and invite them to stay with us. Somehow, the radio had lost its antenna that day, and the battery was dead to boot. We just looked at each other and laughed weakly. There was nothing we could do for them. We'd have to just hope they were okay, and if they showed up on our doorstep, we'd tell them to stay with us.

The next day, we couldn't wait to be out of there – we didn't even eat breakfast, just packed up as quickly as possible and ate bars in the canoes. We ate our real breakfast at the portage, as one more

thunderstorm rolled through and we sheltered under a tarp. It was our take-out day! It had been a lovely trip in many ways, but the last 48 hours had really stressed us to the breaking point. We were also anxious to see the other *brigade* and know that they were okay. And how was DuBois doing? So we hurried along through Tin Can Mike Lake and Sandpit Lake to Mudro, our takeout. At Mudro, I was seriously concerned that we still hadn't seen the other *brigade*. Where were they? We were getting a shuttle from Anderson Outfitters which would take one of us back to our van at Nina Moose. Then we would drive it back to Mudro, pick everyone up, and head home. It was almost time for meeting the shuttle, but Ngwesse had the keys to the van, so if something had held them up, I couldn't even get started on the van transfer. Finally, as the put-in was in sight, an Alumacraft appeared behind us, charging ahead full steam. It was Ngwesse and Moussa! As they came into hearing range, we yelled our greetings and questions. Yes, everyone was okay, and they were coming soon! They had stopped to swim because it was so hot. I remember being annoyed by this – how dare they stop to swim when we had a shuttle to catch, and I was so worried about them! But I'm glad they were taking care of their temperature needs.

DuBois was still swollen, but had been on a steady diet of Benadryl and was slowly deflating over time. We never did find out what he was allergic to. We decided the Horse River was a nice trip that we could keep on the docket for the future – but only if we go downstream next time!

*The Horse River*



*Ikse on the Horse River trip*

# SuzieQ at Deep Creek Hot Springs

February 2018

When I lived in Big Bear, we learned about a hot spring off in the desert. The first time we went there, we took the way that most newcomers take, which goes on a private road through some scary desert people's ranch, and we'd have to pay them \$10 a person for use of the road and parking area.

Now, for this story to make any sense, I'll have to explain a little bit about desert people. It's a whole thing, a very special category of people I didn't know about until I lived in the desert. Desert people like guns – a lot. They are often fierce libertarians, often preppers, distrustful and scornful of cities and institutions. They want to be left alone on their land, and are extremely independent. Many are totally off the grid, and don't want to rely on anyone else for, say, sewer systems or roads or any of that nonsense. They also often have some woo-woo beliefs, like being into crystals. Most of the time, I'd prefer not to interact with desert people, which is just fine as they'd prefer not to interact with me, too.

These scary desert people, however, had decided to monetize their road toward the hot springs. Their land has the best, easiest access to the hot springs, and so they decided to charge money for it, and do their part to protect the land, too. This meant that you'd pull up to their ranch house, which had a big screened-in porch on the front with a little window in it. They'd accept payment – cash only, of course – and then search your car to enforce the rules of bringing no glass containers to the hot springs, while yelling at you about Leave No Trace and not camping near the springs. In a way, I respect this commitment to keeping the hot springs nice. But it was a very intense way to go about it, especially since they seemed to always have guns conspicuously on them.

Regardless, we had a great time at the springs. While we were there, somebody mentioned a different way into the hot springs that did not involve going through Bowen Ranch. "Just take the Freedom Trail!" they said. They gave us some vague directions, but directions in the desert are always confusing, as there's so little in the way of landmarks. Something along the lines of "keep straight at the first two forks, go left at the third, you'll go down a big hill, then up past some big juniper bushes..."

### *SuzieQ at Deep Creek Hot Springs*

But the next time we went to the hot springs, we decided to try it. I can't remember why, but we were actually coming from LA that time instead of from Big Bear, and we definitely took the wrong road, although I did have a GPS pin for the approximate location of the parking area, so we were headed to the right spot. We followed Google Maps – always a mistake in the desert, I learned, eventually. See, Google Maps knows about jeep roads and even sometimes about dirt bike trails, and it doesn't necessarily know that those are different than regular roads. The particular road I was on that day got worse and worse the further we got. It was very steep, and on one side was a cliff – falling off it would certainly be a death sentence. It was also quite narrow, and turning around was simply not an option. I probably should have turned around way back at the beginning when it still was an option, but I didn't. By the time I was having serious doubts, I would have had to back up for many miles to get out of there, which also didn't seem like a good option. So we kept going, in hopes that we'd get there before the road became totally impassable.

We were in my beloved car SuzieQ, an old beat-up Suzuki SUV that did pretty well at off-roading, for a non-jeep. I was okay with taking her on adventures like these because she was rugged and old and beat-up, and it was okay if she got scraped up in the course of our adventures. But at the same time, I really couldn't afford to lose her – I was poor, and wouldn't have been able to buy another car.

We did actually arrive at the parking area without any significant problems, just a lot of nerves. The problem was, I didn't recognize that it *was* the parking area. It was just a high spot in the road, wider than it had been, with various spots a car could pull off to park, usually wedged against a creosote bush. There probably were a couple cars parked there, I don't recall exactly, but I guess I was expecting a little more official, or developed-looking area, for some reason. Or a sign! But there was none. And my GPS pin wasn't exact, so I thought we still had a little ways to go. I continued, on the way indicated to me by Google Maps.

As soon as I started down the hill, I knew I'd made a huge mistake. It was very steep, and I hadn't really looked too hard before I started down it, but once I was on it, I couldn't stop or go back up it – it was simply way too steep! Much later, after this whole episode, I spotted a small post by the beginning of that road that had a jeep double black diamond marker – a “most difficult” jeep road, that I was now going down in my regular old SUV.

I banged and clattered down the hill, narrowly missing potholes that would've swallowed my car permanently, and the side of the road that, if I'd gone over, would've sent me rolling down the

cliffside to my death. SuzieQ made many concerning sounds, but at last I came to a halt at the flat bottom of the road.

My friends and I breathed a sigh of relief. We studied the map a bit, and concluded that we were actually quite close to the hot springs where we were. Since we were at a wide flat spot, I pulled off the road and parked, and we hiked from there into the hot springs and had a lovely stay. It was my birthday! I turned 23. The hot springs are a magical place, really nice hot pools of water right by a cold river with a rope swing and a slackline. We met up with some other friends who had taken the Bowen Ranch way in.

When we left, we told our friends that we were in a bit of a predicament with where we had left my car, and we weren't sure yet how we were going to get out. There's no phone service at all in that whole area, so we simply asked them to tell our boss Chris that we might not be back to work the next day, and if they didn't see us, someone should come back to rescue us. With that, we headed our separate ways – me and my friends Max and Mallory back to SuzieQ, and the others back to the Bowen Ranch lot.

When we got back to SuzieQ, we continued out in the same direction, as I did not think it would be possible to go back up the road we'd come down on. We could see on Google Maps that the road would come to a fork, and the left hand fork went back onto Bowen Ranch. We were hopeful that we could go that way and come out onto the scary desert people's land, even though we hadn't come in that way. But when we got there, the left fork onto Bowen Ranch was closed by a large metal gate. It had a huge padlock on it, and was covered in No Trespassing signs that were riddled with bullet holes. The message was clear.

We looked at the map again, considering our options. The right hand fork wound off into the desert for a very, very long way, a long squiggly line that looked ominous and did not appear to lead out into town. We decided that the best thing to do would be to walk across Bowen Ranch to beg the scary desert people to open the gate for us. Or, if they wouldn't do that, they could at least tell us about where the right hand fork went, and whether we could get out that way eventually.

So we climbed over the gate past the bullet-riddled No Trespassing signs, and walked for a mile or so to the ranch house. From a distance, we could see a figure with a gun standing with crossed arms, staring us down. He hollered "Didn't ya see the No Trespassing signs?"

*SuzieQ at Deep Creek Hot Springs*

Wincing, with our hands up, we continued approaching. “Well, um, yes, but we are in a bit of trouble and we were really hoping you could answer a few questions for us!”

A second figure came out and joined the man, presumably his wife. They were both gray-haired and weathered, leathery skin with more frown lines than smile lines. They both carried guns, and they stared unwelcomingly towards us, but did not stop us from approaching.

This was not how I’d hoped this interaction would begin. It seemed like a bad idea to start right off with asking them to open the gate. So I started off by telling them I was a bit lost and/or stuck, and was hoping for some advice on where to go.

The man took this opportunity to launch into a well-practiced rant about dumb city people from LA, with their stupid two-wheel drive cars, blindly following their stupid Google Maps on their stupid smart phones, and how they’re always getting into trouble and expecting other people to get them out of it, and it’s not his problem, and if only I knew how many dumb people there were like me, I wouldn’t even be trying to bother him about it because me and all the other dumb people aren’t his responsibility.

Raising my hands placatingly, I told him that we weren’t his responsibility at all, but we’d be much obliged if he could just give us some advice about where to go, and then we’d get off his land and out of his hair lickety-split. I wasn’t sure whether or not to mention that we weren’t from LA and weren’t in a two-wheel drive car (though we had, indeed, stupidly followed Google Maps).

He didn’t assent so much as coldly allowed me to continue talking. I explained where my car was, to the best of my ability.

He snorted in amusement. “You have to go back up the road you came down, to the Freedom Trail lot. From there you can head out and it’s a short distance until you meet back up with the main road over there.” He pointed to the road behind his own land, behind where the Bowen Ranch way led off to his house and his own paid parking area.

No, I said – I don’t think it’s possible to go back up the way I came. What about the right hand fork? Where does that go?

“You don’t wanna go that way,” he said. “There’s a lot of... big rocks.” The way he said it, I was sure this was the understatement of the year. Plus, if he was advising me to go back up the road I’d come down, instead of taking the right hand fork, it must be *really bad*.

I hesitated. “I don’t suppose you could unlock the yellow gate? I’d pay you, for the use of your road and for your trouble!”

He sneered. “I had that gate built because I kept having dumb LA people driving onto my land from out that direction, and generally being a nuisance. Or they’d get stuck out there and want me to tow them out this way. I built that gate and immediately threw away the key so no one could expect me to open it under any circumstances.”

“Well,” I said. “We aren’t from LA; we live in Big Bear. And I don’t have a two-wheel drive car. But I can appreciate your frustration. I know we aren’t your problem and that you don’t have to help us. I very much appreciate your time and your advice. But I really don’t think I can go back up that hill I came down. What do you think we should do?”

He sighed. “What kind of car do you have?” I told him. He nodded, not unfavorably. “Hm. How good of a driver are you?”

Not knowing how to answer that, I said, “Well, I’ll try my best.”

“Well, here’s what you’ll do,” he said. “You let a little bit of air out of the tires. You put the car in 4WD low. LOW, you hear me?? And you’ll walk up the hill first, really plan out where you’re going to go. And then you’ll just drive up the hill with a bit of momentum, no stopping. She’ll make it.” He nodded in finality.

I didn’t want to go, didn’t want to do that, but it seemed we were out of other options, and we’d already gotten more out of Scary Desert Man than he’d wanted to give us. So we thanked him and hiked back out past the gate to poor SuzieQ.

We followed all his instructions. The gnarly hill was about a third of a mile long, with the worst part maybe a third of the way up. I suggested that one of my friends walk in front of me to help signal me past the worst of the massive car-eating potholes, and the other wait on the high side of the road. I didn’t say so, but my thinking was that on the off-chance I did tumble down the cliff, that way only I would die – and Max and Mallory would just have to figure out how to get out of there.



### *SuzieQ at Deep Creek Hot Springs*

There were a couple very tricky spots, where I would have to skirt just perfectly between the potholes, and if the sand collapsed under my tires, I might be screwed anyway. So Mallory waited there to help signal me, and I started up from the bottom, in 4WD Low. I banged and clanked up the road, so far so good, until I got to the tricky section. Mallory was intently watching my tires, and forgot to move out of the way. I was yelling “MOVE!” out the window, but there wasn’t enough time. I slammed on the brakes to not run over my friend, and felt the car settle deep into the sand.

My heart sank. I was pretty sure that was our one chance, and we’d squandered it. I was furious at Mallory, she was apologetic, but there was little time to waste on that. It was getting late, near sunset, in fact, and I wasn’t about to try to drive this road in the dark. We set to trying to shovel and push SuzieQ out of the sand. It was fairly clearly a futile effort, but what other solution did we have? This road was actually right near the Pacific Crest Trail, and when we saw a thru-hiker coming past, we begged him to come help us push. He declined, telling us it was hopeless. We begged him to help us try anyway, and he took pity and helped for a little bit, but then went on his way, saying there was no way it was going to happen.

We looked at each other in the growing shadows. “I think I have to back down it and try again,” I said. Max and Mallory nodded. It had seemed nearly impossible going up, worse going down in reverse, but we were out of other options. It was either that or leave SuzieQ forever. This does happen, by the way – I’m not just being dramatic. We would see car carcasses in the desert all the time, from people who got so stuck they eventually had to give up and abandon their vehicles.

I walked back to SuzieQ, got in, and thudded my way in reverse down the scary way I’d come up. Now, I had to try going back up. But the worst section of road was even sketchier now, as there were now deep tire holes in the one good place to drive. This time, I had to drive right on the edge of the road, and hope the sand wouldn’t collapse and send me tumbling down the side. Max and Mallory waited on the high side of the road this time. My heart pounding, I craned over the steering wheel for the best view and bounced my way all the way up the road, past the tricky spot, up and up until I arrived safely at the flat parking area on top.

I got out, weeping and hollering with relief, and kissed the ground as Max and Mallory ran up, whooping with joy. From there, we followed the desert man’s directions – not back out the road we’d come in on towards LA, but on a road I hadn’t even seen before that snaked off the ridge behind a large juniper towards Bowen Ranch. That road wasn’t exactly calming either, but compared to what we had done, it was small potatoes. In twenty minutes or so it had wound around

to deposit us on the main road near where the Bowen Ranch driveway split off. As we hit the main road, we all breathed a big sigh of relief. No more jeep roads for us!

I almost sped out past the ranch, eager to get home, but something compelled me to stop and thank the desert man. He was very scary and mean, but I couldn't help but have sympathy for him. He was clearly tired of helping out ungrateful city folk who'd gotten themselves in a pinch, and I wanted him to think better of us. And genuinely I felt so grateful for his advice, without which who knows if we ever would've gotten out. So I parked at the beginning of the driveway and got out to walk up to the house and thank him. The woman was outside, and when she saw me, she waved and ran inside to get her husband.

He ran outside and towards me so quickly, I flinched at first, not sure what he was about to do, but then I saw that his wild-eyed enthusiasm was for the fact that I'd gotten out, a sentiment I could certainly agree with. He came right up to me and gripped my shoulders.

"You did it!" he crowed. "I never thought you would make it out!" (I had to chuckle at that, since I couldn't very well be indignant at him.) He told me that I must be a fantastic driver, and that I really need to buy a Jeep and become a real off-roader. "This is the beginning!" he said, gesturing magnificently at the wide open desert. "You're gonna explore the Mojave!"

I assented enthusiastically, not actually intending to buy a Jeep by any means, but caught up in the moment and deeply flattered. I felt like I had succeeded on a side quest I didn't even know I was on! I thanked him profusely for his help and headed out of there, back up the mountain to Big Bear, where we weren't even late to work the next day.

# The Casual Evac

Summer 2018

In the summer of 2018, Solange and I were leading a *brigade* with a bunch of amazing villagers. Thaïs was there, Alèx (Zoë's little sister, the red-haired girls), Claire, Gabrielle, Daniel, Eloïse, and Kofi. After a fabulous trip to Winnipeg, we headed into the Boundary Waters, putting it at Little Indian Sioux.

You'll have to forgive the hazy details of this story. Apparently, I was not writing things down that summer, and all I have is the villager list and the list of lakes we went to, so we'll have to rely on my spotty memory – some of it may be inaccurate.

At some point, early on in the trip, perhaps even the first day, poor sweet Claire took a bad fall. While carrying a canoe on a portage, she'd stepped into a surprisingly deep hole that had been invisible, covered with grass. As the hole swallowed her leg, her knee bashed into a rock on the edge of the hole, and tore a pretty good chunk of flesh right out of the top of her kneecap.

I was a fairly new Wilderness EMT, ready to respond and not at all panicked by this non-life-threatening injury. I whipped out the irrigation syringe and the gauze and all my fun arts-and-crafts supplies. Claire was a trooper. She was one of our favorites: smart and funny, gay as hell, seventeen and from Georgia, with a beautiful light southern accent, tall and strong and always game for anything, ready with a smile. Irrigating her knee must've hurt terribly, but she underwent my ministrations with courage.

Then, of course, we had to decide what to do about it. It was a substantial wound, and seemed sure to get infected out in the backcountry. But she wasn't going to bleed out from it, and she could probably even continue to enjoy the trip. It really was one of those borderline cases: to evac or not to evac? Evacuating then seemed excessive; I was confident Dahveed wouldn't do that. Everyone, including Claire, just wanted to enjoy the trip. So Solange and I, with input from Claire, decided that we would modify our trip plan instead. Our original plan had been to head up through the small interior lakes to Lac La Croix, and back down through the Fish Stake Narrows, Agnes and Nina Moose; our van had already been moved to the Nina Moose put-in. But going so far away from a put-in felt like it would be foolish. We decided to cut across the interior directly toward Nina Moose

instead, through Lynx, Ruby, Hustler, and Oyster lakes. We had actually done this exact trip, but in reverse (Nina Moose to Indian Sioux) as a staff trip in 2016, in only two days – so it was a route I was familiar with. It felt like an acceptable risk to take Claire further into the backcountry, if we would only ever be one or two days away from a put-in.

(The staff trip, of course, had been brutal, and involved only seasoned adults. Dahveed's explicit goal had been to break us a little and see if we rallied together and got even stronger, which we did. Memorably, that was also the summer that Cosette had been super fit and ready to portage two Alumacrafts every portage, because "I do hot yoga!" – an explanation which had always left a lot unexplained for me.)

I figured we could modify our speed as needed, take our time if Claire's knee looked good, and stretch the trip out to its proper length (probably five days), or we could speed up if we needed to get out of there faster. In hindsight, this was not a terrible plan, but not a great one either. The route we had chosen had a lot more big portages than the original route – not ideal for a knee injury. When we debriefed this trip with Dahveed after, he mentioned that we could have chosen to base camp and do day trips, a concept I was, at the time, unfamiliar with. It had not occurred to me that we could do that.

In any case, over the next couple days we slowly made our way westward over the long portages. We changed Claire's bandages twice a day. She was in good spirits and still didn't want to leave, although her knee swelled to the point where walking was painful for her. Everyone pitched in and brought her things and helped support her as she hobbled across portages. Then, after a very long and hot day, we arrived at a site, and I went to change Claire's bandage and discovered that her wound was oozing green pus. Delightful. I took her temperature, and it was elevated, but it was also very hot out, so we thought that was probably more the heat exhaustion than infection fever. Nonetheless, it was a worrying enough sign that I thought we should probably try to get Claire to a hospital soon, and cut our trip short.

We let Claire know that we would need to evacuate. Coincidentally, earlier in the session, all of the students had been assigned to do a mini-research project on various backcountry skills, and she had done hers on evacuations. How convenient! When we gathered the *brigade* together, Claire excitedly and confidently explained to her fellow campers the difference between the two levels of evacuation. In a rapid evac, someone is really, really in trouble, and you press the big red button on the SPOT, and then nice search and rescue people come and help you get out with a motorboat or a float plane. Then there are slower evacs, where we are less worried, but still think someone should

## *The Casual Evac*

go see a doctor soon, and we paddle out ourselves. In her explanation, Claire called this a “casual evac,” which was not the term from our first aid book, but it made us laugh and it stuck. Our inside joke was that for the casual evac, it was okay to wear whatever dirty t-shirt and quick-dry pants you had – unlike a *black-tie* evac.

The kids were *stoked*. They were so ready to help get Claire to the doctor, even though it meant cutting our trip short. They wanted a challenge, wanted to be helpful, wanted to be relied upon. The causal evac began.

So the next day, we woke up early, on Oyster Lake if I had to guess, and headed out, hoping to be at the Nina Moose parking lot by the end of the day. The kids were pumped – they paddled and portaged with purpose and gusto. We *would* rescue Claire!

But as we stopped for lunch at a campsite on Nina Moose, we saw dark clouds gathering in the sky to the south. Solange and I listened to the radio while we ate, and the news wasn’t good – we expected thunderstorms intermittently for the rest of the day. We considered whether or not to go anyway. But after exiting the lake, we would just be on the long, slow, marshy Moose River, which doesn’t have many good options for getting out and sheltering on shore if we had to wait out a storm. And Nina Moose lake has the last campsites before the put-in, so if we got stuck for a long time, we wouldn’t be able to change our minds and camp somewhere else. I didn’t want us to get stuck on the river in thunderstorms, and Claire’s condition was stable. We decided the best thing to do was to stay where we were. This would mean we weren’t really cutting our trip short at all – maybe by half a day.

We broke the news to the kids, and they were devastated; they pled with us to change our minds. Thaïs was especially sad and angry, and laid down useless and hot and mad on the rocks, refusing to help set up camp. We let her sulk there, until she had recovered her composure after *sieste*. They just had all been so excited to be heroes, and were crushed that our plans had been foiled by the weather.

The next day, however, we did make it out, all in good time. Drove back to Bemidji, and brought Claire to the hospital, where they said “Whoever cleaned out your wound did a great job!” and put her on antibiotics. She was totally fine, and came back the next year. I think about her sometimes and hope she’s doing well out there in the world! Thanks for being down for anything, Claire.

# The Saga of Meander Creek

August 2018

Once upon a time, Canot, Solange, Aïcha, and I went on a canoe trip together after camp. We'd been excited to scope out some new trips for camp, some places we'd never been to before, but the permits were slim pickings, and we ended up with a permit for the very-familiar Moose River.

On August 20th, we rented canoes - the big green Old Town ones that steer like a rubber bathtub - and headed north on the Moose River into Nina Moose. As always, that river is more work than you think it's going to be, because there are many beaver dams that you have to haul the canoes over, with no land to step on to either side. Depending on the year and month, the reeds can be pretty thick at times, and it feels like bushwhacking. It was August, and the water was low-ish. We camped at Lake Agnes that night. It was a beautiful wide-open site with great stone furniture, we took advantage and reveled in the fact that we were not leading teenagers in the wilderness with a skinny dip, a gourmet meal, and an early bedtime.



The next day, we canoed to the Fish Stake Narrows. Of course we spent time at Warrior Hill, climbing over the rocks, appreciating the view, and taking pictures. We probably ate some late-season blueberries. We took a look at the pictographs. We stayed on the easternmost island of the Fish Stake Narrows. It's a really cool site on a little peninsula, so you have a view of the water from three sides! On the northwest, a little bay; on the west, a point (both excellent for sunset viewing); and on the south, the channel. It's got an open forest of predominantly red pine, and excellent sun and shade opportunities for whatever temperature is going on. It's also large enough for many tents, and we noted it would be a great place to stay with a *brigade*. I have since stayed

## *The Saga of Meander Creek*

there at least 2-3 times with *brigades*, and it remains one of my favorite sites. We had Aïcha's lentil/tomato/carrot/cumin soup for dinner, which I remember specifically, because it wasn't one of my go-to camping meals and I was stoked to learn of it. We spent a while looking at pictures from the summer's camp session and laughing until our bellies hurt. There was a magnificent sunset, and everything was perfect. It was on this day that we came up with our team name: The Winky Bowsers.



*The Winky Bowsers atop Warrior Hill*

I think it was also at Fish Stake Narrows that we began toasting, “To be single and in good health!” It was a quote from Ingvald Stevens’s published journal, that we read aloud from many nights of the trip. We thought it was very funny. It was definitely a theme of our trip – and what’s even funnier is that three-quarters of us were secretly not single! Canot and Solange had just discovered their feelings for each other and hadn’t told us, and I’d been involved with another *mono* that summer and hadn’t told anyone about it. Aïcha, as far as I know, was actually single and in good health.

I don’t remember when the hare-brained scheme of Meander Creek happened exactly, but I’m thinking it must have been at Fish Stake as well. Canot had been studying the map, and came up with a *brilliant* idea. He pointed out on the map another entry point that we’d never heard of before,

at a place called Meander Creek. It was not far from the Moose River entry, so he suggested that we exit the Boundary Waters out of Meander Creek and then hike or hitch back to our cars a mere mile or two down the road. There were many potential advantages to this plan – it would allow us to see places we had never been to, not only Meander Creek but also Gebeonequet/Green/Rockey Lakes, and Ramshead Lake. If this loop worked, it would be *great* to do with campers - not too long, and fun to not have to go back out the same entry point and yet not need a vehicle transfer!

I remember from the beginning having my suspicions. The Moose River had been bushwhacky and tedious, and looked *way* bigger on the map than the Meander Creek. Solange shared my suspicions. We just weren't sure about the look of the Meander Creek, and I dunno, maybe we also felt suspicious that we had never even heard of this other entry point. But, the points in favor were compelling. We wanted to see new places, we didn't want to rain on Canot and Aïcha's enthusiasm, and it would be a very cool thing to discover. Also, we were a dream team: we'd been canoeing all summer and were feeling buff. The four of us were not just *monos* but experienced trip leaders, and so everything went quickly, not just canoeing and portaging, but setting up camp, making dinner, and all the other tasks. Everything felt very easy, and we were invincible – so why not set off on an uncertain adventure? There would never be a better time.

With that settled, we set out west the next day into Pocket Creek and then south through Gebeonequet Creek into Gebeonequet Lake. Gebbie, as they call it, was *beautiful*. We were so stoked that we'd decided to go that way, deeply inspired by the beauty of this out-of-the-way lake. Aïcha had been thinking about getting a voyageur-related tattoo, and said she'd consider getting the outline of Gebbie! I don't honestly recall if we stayed there that night – it would've been a short day if we did, and much smarter if we'd gone on to Oyster. I suspect we probably stayed at Oyster, but we were young and feeling invincible, so who knows if we did the smart thing. That would've been the night of the 22nd, so if anyone has any photos from that campsite, perhaps we can pin it down.

The next day was the grand adventure to the Meander Creek. I'm sure we got up early – it was bound to be a big day no matter where we camped, plus we had to return the canoes and drive back to Two Harbors. Oyster Lake is reasonably well-traveled. People get there from Lake Agnes or Nina Moose, so we were still on the beaten path until we took the 160-rod portage to Ramshead. The portage was thick and overgrown, muddy and rooty, and copious poison ivy spilled into the path. It looked like no one had been that way in *years*. Solange's and my suspicions were growing quickly at that point. Much fun was had joking about our kitchen utensil *d'esprit* – Solange and I both felt kinship with the slotted spoon, which we associated with wisdom and some caution (Solange noting that it keeps in the good and lets out the bad), and which we cited that as the reason



## *The Saga of Meander Creek*

for our spidey-sense tingles. We ended up calling ourselves *équipe sagesse* – me, Solange, and our slotted spoon wisdom.

Arriving at Ramshead Lake did not improve the matter. It was *spooky*, for reasons both real and intangible. Logically, it was spooky because it had *six* campsites on it, but was completely empty and showed little sign that anyone had ever been there (besides, of course, whoever had cleared the campsites and installed the fire grates). As we knew, Nina Moose often has every single site occupied, because it is the first lake after an entry point. If Ramshead was a legitimate point on anyone's itinerary, shouldn't it also be busy, since it was but two (admittedly long) portages past Nina Moose?

Less logically, Ramshead just *felt* spooky. It was a very shallow lake, and it had a ton of pollen floating on the surface, giving it a weird golden-brown color. It was not inviting to swim in. We ate lunch at the one island campsite, and the site itself was pretty nice, again leading us to wonder why *no one was there*.

With our varying levels of confidence and suspicion, we headed to the southwestern side of Ramshead where the Meander Creek allegedly flowed in. We found it without too much trouble, but it was not navigable – just a thin flow of water over some rocks. *Huh*, we said. *I guess there's a portage?* The map did say “rapids” there, but it did not have a portage marked. In hindsight, we should have questioned this more thoroughly. The portages are *always* marked.

Whenever we did question the Meander Creek, though, Canot would always say, “But it is listed as an entry point! It wouldn't be an entry point if it wasn't doable.” We couldn't argue with that.

We picked up our things and walked for a little ways, but the path was not clear, so pretty soon we set them down and began to scout out ahead. It still was not obvious, so I went down to the creek with the idea that I would walk along the creek until I saw the other end of the supposed portage (or until it became navigable) and then backtrack along the best trail. There was nowhere to walk alongside the creek, so I was wading and hopping over rocks. After a ways, the water became deep enough that I could imagine floating a canoe in it, but there were so many large boulders that it would still be impossible to navigate. It would be not just difficult, but physically impossible, to fit a canoe between all the rocks. Every once in a while Canot would call out to me from the woods to make sure we weren't getting too far apart. He popped out of the trees after a while and met me at the creek. We both looked down the creek, which remained a boulder-field as far as the eye could see.

## *Bedtime Stories of Adventure*

“Huh,” he said. (I imagine.)

“I don’t think it’s navigable,” I said. “I think it goes on like this.”

“Let’s go back and look at the map again,” he said. “Maybe there’s something we missed.”

When we returned, Aïcha and Solange were already looking at the map. We reported that the creek didn’t look navigable for as far as we had walked. Aïcha pointed out the name of the entry point, which was Entry Point 11: Blandin Trail.

Then, we noticed the Blandin Ski and Dogsled Trail, marked on the map by a dotted blue line that extended away from Entry Point 11.

“Oh,” we realized. “It’s a *winter* entry point. For the *ski and dogsled* trail.” The creek was never meant to be an entry point for canoes.



*Discovering the truth about Meander Creek on the map*

## *The Saga of Meander Creek*



We felt very foolish. Solange and I also felt a little bit vindicated, and like we should've examined our instincts more deeply! There was only one thing to be done: we had to get back to Nina Moose and then out on the Moose River. The options were either two long portages (150 and 228 rods) to Nina Moose, or canoeing back the way we came through Ramshead Lake, Ramshead Creek, three portages (160, 96, and 70 rods) and a bit longer on the Nina Moose River. The two portages would be faster, so off we went. When we made this discovery, it was already mid-afternoon, probably 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. Could we make it out that day as we had planned? I wasn't so sure. Canot, of course, thought it would be a very long day, but that we'd make it out eventually.

If the portage into Ramshead was overgrown, this one was truly a jungle. Poison ivy leaves the size of my *face* hung down into the barely-visible trail. I believe I took a canoe on that first portage, because I remember feeling relieved that I had the protection of the canoe, parting the threatening leaves ahead of me. It was very muddy. On the map, the portage looks like it might be shorter than 150 rods, because it looks like a very short amount of land, maybe 15 rods, until Lamb Lake, and then the portage trail goes along next to the shore. Why walk along the shore, instead of just putting the canoe in the lake sooner? We had resolved to keep our eyes peeled for where we might be able to access the water sooner and take a shortcut.

Indeed, it was not long at all before we saw Lamb Lake through the trees, but it was all grasses and dense wild rice as far as we could see. The grasses were so thick, it looked like you could walk on them without sinking. The 150 rod portage truly was necessary, and even then, when we got to the lake access, it was difficult. We had to push our way through lots of grass and mud before we finally reached open water.

Lamb Lake was spooky, too. There was a pair of swans floating on the lake; we imagined that they were thinking, *What the fuck are these people doing here??* They'd probably never seen people foolhardy enough to come this way before. The open water area was quite small, and the lake was ringed by mud and grasses thickly on all sides. It was difficult to find our way to the portage on the other side, which was just as jungly and unkempt as the last one.

By this point in time, we had had a *very* long day. I was no longer able to take a canoe - in fact, I may have given up halfway on the last portage, I'm not sure. The green Old Towns I found terribly uncomfortable to portage, worse than an Alumacraft, because the yoke was too wide for my shoulders and was not adjustable. By then, Aïcha and Canot had to take the canoes, because Solange and I were toast. We did single-portage, though – Aïcha and Canot each took a pack along with the canoes, and Solange and I loaded up with multiple bags back and front. By the time we staggered into the clearing on the other side and looked upon Nina Moose Lake's shining surface, it was dinnertime, and things were looking grim. We were hungry, hot, tired, and generally at our limits – or at least *I* was.

"Well," said Canot, irritatingly still in good spirits, "Should we keep going to the exit point?"

"No!" I said emphatically. "*Je suis morte!*"

We all agreed then that we should stay at Nina Moose. If we'd have kept going, we probably could've been at the parking lot around 9:00 p.m. and home by midnight, or we could have camped in the parking lot. But at that point, why camp in the parking lot when you could stay one more night in the Boundary Waters? None of us had anything pressing we had to get back to right away, so it was just a matter of one extra day for the canoe rental.

We canoed all the way around Nina Moose Lake looking for a site. Unsurprisingly, all the campsites were taken – it was maybe 7:00 p.m., and it's always a popular lake. One fellow was clearly all by himself, so we were hoping he would invite us to share. We paddled up to his site and

## *The Saga of Meander Creek*

asked if he knew if the next site around the corner was taken. He said he thought it was. We said we'd been all the way around the lake and everything was taken, and it was late so we weren't sure where to go next. Sadly, he did not take the hint and invite us to stay there. We ended up wild-camping on a bluff. I believe it's actually the spot labeled "Campsite" on the map, with a little black dot – not an official Boundary Waters campsite, but maybe an old one. It was a nice spot - not flat, but open enough, with a great view.

Fortunately, Canot had brought an extra dinner with us of Mountain House! It's the only time I've ever had to use my emergency meal, and I was so glad we had it. Once we'd eaten, we all felt stoked to have one last night in the Boundary Waters. None of us had felt ready to leave – we'd been having such a good time, and it had felt too short to be heading out that day. One more night allowed us to process the trip and that day's crazy adventure, and of course laugh a lot, as we always did together.

The next day, after a light breakfast of whatever-we-had-left, we headed out the last few hours up the Moose River to the take-out. Right before the take-out, we saw a couple who looked utterly unprepared for the backcountry. They were wearing flipflops, generally looking clean and fashionable, and holding their paddles like they'd never been in a canoe before. We made comments about them in French as we paddled up, things like, "*Oh non, est-ce qu'ils vont survivre?*" ("Oh no, are they going to survive?") and, "*Non, ne tiens pas la pagaie comme ça !*" ("No, don't hold the paddle like that!") Then they asked us to take a picture of them, and we heard their accents, which sounded... alarmingly French. We asked where they were from, and sure enough, they were from France. We were never sure if they had heard us, especially with our terrible accents. Wherever they are, I hope they had a great trip! I think about them whenever I take the risk of shit-talking in French. You never know who might understand you...

That night we had a great victory meal in Two Harbors. Either that day or the next, Canot told me about him and Solange, which was shocking news to me, as Solange had never expressed romantic interest in anyone, as far as I knew! Solange, suspecting that Canot had taken me for a walk to reveal this without her permission, brought Aïcha along on a wild goose chase all over town in hopes of intercepting us (meanwhile convincing Aïcha we might simply be lost and need saving).

Solange, it all worked out – I still don't hate you and Canot together, and in fact, I support it so much, I'll officiate your wedding!

# The Green River

April 2019

Once upon a time in 2019, I went on a lovely spring break trip with a dozen instructors from High Trails. I won't describe the whole cast of characters, and it doesn't matter much for the purposes of the story who was there, but for readers who know them, it was: me, Ellie, Elysée, Adele, Blue Jay, Aerin, Madeline, Shannon, Sam, Brandon, Malcolm, and Savannah. We all drove to Moab, Utah, where we planned to rent canoes and canoe down the Labyrinth Canyon, which is a scenic and remote part of the Green River.

Our outfitter was a bit of an ass. His name was Kevin, and he was quickly dubbed King Daddy Kevin amongst our group, a name that stuck. He was unable to talk about the river or give advice without his overinflated ego involved, constantly bragging about how much better he knew the river than anyone, and how no one else would even drive down the road to the entry point he was going to deposit us at, but he did it all the time, in all kinds of weather. It was all laid on a bit thick, and we, a bunch of proud outdoor guides ourselves, were unimpressed.

King Daddy Kevin drove us in a big van down the admittedly quite bad road to the river, narrating braggadociously the whole way. At the bottom, we unloaded our gear and canoes, and he left in short order. When we put the canoes in the water and started loading, however, we quickly realized that one of the canoes had a leak. Not a small leak that you could bail out as you paddled – it was quickly filling with water. We were twelve people with six canoes on a five or six day trip. You can't filter the water on the Green River to drink, so we probably had 60-70 gallons of water – a gallon per person per day, as we'd been taught. We were also a bunch of young adults on spring break, and we had brought quite a lot of beer as well. We were not best pleased at the prospect of leaving a canoe behind and distributing its load of water and gear, and two duffers besides, amongst the other boats. Long-legged Brandon ran as fast as he could up the road to try to catch King Daddy Kevin, but eventually came back unsuccessful. We had no service, so there was nothing to be done but leave the canoe and depart in five boats.

Elysée had brought a ridiculous piece of camp furniture, a gift from her brother. It was an inflatable couch, a long tube of plasticky fabric that you could run around with to fill with air, then seal and fold. (We called it the blue vagina couch, because of, well, what it looked like.) So on that first day



## *The Green River*

we tried to use it as a boat – Adele sat in it and got towed behind a canoe, which quickly lagged behind the others with the extra drag. It was not an efficient solution, and in the days to come we abandoned the attempt, but I will never forget Adele laying in the blue vagina couch in their big sunhat, floating down the Green River like a summer vacationer going tubing.



*Adele on the Green River*

Despite the inauspicious start, our days passed dreamily. The Labyrinth Canyon is gorgeous, the rocks tall and sandy and red-striped, full of caves and so much life. The company was excellent – we were a motley crew, too big to be well-organized, but all outdoor professionals, so it was okay to be a little chaotic. We laughed a lot, and told many stories, and played many games. There were plenty of fun holes and pockets in the rocks, and a few times we scrambled up to sit in them and sing into the weird echoes. One night, we camped in a natural shelter under a huge overhanging piece of fire-scarred rock. It felt alive with history, and I don't remember if this was conjecture if we knew it from King Daddy Kevin, but we were sure people had camped and cooked there for

centuries. There, a family with young boys ended up camping nearby. The boys were drawn to our campfire like moths, and we ended up doing a collaborative Nocturnal Nations class with them, more to our amusement than theirs.

On the third day, we stopped in a canyon where Blue Jay thought there might be good places to rock climb. He was later to become my climbing mentor, but at this point I had not climbed much with him, and I was new to trad climbing. He had brought all of his climbing gear in a giant dry bag, and asked who wanted to accompany him on a little climbing adventure. Ellie and I said yes, and followed him into the canyon to a huge red wall seamed with cracks. He picked out some bolts shining above one of the cracks. We didn't know how hard it was – it wasn't a route marked on Mountain Project, the app climbers use to know what we're climbing, but Blue Jay thought he could do it.

It turned out to be one of the most dangerous climbing adventures I've ever had. You see, falling is usually not the most dangerous thing. Most of the time, falling is fine – you fall a bit, and get caught by your rope and the gear that you've placed. Sometimes the gear fails, and that's bad, but there should be another piece of gear below it, and another after that, so at some point you will stop falling. But what's very, very dangerous is rock falling from above, which can squish you like a bug. No matter how safe you are and how many precautions you take, a microwave-sized block falling on you will be the end of your adventuring. This cliff was tempting to climb, because it was tall and beautiful, but it had terribly weak rock quality. As Blue Jay led, large plates of rock were breaking off and raining down around us. Ellie and I only had one helmet, which we decided the belayer should wear. We stood as close to the wall as we could, watching the rocks bounce down past us to the canyon floor far below.

It was also extremely hard – maybe a 5.12 grade. Looking up, I remember seeing the seam shrink from a hand-sized crack to a finger crack to a fingertips crack before disappearing altogether. Blue Jay arrived at the fingertips crack and launched himself impossibly far up and right to catch the edge of a massive flake. I held my breath, expecting him to fall, his last piece of gear alarmingly far below him. When he caught the flake, I expected the flake to bust off the wall as so many others had, sending Blue Jay tumbling and a massive death block hurling itself down at us. But the flake did not break, and Blue Jay swarmed spider-like over the top of the flake to the next crack, and to the anchor blessedly not far after.

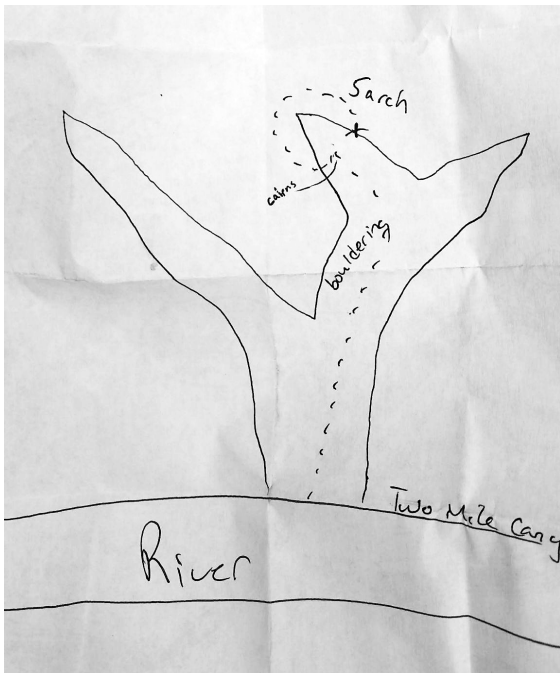
We all agreed that these rocks were not meant to be climbed, but after all that, Ellie and I still wanted to try top roping it before calling it a day. Ellie tried it for a bit and soon gave up, leaving it



## *The Green River*

to me to clean the route. It was too hard for me as well, and I had to cheat and ascend the rope a couple of times, but we got all the gear back and came away successful – with our skulls still intact, that is. I have done a lot more trad climbing since that day, but none so scary and dangerous. We were lucky to not have gotten smashed by any falling boulders.

The next campsite at Two Mile Canyon was where King Daddy Kevin had encouraged us to take a rest day. He'd given us directions for how to hike to a place called Five Arch, creatively named that way because there were five arches. He'd told us how to get there, and under his instruction I'd drawn a map that looked like this:



The instructions were: the canyon splits. Take the right fork. Then the canyon splits again. Take the left fork. On the left wall of that canyon, you'll eventually see a small social trail. Climb the trail up the wall of the canyon until you get to the top. Then, follow cairns to the right around the lip of the canyon until you arrive at Five Arch. You'll know it when you see it.

These sorts of instructions are laughable to follow. There can be many social trails and cairns, and even something as straight-forward-seeming as a canyon splitting can have multiple interpretations when you actually get there and look at it. I remember being incredulous, back in King Daddy Kevin's outfit in Moab, that he thought these instructions would be enough. But we were certainly game to try, and had confidence that we could at least avoid getting lost.

So on our rest day, in smaller groups, we headed up the canyon, up the right fork, then up the left fork, until we saw the social trail wending its way up the steep canyon walls. When we popped out on top, the view was breathtaking. We'd been seeing gorgeous views the whole trip, of course, but as we'd been on the river, we hadn't ever seen what was on top of the canyon rim – no, not even when we were climbing! It was flat and exposed, hot and dry and red, and you could see the Green River down in its steep-sided home for miles and miles and miles. From the arid mesa, you could

tell how green and verdant it was in the canyon – it was a totally different ecosystem on top, an alien world!

There were many sets of cairns, and it was actually quite hard to tell where to go, but we set off, following the ones that seemed like they were heading in the right direction. Since we were walking on slickrock, there was no beaten path to follow, and we often lost our way. We would spread out, looking back and forth until we found a cairn that seemed probable, and then continuing on our way. I have a decent sense of direction – but I'm sure I would've been lost without the group. We did finally make it to Five Arch. It was very cool, and we sat in the high exposed holes in the rock with a view of infinity. We all were quiet for a long time. Something about the place was sacred, and felt very, very old.

When we finally turned around, I realized that getting back might be even harder. As we walked away from Five Arch, there were more and more cairns to confuse us. And we were aiming for a point on the rim with no distinguishing characteristics – we could not see the social trail from the rim. When we'd come up, we'd really just popped up and suddenly been standing on a different plane. So looking around for where we'd come up was a lot of walking to the edge, peering over, and seeing nothing but cliffs.

At last, someone in the group found the trail, and we were able to descend safely back to the river.

The rest of the trip passed without incident – more floating and paddling in the sun, laughing and playing and scrambling. After we got off the river, I went with a handful of the crew to a place near Zion to climb. It was my first time being the leader of a climbing expedition, and I was still terrified of lead-climbing. But fortunately, no one in the group had huge ambitions, so it was just fine that I only wanted to lead easy things. We had a delightful time climbing short little easy routes at a basalt bluff by a river. It was the first time I'd climbed with an all-female crew, and it was so nice that it inspired me to do a lot more of that. The very next month, I organized a non-men climbing weekend in Holcomb that ended in us running away from a wildfire! Read onward to hear that tale!

*The Green River*



*Ikse in Labyrinth Canyon*

# Wildfire in Big Bear

May 4th, 2019

Once upon a time, I lived in Big Bear, California, and worked at an outdoor science school called High Trails. It was really great, and I made lots of friends who were into all kinds of cool outdoor things, including climbing. I was so lucky to get to know people who were excited to teach and share their love of climbing, so by the end of my second year, I had all my own gear and felt comfortable leading and teaching sport climbing skills.

However, climbing was still a bit of a boy's club. There were a handful of female climbers, but all of us were learning from men, and mostly the men climbed way harder and had more experience. I had heard plenty of other coworkers at High Trails express a timid interest in learning to climb, but it seemed they were intimidated by the intense, goal-chasing aspect of it and wanted to learn in an encouraging and low-stakes environment. So I organized a women and non-binary climbing weekend to be explicitly that kind of opportunity for everyone to try the sport. Kindly, the menfolk lent us lots of gear so that we would have enough ropes, harnesses, and hardware to put up plenty of routes and get everyone on the rocks.

I decided we should go to Holcomb, which is a very beautiful crag not too far from where we lived. It's got tons of sport climbing on pristine granite, and in many spots when you get to the top of the routes, there's a sweeping view over all of the pine-forested Holcomb Valley; the snowy peak of Mt. San Geronimo rears behind.

On Saturday, we couldn't have had better weather. It was sunny and warm, but not too hot. It was early May, and wildflowers were blooming abundantly in the valley. Thirteen of us had come out for the day, and we'd split into two groups to go to two walls that had nice easy routes on them. I was with a group at Skyy Slab, when we saw a plume of smoke rising up near the parking lot behind the rocks, about a third of a mile away as the crow flies.

Something you might not realize here in Minnesota is the way Californians feel about fire. California is notoriously hot and dry and wildfire-prone, and in most seasons there are fire bans. You can't have a campfire like you can here, because any stray spark could light the tinderbox around you. We get pretty twitchy about fires. But we didn't panic right away, just watched it for a

## *Wildfire in Big Bear*

minute or so. Suddenly, the plume thickened to a billowing pillar, and the smoke became blacker. At that point, we decided to call CalFire and vacate the premises. Fortunately, someone was able to get service standing on a tall rock and called it in. CalFire said they were already aware and on their way.

At first, we were trying to hastily clean the routes, which means taking all our gear back so we don't leave any ropes or carabiners behind. But as the smoke thickened, we decided to leave the gear. We even left one rope that someone had hastily pulled without taking the knot at the end out, which got stuck in the anchor rings at the top. Hopefully we'd be able to come back for it later – but if not, we'd hopefully escape with our lives, and be able to replace any of our friends' lost gear later.

Someone ran around to Gold Wall, where the other half of our party was, worried that they wouldn't be able to see the smoke as well from over there. We told them to leave their gear and come with us away from the smoke, deeper into the valley. We didn't totally have a plan, since the fire was in the direction of the parking lot, our cars, and the road out – but the first step was to get further from the fire.

As we scrambled lower into the valley, our vantage point got worse. We couldn't see the pillar of smoke as well as we had from the top of the rocks, and we realized we might not know if the fire was getting bigger or chasing us until after it crested the ridge. So we aimed to put as much distance between us and the ridge as possible.

As we walked, we made a couple phone calls. Service is spotty at best in Holcomb, so looking back, it's actually fairly miraculous that we were able to make all these calls. First we called our coworker Kevin, who drove a Jeep. There are many Jeep roads criss-crossing Holcomb Valley that a car wouldn't be able to get through, but we figured Kevin could get to us and bring us out of the valley on an alternate road. We also called our boss, Chris, who volunteered with the local search and rescue. We figured Chris might know live updates about the fire and be able to advise us on when, or if, it would be safe to go back, or if we still needed to press on further away. Chris didn't know much, but promised to try to find out and call us back.

I did figure, during this walk, that our cars were toast. We had seen the smoke, which was pretty clearly coming from the direction and approximate distance of the parking area. Even if the fire was quickly contained, I imagined that all of our cars would have been burned from the beginning. I was

still contemplating whether or not we would escape from this adventure unscathed ourselves, so I didn't waste too much time mourning my car, SuzieQ, but it definitely crossed my mind.

During all of this, we'd seen CalFire planes – maybe seven of them – coming in low and spraying fire retardant over the area. After a while, we didn't see any more of them, so we hoped that meant the fire was out and everything was under control.

We ended up walking in a big circle around the climbing area on a Jeep road until we met Kevin at an old miner's shack that serves as a landmark. The miner's shack was just across a stretch of dried-up lake bed that's now a sage flat from the parking area. We could see many parked CalFire vehicles over there, but not a lot of action, so we went over to talk to them. They told us that everything was under control, and we were allowed to go back to our cars and the crag. There was an area that was taped off with caution tape that we were not to go in. Everything was polka-dotted in pink fire retardant – the rocks, the trees, even a lizard scooted past, dotted with the stuff.

Apparently, there had been a creeping grass fire – I'm assuming caused by a person, but maybe that's an unknown detail – that had gone under a camper trailer that was parked one turn-out down from the parking lot, maybe a quarter mile or less away. The camper trailer and its propane tank had exploded, which caused the suddenly copious billowing black smoke we'd seen. Fortunately, there had been people in the parking lot who'd seen it, called 911 before it even got to the trailer, and began shoveling dirt on the fire. Because of them, and CalFire's rapid response, the damage was contained to just the one empty trailer.

I was truly shocked that all our cars were okay. Allison's car, on the closer end of the parking area to the trailer, was speckled with pink fire retardant, but everything was unharmed. Once we'd all looked over our vehicles, we had a good debrief circle in the parking lot, where we talked a little about what it felt like, now that we had contemplated death-by-wildfire – most of us for the first time. This is a funny detail to remember, but we passed a block of cheese around the circle as we talked.

We had planned to camp that night, but feeling shaken and tired, we all decided to go sleep in our own beds. I stayed with a few other people to go take down the gear we'd left at the crag. We got everything back, and some of us even went back out climbing the next day. I, at least, was feeling emboldened by this adventure, and led some harder routes.

### *Wildfire in Big Bear*

I kept a pink-speckled granite pebble in my pocket for a few weeks after that, and every so often I'd take it out and look at it, and think about how beautiful and fragile our lives on this earth are. I still have the rock, though much of the pink has worn away by now. Overall, we felt very fortunate to have run away from a wildfire and have it be totally okay, but we also felt stronger for having organized ourselves so well and made good decisions in response to the crisis. *Figure 8.*





# The Hidden Munro

September 8th, 2018

In 2018, I went to Scotland with my family for a hiking vacation. We rented a small shepherd's cottage in the middle of nowhere in the Highlands. The Highlands of Scotland are rugged, wet, mountainous lands full of sheep and lochs. Hiking culture is a bit different there, we learned over the course of our stay: for one thing, there's a law that allows you to hike wherever, even on private land, as long as you stay a respectful distance away from people's houses. It's common to go wandering through fields of sheep grazing, and let yourself in and out of gates in fences. For another, trails are much less built-up and maintained than they typically are in the States. Trails are just made by people and sheep walking around, and so it can be hard to know which is the correct direction when there are several sheep trails wandering over the mountain, none of them wider or more marked than the others. And sometimes, there are no trails at all! In Scotland, more than I ever have in the States, I used a map and compass to just take a bearing and hike in a direction. As I wrote in my journal after a few days in the Highlands: "The Scottish idea of climbing mountains seems to be just heading up them, not bothering with paths or trails or anything, over rough terrain and deceptive tussocky grass."

In Scotland, there are a bunch of mountains called the Munros, named for some famous mountaineering guy named Munro. The Highlands are not actually very tall, and the Munros are just any peak over 3,000 feet – nothing, by my Californian standards – but they make up for it in ruggedness. There's some three hundred of them in Scotland, and some people try to climb them all! Some are very popular and well-marked, like Ben Nevis, the tallest mountain in Scotland, and others are obscure and require a bit more navigational prowess. We climbed a few of them during our two week stay. Our remote little cottage happened to be right nearby to one, Sgurr na h-Ulaidh, also called the Hidden Munro. It is pretty far off the main road and hidden behind another mountain, and because of the difficulty in accessing it, it is one of the least climbed Munros. On the last day of my stay in Scotland, we set out to climb it.

From our cottage, we walked upstream next to a river for several hours, until at last we arrived at a low saddle between the Hidden Munro and the mountain next to it. Conditions were highly unfavorable – it was intermittently misting and lightly raining, and the mountain was entirely hidden in dense fog. We could just see the base of it, looming and dark, before it got swallowed in a



## *The Hidden Munro*



blanket of uniform white. My mom was nursing a twisted ankle, and my brother had blisters – they both sensibly suggested that we all turn around. We’d already had a good walk, and they pointed out that if I still was hungry for more hiking, I could scramble up the lower mountain that rose up behind the cottage. But I was determined: it

was my last day in Scotland, and I wanted to have an adventure and summit the Hidden Munro. I promised I would turn around if it got dicey. My mom said that if they didn’t see me by dark, they’d call mountain rescue. And with that, we parted ways. (I’m sure I probably said something stupid, like, “Don’t worry, Mom, I’m a professional outdoor guide!”)

The guidebook suggested approaching from the west and descending on the east, with a warning not to go down the north or west sides at all, because you can’t see the cliffs until you’ve already climbed yourself into a corner. I had come from the north, where the cottage was, and was now climbing slowly up the west side. I never did find a path on the west side, and the whole thing seemed pretty dangerous from the beginning. It was lightly raining the whole time I was on the mountain, and everything was slick with water and sheep droppings. I had my bearing and checked my compass obsessively. Every time I climbed up a new patch of slippery rock, I was afraid that I would climb myself into a corner that I couldn’t get out of. The visibility was awful, maybe twenty feet – so I couldn’t plan out a strategic path based on what I could see!

It wasn’t long before I thought that what I was doing was a terrible idea, but already I feared downclimbing what I’d come up. From the guidebook’s description, it sounded like going down the east side would be much easier, so I decided it would be safer to keep going than to turn around and downclimb the sketchy way I’d been coming up. At some point, I stopped under an overhang of

## *Bedtime Stories of Adventure*

rock and ate my sandwich. I was shivering, my hands cold and waxy. I hadn't packed that much, didn't really expect it to be a full day's outing, so after my sandwich I had no food left and only half a liter of water. The rain had soaked through my rainshell and rain pants, and I was thoroughly wet and cold. I was not, one might observe, superbly prepared, despite being a professional outdoorsperson.

I also had no idea how far up the mountain I was, since I couldn't see anything. How fast was I climbing? Was I a third of the way up? Halfway? Two-thirds? Also, since I was just following a bearing, I realized that it was pretty unlikely I would actually arrive at the summit. It would be easy to miss the summit and pass on by to the north or south of it. I was really trying, and really hoping, because I wanted to find the supposed trail on the east.

Miraculously, my bearing led me right to the top – I practically tripped over the summit cairn before I saw it and realized what I was looking at. I gazed around, at what would probably be an incredible view on a nice day, but was just a 360-degree view of solid white clouds. I took a selfie – soggy me with a nervous smile in front of the cairn, so surrounded by fog it looks like I edited out the rest of the landscape.



To my great surprise, two hikers appeared out of the clouds from the east, the only two I'd see that day. We chatted a bit, and they told me I could follow the path east and that it was fairly clear going all the way to the summit of Stob an Fhuairain, where there's a cairn of small reddish rocks. At that point, I should turn north and make my way back downhill to the river where I'd started from. I thanked them and hiked off, in renewed good spirits. Not only had I found the summit, but there were other people out here, meaning that I wasn't crazy to be doing this in such bad conditions, and the path ahead sounded much more promising than the way I'd come!

I followed the path meticulously for a long way. In parts it was slippery wet rock slabs and in parts it had drops, with significant downclimbs, but it was always along the ridgetop. I figured I couldn't really lose the trail, because it had to be on the ridgetop with me. The drop-offs on the north and south sides were significant, and I could see what the guidebook was talking about to not go that way. Several times, though, I did lose the trail, and would walk back and forth on the ridgetop trying to refind it. Several times I did – a few boot prints in mud, or a pebbled streak. I absolutely did not want to turn north before the cairn and head down the cliffs of doom. But I walked east for a long time – maybe two hours or more – and I still had not seen a cairn. It seemed like that *must* be far enough, and eventually the ridgeline rose up to another abrupt peak, one that looked far too dangerous to climb up to, and was surely the wrong way to go. So I looked over to the north. It looked fine – like a long, steep grassy valley. I did not see any cliffs of doom.

I headed north, downhill. Before too long, I could see cliffs above and west of me, confirming where I thought I was – that I had just gotten past the dangerous cliffs. I followed the water, small streams gushing fresh out of springs in the hillsides that ran together and together, making larger and larger paths until meeting in a river on the valley floor. This was exactly what I was hoping for, as now, I could just follow the river back to the cottage. The water was cold and clear, rushing, with many beautiful waterfalls. There were rowan trees growing on the rocky shores in all their gorgeous red berries, which I took as a good sign as well. Rowan trees signify protection. It was lovely.

After a couple hours of walking along the river, it was beginning to seem awfully strange that I didn't recognize where I was yet. *My* river had a path along it – this one didn't, at least not yet. And where I was standing, this river had a large tributary, making a fork that didn't look familiar at all. I opened the map and studied it. There were so many creeks and streams and rivers flowing into each other, but none that seemed quite right. I considered many possibilities. Had I somehow walked off the southeast side of the mountain? That couldn't be – these waters were flowing downhill to the north, and if I were on the other side of the mountain they'd be flowing south. Finally I opened up one more flap of the map, and saw it – I was so far east of where I was supposed to be, I had walked

into a whole different river valley! I had walked, if not over another summit, perhaps below it, without ever seeing the cairn of small reddish rocks that had been promised to me. I was nearly due east of where I wanted to be, by quite a few miles.

At this point, I was pretty crushed. To take stock, I had no food, almost no water, no dry layers, and was blue-lipped and shivering. I'd managed to stay warm enough on my climb up the mountain, but now that I'd been headed downhill for hours, hungry and tired, my body was unable to keep me up to a functional temperature. I now had to walk across land I knew nothing about – could be full of bogs, or impassable nettles, or fenced sheep land, or maybe more rugged foothills – several miles to the other river. I briefly considered a few options:

I could bivouac here. My mom would call search and rescue. Would they even look for me until morning? I dismissed this possibility quickly. Even waiting here a few hours would be dangerous for me. Better to keep moving in the right direction.

I could keep hiking north to the road. It was a bit closer, and then I could hitchhike to the end of the driveway, and be much more certain of where I was. I had no idea what hitchhiking culture was like in Scotland, if anyone would stop to pick me up. If they didn't, it would be much longer to hike north to the road, west along the road, and back south up the driveway.

So in the end, I decided to just go for it: hike cross-country directly to the cottage, and hope for the best. It was hard going, tussocky and boggy. I sunk into invisible holes a few times, sometimes full of water, up to my thighs. I was getting to the shaky and bumbling, unreliable stage of hypothermia.

But I made it eventually, arriving at the other river in between two patches of dark scrubby forest. I checked the map, guessed which patches of forest I was between, and set off downstream to find the bridge over the river. This was a navigational blunder, and I should have known better: when you're crossing a large area of land or water, you don't usually want to aim exactly to the correct point, because then when you get there, how will you know which way to turn? If instead you aim a few degrees to the left, then you will know to turn right when you arrive. I did not do that, and I was wrong about which patches of forest I found myself between, so after another forty-five minutes or so, when there was still no bridge, I realized my mistake and turned around.

It was 6:30pm and the daylight was starting to go. Again, I was falling into hidden streams and getting my feet stuck in bog mud. As tired and dispirited as I was, it was a big relief when I finally found the bridge. I crossed the river, cut through a wood, hopped a barbed wire fence, and came up

## *The Hidden Munro*

the road to the cottage from the north – the opposite direction from where I should have come from. I remember sitting down on the front step and taking off my boots, pouring a cup or so of water out of each one, and wringing out my socks before coming inside.

Naturally, I'd missed dinner. My mom had wandered up the path to see if she might meet me there, and was going to drive out to get service and call search and rescue if she didn't see me. My brother Alex went running out after to find her. I'd walked and climbed about thirteen miles that day, up and down slippery rocks, across bogs, and through tufted, treacherous meadows. I was unprepared for the day, and very wrong about where I was for a couple hours, but happily, it was all okay in the end.

To my chagrin, in narrating this story to my family, I made a tactical error. I said that the Hidden Munro was no joke, not for casual hikers, and that it was good my mom and brother had turned around, as I didn't think they could do it. Well, my mom doesn't like being told she can't do something any better than I do, and she had another week still in Scotland, so the next week she set off to summit it with her friend Mike. They didn't get too far up the west side before my mom slipped and fell into a little crevasse and busted her knee up pretty bad. Fortunately, she and Mike were able to get out of there and get fixed up at the nice Scottish hospital. Everyone is a-okay now, but the Hidden Munro did assert itself as a formidable challenge.

# Rattler in Fairview

Spring 2020

In 2020, when COVID happened, High Trails, the outdoor school where we worked, shut down, and we all lost our jobs. It was great for us, actually; we made better money from unemployment than we had at our jobs, and we were living in a beautiful place with access to so much nature. I lived with my partner at the time, Blue Jay, and we spent our time climbing in all the incredible places around Big Bear and Joshua Tree in California.

One of the places we liked to go, just down the mountain from Big Bear, is called Fairview. It's a great place to sport climb, even though none of the rocks are very tall. There are thousands of quality routes, and they are all super well-maintained by the guy who made them, Jay. (We call him Fairview Jay, to distinguish from Blue Jay.) Fairview Jay is a dirtbag desert man of indeterminate age. He looks weathered, like a man who's spent his life climbing, doing a lot of drugs, and not wearing sunscreen, but he could be anywhere from a leathery 40-year-old to an immortal 65 – I wouldn't be that surprised either way. His clothes, somehow, were all the same sun-worn brown-beige as the rocks, and so was his ashy mop of hair, so that he blended in totally with the desert. Usually the first sign of Jay was his dog, and then Jay himself would appear as if he'd just stepped through a portal in the rocks, and he'd ask to climb with you. Always say yes. If you saw him in LA, you'd probably assume he should be avoided, but when you see him in the desert, you know him for what he is – a timeless and benevolent desert spirit of great power, come to give you guidance and stoke. And at some point, Jay would disappear into the rocks again, and you'd see him whenever he next decides to appear.

Fairview Jay taught me a lot of things. We met when I was still quite a new climber, and very scared. Jay used to climb really, really hard things, and has known a lot of big-deal climbers, but he was never dismissive of my fear, or intimidating to climb with. He was always conscientious of safety, reassuring and encouraging, and understood perfectly that, for me, leading a slab 5.7 – using only friction to move up a very steep ramp – was like summiting El Cap. That's what made him such a good route developer – he can develop quality routes of just about any grade, and he always makes sure to put the bolts where he can touch them with his elbows, so that shorter climbers can have safe clipping stances too. Fairview Jay is great. This story is not about him, but I had to set the scene properly, and you can't talk about Fairview without mentioning its creator.



Spring is the best season in the desert. It rains in the spring – miracle of miracles – and flowers bloom from gray wiry bushes that suddenly turn green and fragrant in the wet. My favorite flower of them all is the desert indigo, for its smell: sweet and fresh and acid desert-y. Most of the plants are creosote, and creosote smells bitter and sharp when it rains, a smell I remember I found distasteful at first, but quickly learned to love. There are cactus blossoms, and bees, and as the sun warms the land, the rattlesnakes come out of hibernation and doze on the paths, sunning themselves.

It was late May, and hot. We'd never been there at that season before – normally we would have been heading out for our summer jobs around then. But instead we were still in Fairview, unemployed and waiting out the pandemic. There were four of us – me, Blue Jay, Allison, and Kyle. Allison is a good friend of mine still, and features in many other of my climbing stories. But back then, she was mostly Kyle's climbing partner – she was learning from him and I was learning from Blue Jay.

Kyle was a real dirtbag, a crusty mountaineer who had left his heart in the Cascades, but decided to come down to SoCal to get better at rock climbing, so he could do harder mountaineering. He was gruff and had a lot of swagger, despite the fact that he could be a real scaredy-cat climbing. He was a very good climber, but he'd be placing trad gear every two feet, legs quivering, swearing constantly while he did it. He subsisted off cigarettes, weed, and beer. I never saw him bring food to the crag, even when we were out there all day, and I only ever remember seeing him eat cans of vegetarian soup for dinner. He apparently had no physical needs, and expected others to keep up. He ran – and won – marathons in his spare time, despite how much he smoked.

Kyle was incredibly afraid of rattlesnakes. Actually, he was afraid of all snakes. At High Trails, we kept live snakes to teach programs with the children. They were harmless little corn snakes and milk snakes and boas, and we'd take them out and hold them, and let the children pet them. Each instructor would hold a snake, and we'd walk around showing them to each cabin group, until



they'd all met all the snakes. Kyle couldn't do it, at first. He would take another prop, like a snake skeleton, to show them instead. I think he might have eventually worked up to holding Aggie, who was more of a glorified, sleepy worm than a snake. I admit it – I enjoyed seeing Kyle scared. He was so gruff and hardcore that this trait really humanized him.

Anyway, we had encountered several rattlesnakes on the path on our way to the crag that day. Kyle was not happy about it. Encountering rattlesnakes is not usually a problem, as long as you keep your eyes peeled. They don't want to bother you, if you don't bother them. If you just take a wide berth around them, they won't chase after you or anything. It's if you step on one that you have a problem. They might be sleeping in a little coil on a warm rock, perfectly blending into their surroundings. If you step on them, they have to defend themselves and bite. We had been seeing so many that we were taking extra precautions – we walked in a line together, keeping our eyes on the ground. Kyle made Blue Jay walk in the front, because he certainly wasn't going to, but his notions of chivalry prevented him from asking me or Allison to.

The approach to the rocks is a pretty strenuous half-hour hike. We did step around a few rattlers. When we finally arrived at the first wall, we set up to warm-up, and Kyle pulled out a cigarette. "Uh oh," he muttered, searching frantically through his backpack. He'd forgotten a lighter. None of the rest of us had one, of course. He dithered for a while on going back for one, deterred by his fear of rattlers. None of us were going to offer to walk with him – we wanted him to quit anyway, and it was a grueling hike. At first he decided to stay, but after a couple routes, he said he wouldn't be able to be there all day without his fix, so he reluctantly prepared to hike back. He lingered for a while, procrastinating and also perhaps hoping one of us would offer to go with him. None of us did. So finally, off he went. We watched him go for a long way as he headed down into the valley towards camp, holding his elbows and nervously calling "Hey, rattler rattler rattler! No, rattler rattler rattler!" as he walked.

At last, Kyle returned, shaken but unbitten, in possession of a lighter. We decided to go climb at a place called the Inner Sanctum. You had to crawl through a tunnel to get in, pushing or pulling your backpack ahead or behind, and then pop out of an opening in the ground, like a manhole, to a small room of rock, where two of the sides had bolted routes. We did consider that there might be a rattler in the tunnel, but Blue Jay went first and investigated, and determined the tunnel free from snakes. So we all squeezed through and popped up into the Inner Sanctum. But then, as we stood beneath the routes, contemplating our options, we heard a rattle. We had disturbed a sleeping rattlesnake inside the Inner Sanctum, and she was not happy about it. We threw ourselves to the other side of the little room, and watched her slither and rattle angrily, ending up right next to the tunnel opening.



She was on high alert, coiled and rattling with her head raised, ready to strike. And she was blocking our exit. There we stood, in a stalemate, each of us unable to reposition – there wasn't enough room in the Inner Sanctum for us to all feel comfortable.

Kyle, of course, was freaking out. Blue Jay was calm, as always, and said that we should climb up the routes and rappel over the other side. It was a good plan. We needed to use the two routes that had high enough anchors to get us over the backside of the wall, which were, if memory serves, graded 5.9+ and a 5.12a. Allison and I were not about to climb a 5.12, so we went for the easier 9+. Kyle had to choose between two fears – leading the 12, under less-than-ideal conditions, or staying at the bottom to belay, with the rattlesnake. He chose belaying, saying that it would be better, since Blue Jay is such a fast climber.

The rattler continued to rattle, poised and ready to strike if any of us were to approach her. Blue Jay and Allison started up the routes. Kyle had a terrible time belaying, focused more on the snake than on the safety of his climber. Blue Jay kept asking “Are you watching me? I might fall!” as Kyle was, clearly, not watching him. Kyle kept urging him to go faster. Blue Jay responded that it's a 12, and it's hard! Eventually, our leaders both made it to the top, built anchors, and pulled up the ropes, allowing me and Kyle to follow them on a top rope. We left at least one of our backpacks behind – I can't remember if it had been dropped in the rattlesnake's zone and we couldn't get it, or if we'd just planned poorly for getting all our things out of there – but we decided we'd come back for it later, and hope the snake would be gone. At the top, we flipped our ropes over the top, rappelled down the other side, and were free.

We spent the rest of the day climbing other things in the area, and at the very end of the day, one or two of us went back for the backpacks. There was no sign of the rattler in the Inner Sanctum, and we were able to get in and out through the tunnel as usual. We hiked back to the camping area, where Kyle got a scare from a massive rattlesnake taking a nap under his truck. He declared that he was done with this bullshit, and would be going back to Big Bear the next day. Though if I recall correctly, we all just slept out in the open on a tarp as usual, so we could look at the stars – except Kyle, who slept in his truck. I did worry that a heat-seeking snake could crawl into a sleeping bag with one of us, but fortunately, our bags were snake-free in the morning.

# SuzieQ in the Red

Fall 2020

When COVID happened, we all lost our jobs at the outdoor school we'd been working at in California. I spent the rest of 2020 being a climbing dirtbag, which was awesome. At first we stayed closer to home, around Big Bear, but eventually we were encouraged to move out of our employee housing, and my car became my new home. Of course, it was COVID times, so we weren't trying to socialize, but living in a tent or a car and climbing with my same couple of friends felt like the same amount of risk no matter which state we were in, so by that fall we found ourselves in Appalachia, where there is some really cool and different climbing.



This story takes place in the Red River Gorge in Kentucky. It is a rock climbing mecca, and I spent quite a bit of time there that fall. It was October. I was there in my very, very old Suzuki SUV named SuzieQ, who I loved very much. One day, my two friends and I got back late from a day of climbing hard things. It was 7:00pm and already quite dark, and SuzieQ was as dead as a doornail. Though it was late-ish and we were far out in the park on a minor back road, we got lucky in finding a pair of climbers nearby who were willing to jump it from their Jeep. Though we tried for quite some time, SuzieQ was unwilling to jump, and wouldn't even turn over or sputter. We thanked the kind strangers and let them head out. We were not too perturbed by this development – fortunately, we had camped about two miles away, and my friend Suzanne's car was back at our campsite. We decided to walk back to the campsite, and the next day we planned to try again to

jump it, then drive into town for cell service and call AAA. Needless to say, it would have been a more difficult situation if we didn't have Suzanne's car, or if we had been camped back at Miguel's Pizza in town, where many climbers camp.

We had my stove and food in the car, so we cooked dinner right there on the road, left our climbing gear in my car and took only what we needed for the night, and set off back towards our campsite. As we packed up, it began to rain, and we all laughed at our bad luck. I was happy to be with friends who can laugh when unfortunate events happen.

The next day, SuzieQ still wouldn't be jumped, so we drove into town, called AAA, and asked them for the direct number of the tow truck driver. I explained to him the situation: that my car was far down a narrow windy road, and I'd driven over a bridge that had a posted vehicle size limit, as well as through a small one-way tunnel in the rock. I wanted to make sure his tow truck would fit. As I explained, he said, "Yeah, yeah, I haul climbers out of there all the time, don't you worry. I know just where you are!" We had to laugh. Climbers and our shitty old vehicles. His name was Tim Jones, and he had a thick Appalachian accent that I had a hard time understanding, especially over the phone. We asked him to meet us at the gas station, where we still had service, so that we could drive together into the Red.

Once at SuzieQ, he tried to jump it with the box, to no avail. First, he told us how to buy and install a new battery. Then, when he was about to drive away, he changed his mind and said that actually he'd bet the issue was the starter, and that he'd better tow us, because a new battery wouldn't help. So tow us he did – out through the Nada Tunnel, over the small bridge, to Stanton, Kentucky. In Stanton, at the Auto Zone, they tested my battery for me and said it was good, so the issue must be with the starter, but they couldn't help me there.

It was Sunday. Somehow, every time I've had car troubles in a rural place, it's always on Sunday, and nothing is ever open. Now, I had originally thought this was just a battery issue, and that we'd probably spend all day fixing it, since town was so far away, but that it couldn't possibly take longer than a day. Now I was starting to get worried: I actually had to be in Knoxville, Tennessee the next day, on Monday! I had just gotten a new job working as an adult adventure travel guide, and I was about to



go on my first trip with them in the Smokies. I was very excited about this new job, and of course didn't want to be late.

So I explained my predicament to Tim. I needed to be in Knoxville tomorrow, I said – did he know anywhere that could fix my starter on a Sunday? Tim and the Auto Zone guy went into furious brainstorming mode. It was all very small-town Appalachia. They were putting their heads together like, “What about Bill?” “No, I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t. How about Gary?” And they were calling various auto shops, or maybe just their buddies who liked to tinker.

I could hear Tim on the phone, trying to convince these people to help me out. He was going, “This lady’s from California! She can’t wait around! She needs it today!” which made me laugh. I was not in a rush because I was from California, but whatever worked. In any case, calling around didn’t work, but eventually Tim and the Auto Shop guy concluded that our best bet was to go to “that orange shop in Clay City” to see if “those guys” would help us. They didn’t have a phone number for them, but they thought it was the best bet.

This whole time, I was vaguely aware that they might be taking me for a ride, but they were so chivalrous and seemingly sincere, I truly believed that they were doing their best to help me. So I said yes to going to Clay City. When we got there, there was this crumbling orange and white stucco building on the side of the road that didn’t even have a sign – there was no way to tell it was an auto shop at all. Out front, two wrinkled men with foot-long gray beards and pipes sat smoking in a couple of Adirondack chairs. I couldn’t make this up. They were the two most Appalachian-looking people I’ve ever seen. If Hollywood is ever casting for “older Appalachian man,” I recommend they go straight to “that orange shop in Clay City, Kentucky.” When the men greeted us, I truly had no idea what words they said. Their Appalachian accent was far thicker than Tim Jones’s. Tim helped to translate. A man with a cigar told us that he couldn’t make any promises about fixing it because “parts are hard to come by ‘round these parts,” but that I should check back in three hours, after 4:00pm.

Suzanne, Allison, and I went on a rather stressed walk around Clay City, brainstorming how to get me to Knoxville tomorrow. We did come up with a very inconvenient plan that would involve a lot of extra driving for Suzanne. But when we returned at 4:00pm, all was well. Tim had left, so we were on our own for interpreting the mechanics, and all I could understand was “she’s ready.” But when they handed me the invoice, it said “Tightened starter wires. Cost: \$73.” I was overjoyed. I tried to pay them with a card, but they only took cash and I didn’t have enough, so they instructed me to drive one town over to the nearest ATM and come back with my payment.

That night, we camped at a recreation area in New Tazewell, Tennessee, and a little lost white cat came and made friends with us. Allison and I let her into our tent to snuggle for a bit, until we became afraid for our sleeping pads in proximity to kitty claws. We named her Tennessee, and wanted to bring her with us so badly. We had to talk ourselves down from it, telling ourselves that living in a car was no life for a kitty.

I did make it to my Smokies trip on time, which was a wild trip with a very weird co-guide, but that's a story for another day.

# A Month Of Dirtbagery

Spring 2021

*This is a story about a month I spent on a climbing adventure with some friends. It's a bit meandering, and doesn't have as much of a narrative arc, but I would tell it when my audience was specifically interested in climbing adventures. It was cool that we kept meeting old route developers – heroes to me – who guided our way.*

In 2021, I was doing an online master's degree from my mother's attic in Two Harbors, Minnesota. It was a hard and lonely time, and so different than all the adventuring I had gotten to do during the years I worked at High Trails! But what kept me going through the long semesters was the promise of more adventures. My spring semester ended in early May, so I had a month to do whatever I wanted before heading to Bemidji for camp in June. I was able to spend that month on a long rock climbing adventure with my good friends, Allison and Suzanne. It was just after getting our COVID vaccines, and we were so thrilled to be back out and about and able to see people more freely.



*Allison, Ikse, and Suzanne*

First, we went to Red Rock Canyon, a climbing area right outside of Vegas. We had been to Red Rocks a handful of times before, but it's very large, so most places we went were still new to us. We had some fun and scary trad adventures, and some fun and hard sport climbing adventures. We spent a couple days in the Black Corridor, which is the most popular wall in all of Red Rocks. It was getting very hot in the desert by May – kind of the tail end of the climbing season out there – so



## *A Month of Dirtbagery*

the Black Corridor was a nice place to be. It's a very narrow corridor of rock, so it's pretty much in shade all day except for about thirty minutes in the middle of the day, with the scorching sun directly overhead. During this time, my friends and I huddled in a small pool of shade under a boulder and ate lunch. As I was eating my sandwich, a chipmunk fell from above, landed on my arm, scuttled across Suzanne, and ran out across the sandy floor of the corridor. Startled, we looked up, and saw that the chipmunk was fleeing a ringtail. The ringtail was able to run right along the sheer vertical wall, putting all of us climbers to shame. It was adorable, with its huge dark eyes and stripes! It hung out near us for quite a while, scurrying around in the boulders.



*Ikse and Allison climbing in Calico Basin*

The second day in the Black Corridor, we had a lovely time climbing hard things. Around 4:00, we were feeling pretty toast, but wanted to get one more chill climb in for the day. Allison wanted to lead a 10a route, but when we went to stick-clip it, the first bolt was a spinner, which can be a safety issue. As we were deliberating about it, an old man wandered into the corridor and stood by, watching us. He looked like a typical hiking tourist – all covered up from the sun, with one of those hats with the cloth neck covering, a little daypack, and Keens boots. I never would have thought he was a climber, and not just because of his age – climbers tend to have specific types of gear, clothing, and shoes, and he was not wearing any of those things. At one point I asked if he wanted to get past us, and indicated the way out of the corridor in case he didn't know. He politely refused, and then told us the climb Allison wanted to do was garbage anyway, and we shouldn't do it. He had a pleasant accent that I couldn't quite place – I thought maybe somewhere in Eastern Europe. This only supported my idea that he was visiting from far away.

*What do you know, old tourist man?* I thought, but I didn't say that. "What about this one?" he asked, pointing to the 10b next to it, but we said no, it looks kind of hard, and we were looking for a cool-down. I didn't even think he knew what the climbs were; I thought he was just being an overly friendly hiker who didn't know what he was talking about. Then he indicated one behind us on the other wall, and said it was a 5.9. I asked him a couple questions about himself, to which he was weirdly evasive, but he said yes when I asked if he was a local. He wandered off. Suzanne led the 5.9 he'd suggested, and it was a great route. Talking amongst ourselves, the idea was brought up that maybe he *knew things*. We had spent a lot of time with a route developer named Jay at Fairview, one of our home crags. Jay knew everything about Fairview and had bolted most of it himself, and was out there haunting his own crags most days. Had we just met the Fairview Jay of Red Rocks?

The man reappeared a bit later, as we were cleaning the route. This time, I was much less dismissive, and wanted to find out who he really was. Upon questioning, he admitted that he was none other than Michael Moore! Michael Moore was a name I knew. He'd written the guidebook to Red Rocks, and had bolted many routes, including many of the most classic lines. He told us that he used the name Michael Moore, or Leo Hanson, because someone long ago had advised him not to use his real name in case a climber ever got hurt on one of his routes and decided to sue him. But his real first name, he told us, was Wolfgang, and we could call him that.



He recommended a bunch of climbs to us, and then led us to his favorite climb and insisted I get on it, though we had already told him we were done for the day. It was a 10c, and it felt harder than that to me. I had already climbed a lot of hard things that day and was pretty tired. But I am very susceptible to being peer-pressured into climbing, and even more susceptible to falling easily into hero worship of someone like Michael Moore, and trying to impress. So I gave it my all. I took more lead falls on that route getting past the second crux than I ever would normally tolerate – 4 or 5 long, swinging falls. Twice I managed to move through the huge huecos in sequence and grab the jug at the top, but was too pumped to haul myself over the last overhang. I tore a chunk of flesh



## *A Month of Dirtbagery*

out the heel of my hand on one of the falls, trying to prevent my body from swinging too hard into a bulge on my left. I was going to give up, but neither Suzanne nor Allison was willing to lead it, and I felt we just couldn't give up with Michael Moore standing right there. So finally I willed myself to do it faster, and get my feet under me before my hands could give out. The last crux to the anchor I had to cheat and put my quickdraw on the chains and hold on. But once at the anchor, I looked down, and Michael Moore had vanished as suddenly as he'd come, without a word of goodbye.

The whole time he had been there watching me climb, he had told us a bunch of things, all with a cheerful dry wittiness that helped overcome some of the content. *You gotta be stronger. Strong legs. No pizza or beer, don't want to gain weight. There's a lot of stupid people in the world. You need a push to climb harder things – need your boyfriend to tell you to just get up there!* He was almost dislikeable in his constant stream of insults, but they were so interspersed with compliments and helpful information, I just couldn't bring myself to dislike him. He took quite a liking to us, and said that if we were going to be around for a few weeks, he'd train us. He told me he wanted to see me doing big things in the future, that he'd look out for me. Sadly, we were leaving the very next day for cooler altitudes, and couldn't take him up on his offer of training.

The next day, we drove to Big Bear, the town we lived in when we worked at High Trails. We headed to a place called Holcomb, where we set up camp and planned to climb for a few days. It was so nice to be back. The sweet smell of the Jeffrey pines, and the scruffy spring wildflowers, and the lizards scurrying on granite, all felt like coming home. We climbed some good hard things, and then our friend and former boss, Chris, met up with us with his two little boys. They were probably four and six at the time. We set up some topropes for them on a slab, and had some silly climbing races. Afterward, we asked Chris if he could give us a ride back to our campsite in his Jeep. There wasn't really room, but he told us we could hang on to the outside. We happily accepted, and he gave us a fast and scary ride on a gnarly Jeep road through the forest and back to our campsite.

After a couple days in Holcomb, our fingers were raw and the temps were dropping, so we drove down the mountain to Fairview. Fairview Mountain is a sprawling pile of granite rocks in the Mojave desert. It looks like an alien landscape, and I remember that I didn't used to think it was beautiful, before I fell in love with the desert. It's all brown and full of trash and bullets and Jeeps, and acrid-smelling creosote bushes and spiny cacti and snakes and chuckwallas. It's beautiful and raw and harsh.

## *Bedtime Stories of Adventure*

We saw Fairview Jay almost immediately, and he proceeded to curate our time there over the next several days, showing us around to obscure places on the mountain I had never been to, showing off his new routes, and taking us on a gorgeous hike up to the unfrequented summit.

We weren't staying long in Fairview, to Jay's disappointment, but we planned to head out to Joshua Tree. Jay said he'd connect us with Todd Gordon, one of the route developers of Joshua Tree and an old friend. He texted us both, and soon enough Todd called me and cheerfully invited us to camp in his backyard. He lives right outside the gates of the park, and used to have climbers stay there all the time before the pandemic. Todd was also stoked about finally being vaccinated. "We're having band practice on Wednesday! You guys gotta be there, it's gonna be amazing! I can't wait to have people around again!" he told me on the phone.



Todd was even more gregarious in person, welcoming and effusive. Band practice was indeed a good time, somewhere in between loud garage band and old classic rock. Todd's son was on the drums, and they all clearly loved playing together. Todd's backyard was a great place to stay, and we were the only ones in it. He had outdoor couches around a firepit, a sturdy wooden picnic table, and a porta-potty. Todd was a real talker – full of stories of all his exploits, and of all the famous climbers who had come and stayed at his house while they threw themselves at the monzogranite. On the morning that Allison and I were trying to multi-pitch a route called The Swift, Todd talked to us so long in the parking lot we thought it would be noon before we even got to the base of the route. Eventually, we had to make our escape and get out there.

The Swift was the first time I felt like a real trad climber. It wasn't hard, and we were more worried about finding the right way to go up the wall than the climb itself, as it's possible to take a wrong turn up a crack and end up on a much harder route than intended – and it's a lot harder to bail from a trad climb than a sport climb. But we breezed up The Swift in less than two hours, and I placed gear sparsely and efficiently because I felt so comfortable up there. We had plenty of time left for other good trad climbs, and got on some spicier single-pitch routes.

## *A Month of Dirtbagery*

Todd was always going on about his new bolting project. He had been kicked out of Joshua Tree for bolting things without permission, and was fed up with it. So he'd been hard at work developing a new area called Spy Mountain. He insisted we come with him to do a day at Spy Mountain to climb his new routes, and offered to teach us about bolting! I had hand-bolted a couple of routes in 2020, so I was curious and interested to learn more. We followed Todd out there, who drove so fast down the rocky dirt roads, I had a hard and scary time keeping his truck in sight. When we arrived, it was a long and bouldery approach, like what Fairview must have been like before Jay spent all those many hours building trails. It was anticlimactic to arrive at the wall and see that it was short and chossy, too loose and unstable to make for good climbing. *This?* I remember thinking. *This* is what Todd spends all his time on? This is nothing!

And indeed, as we climbed, we continued to be unimpressed. Maybe someday it'll clean up nicely and there will be sturdy rock beneath it, but it was so chossy it was just raining down chunks of rock the whole time. At one point I fell on a slab and cheese-grated the skin off my ankle and hand pretty good. Todd had a whole posse of young people he was instructing in the art of route developing, which was interesting because they were not actually experienced climbers, and we kept helping them with important safety things, and cleaning their routes for them! It was crowded, and the rocks were not exciting; in the end we didn't learn anything about bolting. So we thanked Todd for showing us his project and headed out to go hike in the park for the rest of the afternoon.

Allison had gotten a summer job in Seattle, so after Joshua Tree, the next leg of our trip was driving north. Suzanne had to split, but I would stay with Allison so we could climb at Smith Rock in Oregon, and fly out of Portland. Unfortunately for us, we arrived at Smith Rock the Friday of Memorial Day weekend. We'd been so out-of-service and in the desert that we had forgotten about calendars and days and things like that. Oh well, we said, we'll just climb the most obscure, farthest-away things in Smith Rock that no one will be at! And so we did – turns out that if you hike for an hour, you can be away from the crowds, even at Smith Rock on Memorial Day weekend.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Allow me to set the scene. I had never been to Smith before, and it is truly otherworldly. It's a set of massive fins of rock wound about by a ribbon of river, the artist that did the carving. It looks like AI art – not something that could, or should, really exist. And so lots of the climbs themselves are very scary just because of the exposure. Getting high up on a thin fin of rock and getting a 360-degree view at the top is just insane, and the brain can't really comprehend what's going on. It's kind of like if you had never seen a mountain before, but you'd just seen those cartoon mountains – a triangle with a jagged cone of snow on top. You would think

mountains went straight up, with thin edges and a very obvious pointy summit. That's kind of what Smith Rock is like.

Our last day in Smith, we decided to climb a 5-pitch multi called Wherever I May Roam. Even just getting there was an adventure. The most usual approach follows a thin winding trail up over the top of the main fin at Asterisk Pass, with a scramble down on the other side to arrive at the base. However, when we arrived at Asterisk Pass, we were too scared to climb down the other side! It was truly so steep, and felt much more like a climb than a hike. I probably would have done it without our packs, but with the heavy backpacks full of trad gear and ropes and water, it seemed foolhardy and scary to downclimb. We ended up deciding to hike back down to the river, around the fin the long way, and up to the base on the other side. Forty minutes later, hot and irritable, we arrived at our route.

The first pitch led up a semi-detached massive boulder, probably only fifty feet tall or so. The second pitch started right off with a scary step across the void from the boulder to the main wall, without protection. Pitch 3 was a traverse, headed straight off to the left around a bulge where we could not see. It was run out, and the bolts were old-fashioned little half-inch ones, rusty and spinners. Normally when I'm scared I sit at each bolt to remind myself that the system works, to trust the rope, rest, and make a plan. But with these bolts I didn't even want to sit, let alone fall, in case they blew right off the wall and dropped me to my death far below! I was soon out of eyesight and earshot of Allison, so I had to just keep going without communicating. By the time Allison joined me at the Pitch 3 anchor, I could tell she wasn't having fun either. We were both scared and wanted to be done. The problem with multi-pitches is that that's not always an option – or not always an easy one.

We *could* bail there, and rappel off of Pitch 3, but it wasn't a good idea. The comments on Mountain Project all said not to rappel, that there was a big risk of getting our ropes stuck. We were planning on walking off the top via a trail instead. We also didn't really like the look of the rusted chains we'd have to rappel off of. So in the interest of safety, we decided to keep going. I agreed to lead the traversing and slippery fourth pitch, if Allison would do the fifth. She agreed.

The fourth was scary for a few bolts and then mellowed out, and Allison was the one who had to tackle the steeper headwall. At the top, we weren't even brave enough to stand. We could sit straddling the fin of rock, truly feeling like we were on top of the world. To our left, right, and behind us, far below, glimmered the Crooked River. We could see the sculpted walls of the rock falling away on all sides of us, climbers on many of them, hikers like ants below, the snowy

## *A Month of Dirtbagging*

Cascades shining in the distance. It was the coolest top-out of a climb I've ever seen. Seeing vultures swooping around *below* us really made us feel like we were high up!

Compared to Asterisk Pass, the walk-off trail was surprisingly tame – just some light scrambling and then a pretty normal hike back down to the river. We did go over Asterisk Pass on the way home, and it was much easier that way than the other way around. We knocked out four more single-pitch routes before calling it a day, walking back to camp in the still-sunlit seven o'clock hour.

Soon enough, I flew back out of Portland to Minneapolis, and went up to camp for the summer. But after a whole season of online grad school, a month of dirtbagging was just what I'd needed to rejuvenate my soul. If you ever have the chance to travel around and climb for a month with your friends, I highly recommend it.



*"Wherever I May Roam"*

# The Bear

Summer 2021

In 2021, Thaïs and I were *monos* (counselors) at *Voyageurs* with a wonderful, and occasionally exasperating, group of credit kids. For scheduling reasons, we were to lead a two-week canoe trip in which we paddled for a couple days in Voyageurs National Park before heading out into the adjacent Boundary Waters. We put in at Crane Lake and camped at King Williams Narrows the first night. When we got to the site, however, we realized that we didn't have one of the bags we needed, including people's personal things – sleeping bags and clothes and such. It was too late to go back out that night, but someone would have to go in the morning. I knew that later in the trip I would be the one going on an excursion to pick up our Boundary Waters permit, so we decided that Thaïs would go on this mission. Our *brigade* had a long paddling day the next day, up Sand Point to Jensen Bay. We were hoping Thaïs could be speedy with her rescue mission, and we'd all begin the next day's paddle before lunch.

That next morning, Thaïs and two of the campers (Samuel, who was my favorite “MBA boy,” one of many villagers from Montgomery Bell Academy, and sweet Jean-Marie) went out to the van at Crane Lake to go get whichever bag we'd left. However, I'd neglected to tell Thaïs that the boat ramp labeled on the map is not the one we use (the one we use is actually not on the map at all), and so they were terribly confused and went into many different bays on the south side of Crane Lake before finding the familiar one.

We had asked them to hurry, of course, because of our long day of paddling ahead, and while they were gone we'd loaded everything into the canoes and were all ready to go. We then proceeded to wait, and wait, and wait. I'd been hoping to head out well before lunch, but pretty soon it became apparent that we'd have to eat lunch here before leaving, so we got out lunch foods and dishes from the canoes. As we did so, our one good chef's knife dropped through the slats of the dock and fell into the lake below! I asked the kids, many of whom were on their high school swim teams, to dive for it. When their reaction was, “meh, nah,” I was like, okay, *I'll dive for it!* But I'm not very good at diving, and *please help me, you'll be way better at it!* I don't think they understood how much the loss of this knife was going to affect our cooking experience for the rest of the trip.

## *The Bear*

So I began to dive, and, feeling ashamed, the kids reluctantly joined me. It was very dark and murky down there, and we couldn't see, so instead we had to carefully feel with our hands. The knife *was* in a sheath, but we also didn't know what else was down there, and I was certainly afraid of cutting my hands on something, or getting pinched by a crayfish. We found a lot of weird stuff down there: a metal pole, some glass bottles, an extension cord. (The extension cord worked, by the way, and I still have it!)

While we were diving, Thaïs and the others returned from their quest with the bag we needed. They joined us in diving for a bit, as Thaïs and Samuel were swim team people too, but we never did recover the knife. Finally we gave up, ate lunch, and then paddled to Jensen Bay. It was a very hot day and took us much longer than it should have, simply because everyone was hot and mad. But once we swam, everyone was immediately better. Even Samuel, who'd been the pissiest one of all from the heat, wrote in his journal that it had been a good day. It's amazing to me how quickly swimming fixes everyone's moods.

It was the next day that I had to paddle out from Jensen Bay and get our permit to head into the Boundary Waters the day after. That alone would be an 18-mile round trip! I took two of the older and stronger kids from our campsite on Sand Point to paddle with me to get the resupply and our permit from Anderson's Outfitters. It was Parfait, this big, red-headed kid from Colorado Springs who was an absolute paddling *machine*, and Margot – wise, responsible Margot, who is now a counselor and basically runs the show at camp. They were the ones I wanted to take, and fortunately, they were the ones who volunteered. I didn't want to make anyone go who didn't want to, but it would have been so much harder with anyone else. We made great time – on the water by 6:00am. and at the Crane Lake parking lot by 9:00. I bought them ice cream at Anderson's for their troubles. I also bought an extra pocket knife at Anderson's, which wasn't really a suitable replacement for the chef's knife, but it was something. I'd been afraid it would be a ten-hour day, but we did it in only five, thanks to a chilly and overcast day and Parfait's incredible paddling muscles.

The next day, off we went on our voyage: through Little Vermillion to Loon Lake, and then eventually into the interior peninsula of Lac La Croix. The voyage was great. Hot, but great. We did have a *brigade* that loved to complain, which was hard for me, because we were objectively having a great trip, and I even thought the kids were very funny and enjoyable to hang out with, except for how they were somehow convinced that everything we were doing was a misery to be endured. But they were also endlessly quotable, as in Pierre's "All a man has in life is himself and his *bidon*

*bleu*,” and us banning Samuel from singing “Never Gonna Give You Up” translated poorly into French.

I also had a first on a portage when I slowly heard more and more buzzing, and then abruptly realized the canoe on my head was *full of wasps*! I threw the canoe off my head – it hit a tree with a clang – and ran for the water, yelling, followed by a cloud of wasps. After they finally dissipated, I went back and flexed the canoe til the dent came out, and everything was fine. I wasn’t even stung.

We did have another little incident when we discovered that our primary way to treat water and drink it safely in the Boundary Waters, Aquamira, was compromised. The corner of the Part A bottle had broken and all the liquid had leaked out. I did have another method to treat water, my SteriPen, and I even had an external battery, but I had forgotten the charging cable to connect the two. We would have to boil our water. Boiling water in a pot tastes disgusting, so we tried putting cedar and raspberry leaves in – to my relief, the kids loved cedar tea. Boiling water became a major part of our daily activities, since it takes forever. We had to gather wood constantly, and then there was the whole process of pouring the hot water off into bowls so it would cool faster. Fortunately, we’d brought a collapsible water cube that I think I had brought purely for if we spent the night at a campground and hadn’t even intended to bring it into the Boundary Waters at all, but it had come with us by accident and that made our lives a lot better. It would have been rough if we would have had to boil water at lunch, since most of the kids only had one water bottle. Funny enough, once we got out of the Boundary Waters, we learned that there had been a fire ban that whole time, but we didn’t know about it because it wasn’t instituted until we’d already headed into the wilderness. We would never have had enough fuel to boil all our water, so all things considered, I’m glad we didn’t know about the ban. We would’ve had to have fires anyway.

On beautiful Fish Stake narrows, as we approached the end of our trip, I noticed we were running low on lunch foods. Since it was a rest day, I thought we should prepare our *emergency* food for lunch, to save our regular lunch food for a day when we’d be on the move. Our emergency food was grits, a food I neither like, nor understand, nor know how to prepare. Accompanying the grits in this culinary masterpiece was canned corn and instant mashed potatoes – all mixed together! Furthermore, our large pot was constantly occupied in boiling water over the fire. I therefore tried to cook all the rest of our food in the smaller pot, which couldn’t go on the fire, and as much as possible I tried to do this by pouring boiling water on top of the food and leaving it to soak rather than bothering to assemble the stove. (This was partly out of laziness, and partly out of a feeling that we ought to conserve fuel for boiling water should it become rainy.) Sadly, grits do not cook when hot-soaked – apparently they must actually be boiled. So we passed around this pot of



## *The Bear*

terrible, half-raw, gritty, barely-seasoned grits, insisting that everyone take a serving. Everyone ate firsts, with much complaining, but there were still a lot of grits in the pot, and we did not want to carry them out with us, so we passed the pot around, insisting that everyone keep taking bites until it was gone. This is a ritual we call “Happy Spoon,” that makes no one happy.

Pierre, another MBA boy, was having a hard time with this. Thaïs, being the good *mono* that she is, wanted to encourage and hype him up, so she said, “Pierre, let’s do it together!” and while they made eye contact, they each took a scoop of grits and put it in their mouths. It was too much – they shouldn’t have ever tried to watch each other doing that. Pierre made a sound of disgust. Thaïs had tried to take too big of a mouthful. Both of their eyes got bigger as they realized their mistake and gagged a little on their grits. Thaïs ran into the forest and vomited. That was the end of Happy Spoon. We packed the rest of the grits out in the trash.

The next day, we packed up from our beautiful Fish Stake Narrows site and headed south, visiting Warrior Hill and the pictographs, under hot smoky skies. That night we camped on Lake Agnes. I had fond memories of a campsite on Lake Agnes from years earlier, which we had nicknamed Mordor. We headed straight to that site on the south side of the lake. To my chagrin, when we got there I realized it was not even a good site, it was only that my memories of being there were fond. (I’m not even 100% sure it was the same site, but I pictured being there with Les Cuillères de Guerres, seeing a double rainbow, linking arms and singing the Rainbow Connection together, and then seeing a bald eagle majestically soar towards us from between the two rainbows.) During sieste that day, I wrote that “nothing huge has gone wrong,” despite the various mishaps, and how grateful I was that this was not a Horse River or Casual Evac-style horror story. Little did I know the power of my own foreshadowing!

The site was quite small, and all the trees in the area were small and had spindly little branches – nothing at all good for a bear hang except the one scrawny white pine in the middle of camp. It wasn’t even a great tree, but it was adequate. We weren’t too fussed – it was the last night of our trip – and we hung our food on the tree in the middle of camp and pitched our tents all right around it.



*A peaceful end to the day, ready for a tranquil sleep*

That night, as campers went to sleep, I told the story of the Mississippi River catastrophe in 2015. After I was done I went into my tent and was getting settled in my sleeping bag, when I heard something large breathing outside the tent. I immediately sensed it was a bear, and was alarmed at how close it was. I remember looking at Thaïs, motioning for her attention, and mouthing “ours?” We yelled “*non ours!*” and clapped our hands. Even after we started yelling, we heard it continue to make a slow tour around our site. Once I couldn’t hear it anymore, I got out and looked around, shined my flashlight into the woods, got out a pan and spoon and banged them together a few times. I asked the villagers if they had any snacks or wrappers in their things, and Parfait came out with a handful of bar wrappers, which we put in the bear barrel. I assessed the bear bag in the tree, and thought, “Yeah, that’s good enough.” I reminded the villagers that if they heard the bear come back in the night, to shout “*non ours!*” in a low, calm, loud voice. I really was nervous that the bear had come *right* after I was done telling my bedtime story – it showed a lack of fear. I had the prescience to bring the pan and spoon into the tent with me, and then we all went to sleep.

Sometime after 11:00, Thaïs shook me awake out of a deep sleep, telling me there was a bear. I was confused – I could hear loud noises coming from nearby, but noises so loud and close couldn’t possibly be a bear – that’s a person, right? Thaïs replied, “No, Ikse, that’s a fucking *ours!*”

## *The Bear*

We banged on the pan and yelled as loud as we could for a long time, but to no avail. The bear did not give a shit about our noises. After a while, I thought hard about what the next steps were, trying to review bear information from the deep recesses of my brain-library. I concluded that the next steps were to get out and throw things at the bear. When I said so to Thaïs, she said, “No, Ikse, don’t *fight the bear!*” I said, “No, I’m serious, I think that’s really what we have to do!” I had two full Nalgenes in the tent with me. Slowly and nervously, I opened the door of the tent. I fully expected the bear to be on the ground, seven feet or so away from me, batting at the bear bag above like a piñata. But no, the bear was up in the tree and had managed to scoop the bear bag on top of a branch and was rummaging around in there, pulling things out with its muzzle.

I have seen quite a few black bears in my days. I can think of at least seven other black bear encounters I’ve had off the top of my head, and I’m sure there have been more. This bear was *enormous* – so much larger than any other black bear I’d ever seen. I’d like to defend our admittedly inadequate bear hang by saying that I had no idea we’d be seeing the mother of all black bears, with the longest arms of all time reaching all that way out from the trunk and pulling the bag up onto the tree branch.

I stood in front of our tent. I remember feeling quite protective of Thaïs, who was only nineteen at the time. I yelled up to the bear, “Hey!” and threw my first Nalgene at it. I think I hit it; it grunted in surprise and looked at me. I remember its eyes shining at me, reflecting the light of my headlamp. I threw the second one and I think that one hit as well. The bear scampered further up the tree, making a terrifying chomping sound with its jaw that made me wonder if it was going to attack me, or if it had rabies or something. The bear being further up in the tree was also, to say the least, not what we wanted. We wanted the bear to leave! What were we going to do now? It was an uncomfortable stalemate. The bear chomped its jaws aggressively (nervously, I think, looking back on it). The kids were freaking out. One of the girls was having a panic attack and also really needed to pee. They were asking me what to do about it, and I told them they were going to have to figure it out – I was a little busy. But us yelling and wanging wasn’t doing any good – the bear was still up in the tree. It would need to come down eventually.

I suggested to the kids, just thinking out loud, that they all get out of their tents and go down to the water together. My thought was that I didn’t want the bear to feel surrounded, panic, and go charging off blindly into one of the tents and hurt the villagers. I wanted it to feel it had an escape route. But the kids were not having it – they had their illusion of safety and did not want to leave. The girls were basically right under the bear, and so I can understand not wanting to move for fear of startling the bear. So, new plan: we all would get really quiet and wait for the bear to come down

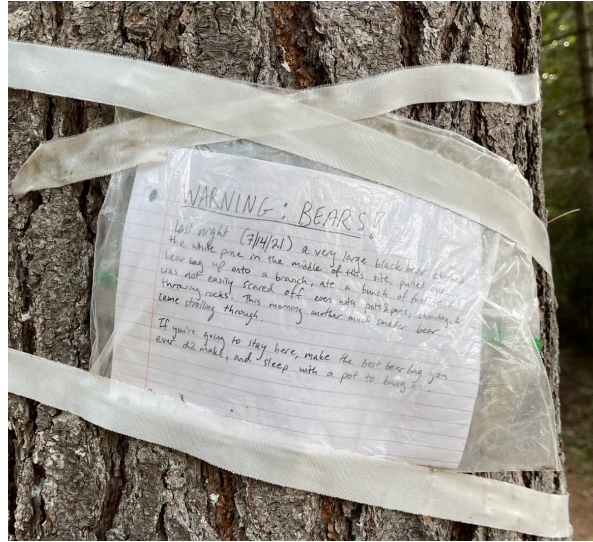
on its own. Once its feet touched the ground, we would then yell again and hope that it would leave. Sure enough, the bear started to come down. It stopped one more time at the bear bag to grab a last snack for the road. I think it was a jar of peanut butter. I will never forget watching its enormous butt shimmy down the tree towards me, and the impending dread of knowing that the largest black bear of all time was about to be on the ground mere feet away from me. But as soon as it touched the ground, we all yelled, and it evaporated into the forest.

I remember falling to the ground in relief, sick to my stomach with adrenaline. I asked all the kids to get out of their tents so I could check in with them and make sure everyone was okay, and so that we could take down the bear hang and redo it. I remember saying passionately, “Let’s make the best fucking bear bag we ever did make.” They all laughed, a wonderful tension-relieving moment, and they all came outside half-dressed and barefoot, swearing like sailors – aware that this was a no-rules situation, and giddy with success and adrenaline. We took turns going pee with partners while singing *Dans la Jungle*. We rehung the bear bag higher and further from the trunk.

Then we decided we should stay awake in shifts to keep the bear out of the tree, since it was so alarmingly close to our tents. Thaïs, Parfait, and Samuel took the first shift, midnight to 2:00. Sylvie and Jean-Marie would take 2:00am to 4:00am, and Margot and I would take 4:00am to 6:00am. Each shift was armed with the pan and spoon, their headlamps, and could have a fire until we ran out of wood. I remember lying in the tent trying to de-stress enough to go to sleep as Samuel paced anxiously back and forth outside the tent, shining his flashlight this way and that. It was not a relaxing night.

During mine and Margot’s shift, around 5:00am, another, much smaller bear showed up. It left when we yelled at it, but it poked its head in twice more on the other sides of camp before leaving for good. We gathered wood, made a fire. We woke everyone up at 7:00 and had a long, hot, sleep-deprived day: five portages and the nasty Nina Moose river with all its beaver dams. That day we met many other people who’d been terrorized by the Lake Agnes bears, and even saw one blue bear barrel that had been torn open! When we arrived at the entry point, there were signs all over warning of aggressive bears. There was even a logbook to record your bear-related incidents, and we wanted to write ours, but it was full – every single page was full of many, many incidents of people camped all over the lake being mobbed by this bear mafia. Some were visited by the whole family at once. I remember in one tale, the bears stayed all night – seven hours! – and nothing the people could do persuaded them to leave. They could only sit back and watch them eat all the food.

## *The Bear*



*Ikse's warning to future campers*

I had to drive the three hours back to base camp in Bemidji, since Thaïs was not yet a van driver. Once we got back to site, it became a badge of honor, a story our kids were excited to share with the two-weekers. I had trouble sleeping in the Boundary Waters for *years*, and every gust of wind or rustling chipmunk made my heart pound. But the next year, I asked Margot and Thaïs how traumatized they were, and they told me that they were much less traumatized than that, because of their impression that I had things basically under control.



# A Word From Canot

This project is a compiled list of Ikse's bedtime stories, swiftly formatted and published in time for their memorial service. However, Ikse's ultimate wish was for this to be a collaborative storybook, with a mish-mash of stories from *Voyageurs* counselors new and old, High Trails friends, and family. Ikse had some stories yet unwritten, and wanted others to add theirs as well. To that end, here are a list of some stories identified that still need to be written, and a new book compiled:

## **Line 3**

Élodie

## **Turtle River 2015**

Solage, Canot, Thaïs

## **Crise Canot**

Élysée, Canot, others?

## **Old for William Tipi**

Solange, Aïcha, or anyone who has stayed in the wigwam at Old Fort William

## **Voyage qui n'existe pas**

Nicole and others

## **Ice Castles**

Allison, Suzanne

## **Cameroon Adventures**

Dahveed

## **Any other bedtime story of adventure worth sharing!**

This is your call to action! Send me your writings and let's get the full version compiled for this summer! *En avant!*