

“Lost But Not Lost”

excerpt from:
The Land Has A Voice &
Up North

In the summer of '78, there was a group of young people, though they may have been older than me, who had been traveling through the mountains on the Pacific Crest Trail. They camped in Seiad Valley, a common stopping place for backpackers to wait for their supplies to come in at the post office. When the mail arrived, people would come down from all over, other young people who lived in tents and teepees in the woods. There was even one young man who wore a breechclout, deerskin leggings with no covering over his rear end, only a flap of hide. It drew odd glances from the Hoopa Indian women.

This group of young backpackers invited me to hike with them when they would be continuing on their way into Oregon the next morning. I told them I would think about it. Something in me felt uncomfortable and I shrugged it off, telling myself I was just being shy by not wanting to go along with them. I made myself go and, the next morning, I went to their campsite to start down the trail with them. They had already gone. This was another point when I felt something was telling me not to go, but I still wouldn't listen. I hurried down the river highway, not sure where the trailhead was, figuring it was just a short ways. It seemed I would never find it, but all of a sudden, there it was.

I hiked quickly, hoping to catch up with them, but the trail was much steeper than I had anticipated. It went up to a lookout tower I think was abandoned or maybe the mosquitoes that summer drove everyone away. They were like a cloud in the woods, attacking in a frenzy that could drive a person to madness if they let it. It was beautiful country, though, the Siskiyou Mountains, not seen by very many, the trails rarely traveled except by these people who came from all over the country to hike its rocky, wandering pathways. I began to realize I had made a mistake in trying to catch up to them. What would it matter? I asked myself. If they never saw me again, did they really care if some local hiked with them?

I reached the lookout tower about seven miles from the road where I had started out. I told myself to just head back down the trail, but I was curious, too, wanting to reach my destination whether or not I met up with that group of people. I believed I had come too far to turn back. After a few more miles, I spotted them resting along the trail, eating their lunch and laughing. I felt pretty stupid then, like I have tried too hard to win someone's respect when they couldn't even remember my name. They were happy that a local had joined them, however, saying I was the first and it meant a lot to them. They said that they were just passing through in the towns they stopped in and I helped them to feel more welcome.

Now, if I could only hold on to that morning, freeze Time at that point, so it would never change, but it doesn't happen that way. Instead, it moves forward, further down the trail where we all stopped to rest and I felt uncomfortable again, wanting to just be on my way, because it was I who felt left out and unwelcome. They had their journey in common and I was just a lonely, young, pregnant woman who was flattered by their invitation to join them when they hadn't really meant it. It was just small talk, I supposed, just around the campfire banter. They didn't think I would take them seriously, found it humorous that I had, and I wanted very much to go home.

One of the young men said they thought the trail I needed went “down over there,” and I went that way, only to discover it was just a short trail to the spring. I didn't want to see these people again and stubbornly continued downhill, regardless, climbing slowly down this mere dent on the mountainside, which was the very headwaters of Canyon Creek. Lilypad Lake, my original destination, wasn't going to be reached on this trip.

It was not long before the trail down the trickling beginnings of a mighty creek could no longer be fooled into behaving like a trail. I was either to swallow my pride and head back uphill and try to reach Lilypad Lake, or, like I ended up doing, I would begin a journey of my own that took only twenty-four hours to accomplish, yet many years to forget.

I found that walking on the tops of the springy bushes was the quickest and most laughable way to get down the mountain. Yet, it was almost nightfall before the trickle even became a creek and I could walk beside it, arms scratched and bleeding, clothes wet and muddy. Since I was so sure I would be home before dark, I threw all my food away, except some crackers, to make my pack lighter. After all, this was turning into just a day hike. I no longer wanted to sleep out in the woods or go backpacking.

The water grew deeper as deeper down the canyon I walked and it also became narrower, the walls rising higher until I was wading through the water to my boots, to my knees, then to my waist. I told myself, once it was dark, I'd have to stop and sleep, but I just couldn't accept that the map showed I had much further to go than hours in the day to travel. There ahead, lay a sandy bank full of ants I never saw, but felt all the night through. I threw my pack off, stripped off my clothes, and swam in the creek as though I hadn't felt its refreshing chill until that moment. I ate a few crackers and climbed into my sleeping bag, hoping my clothes would dry draped over logs fallen across the creek. As long as the night had been, morning, by contrast, arrived too soon. I got dressed, slung my pack around and put it on my back and began to walk down the creek again. Thinking for sure I would soon reach the road, I quickened my pace, anxious to get home.

Again, the canyon narrowed more and more, but this time there was no way around it but to swim down it. I began to panic and retraced my way back to where the woods were last seen along the banks. I walked through the woods instead and soon learned why the canyon had narrowed so suddenly. There below me was a waterfall the narrowing creek had become. My tears couldn't be held back anymore as miles and miles were traveled. The bears ran from me, but I was still frightened by them. The yellowjackets stung me and the mosquitoes plagued my face and my eyes, the miles unending, though I was certain the road should have been reached long ago.

Thinking perhaps I was heading down a creek other than the one I traced on the map over and over again, each bend having already been passed hours before, I began to worry. Was I lost or was the map faulty? Regardless, I had reached my limit and screamed for help. I began to believe more and more I wasn't following Canyon Creek, after all. For years, I would tell myself, if only I had done this or if only I had done that, but it will never change the outcome of the story. My pride and stubbornness got me into that predicament and I suffered for it.

I was going along through the woods, the creek getting further and further below as I seemed to be climbing higher away from it. All of a sudden, the woods ended and there was a cliff. I had to go back and find a place to cross the creek, but I eventually ended up walking down the creek instead, wading up to my waist again, each step an effort pushing through the water. I'd sometimes fall into the water, the yellowjacket stings swelling and throbbing, my screams for help just an echo, fading into the roar of ever-growing waters.

I can't even bring myself to laughter now, but, suddenly, I was walking across someone's backyard and onto the road. The creek continued on under the bridge. The sign along the road read "Canyon Creek." I had been right all along, but had greatly underestimated the distance I would travel. I walked beside the pavement, my hair in tangles, caked in mud, and my pants sagging from the weight of sloshing water, boots squishing with each step. No one passing by in their car would pity me as I had hoped, no, the lesson I needed to learn was yet to be over. More miles had to be walked before I could get home, only to find a plastic waterline in our trailer had expanded and burst in the heat, flooding the entire trailer. Everything was soaked, I could see that, and I just looked, no belief, no realization, then closed the door and walked away.

After I had eaten at the café, the woman who ran the trailer park, told me she had seen water

running out of the trailer, so she turned our water off, but I still had to take everything out and set it to dry. The rug had to be pulled out and dried in the sun, including all our important papers, anything that had been on the floor.

What was the lesson I needed to learn? Was it that I should have just stayed home? Probably. But, I didn't stay. I wanted to get out in nature, hopefully escape the heat. My husband was away on a fire and I was bored and lonely without him. Having quit my job on an engine fire crew since I got pregnant, I thought, why not go? I was telling myself all along the way, just go back home. The lesson, I believe, was to listen to myself, to *trust my instincts*, my intuition, the voice within me that said, "don't go," and even at the headwaters of Canyon Creek, where I heard again, "don't go." As I walked down and down the canyon, I knew where I was and where I was going, but I wasn't trusting my instincts.

The tears I didn't shed back then are running freely now, because I finally know. Listen to myself. With each footstep that I take, one surely placed in front of the other, because I have listened, I'll know the right path to take at the right time as it is laid out before me. Though a bit timid in my feelings, I will be certain of where I am going. All it will take then is to go there.

