

BACKPACKER

THE MAGAZINE OF WILDERNESS TRAVEL

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COLIN FLETCHER'S

'Into The Forest'

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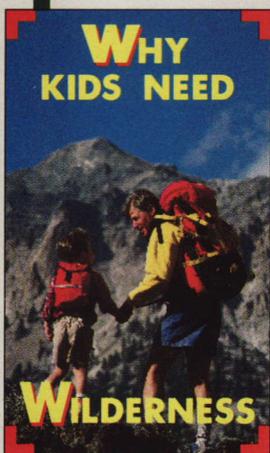
■ The Legacy Of Edward Abbey (1927-1989)





Fact: Not all kids walk around wearing headphones and listening to music that could numb geese in flight. Some walk around wearing backpacks. More facts about youngsters and the wilderness beginning on page 20.

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COVER: *Is the love of wilderness a genetic trait passed down through the generations, or a love born through time and experience? You'll find the answers in our special section. Photo by David Stoecklein.*

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INTO THE FOREST

BY COLIN FLETCHER

At the bend in the road I pulled over and parked tight against the fence. I got out and began to walk around the back of the car, eyes reaching for the two worlds, and at that moment the sun came easing up over the valley's rim.

Warmth and vivid light flooded the scene spread out before me. Earthy spring smells welled up from wet grass.

I took another step forward and stood beside the fence, already partway excluded and included; stood there looking out over the view that had become so familiar yet always remained fresh.

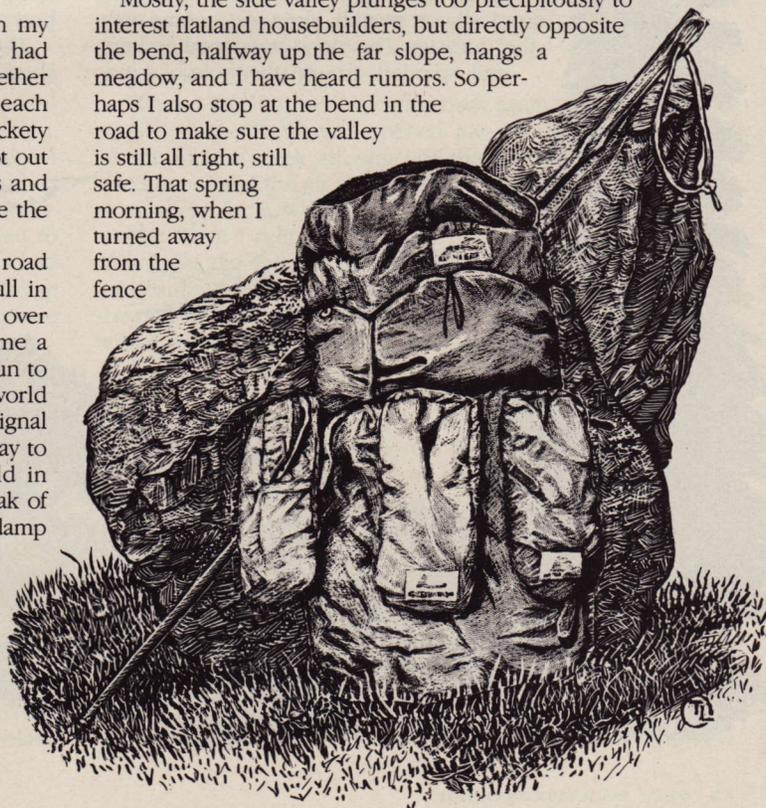
Many years before, the first time I drove this road on my way to the forest that lay at its end, the view was what had made me brake to an abrupt stop. I am no longer sure whether I sensed, even as I braked, the two worlds that faced each other across the green and plunging space beyond the rickety barbed-wire fence; but I know I saw them as soon as I got out of the car. Down at the foot of the valley lay the flatlands and the houses. At its head, framed between steep slopes, rose the billowing green folds of the forest.

After that first day I took to stopping at the bend in the road each time I drove up to walk into that forest. I would pull in beside the fence and stand for a few moments looking out over the steep side valley. Down the years, this pause became a minor but valued personal tradition: a sign that I had begun to break free from the flatlands and the houses and their world all wrapped in schedules and money and other tinsels; a signal that I had already moved across some invisible line, halfway to the forest; had moved a decisive step closer to a world in which the things that ruled would once more be the creak of pack harness and the rhythmic brush of boots through damp leaves and a glimpse of a squirrel leaping high and free, tree-top to treetop—a world in which I would know that the hours and days ahead lay safely cradled in no one else's hands but my own.

In time, the side valley itself had become part of my ritual pause at the bend in the road. The bend overlooks the valley's most beautiful part. Beyond tree-green depths my eye meets pale, smooth, steeply sloping grass-

land, all curves and delight. Wedges of dark woodland confront and dramatize. Between them, bands of warm brown sandstone change texture with every visit but always cry out—dawn or dusk, rain or sun, spring or fall—to have my hand brushed across their smooth surfaces. The sandstone is pierced here and there, like Swiss cheese, with the mouths of small caves, and I think it is these black and mysterious openings that give the valley primordial overtones. Far off to my right, out beyond the flatlands and houses, gleams a sliver of the ocean that has been called “the eye of the world.”

Mostly, the side valley plunges too precipitously to interest flatland housebuilders, but directly opposite the bend, halfway up the far slope, hangs a meadow, and I have heard rumors. So perhaps I also stop at the bend in the road to make sure the valley is still all right, still safe. That spring morning, when I turned away from the fence



at last and got back into the car, I knew that all was well.

An hour later I had parked at road's end, swung the pack up onto my back and was walking along the jeep track that led toward the forest.

I walked easily, taking my time. The pack held three days' food and all the necessary equipment, but on this trip, even more than most, the number of days consumed would, like the miles covered, be irrelevant.

The jeep track crossed a meadow. All around me, again, grass and scented air spoke of spring—of youth and the future and surging hope. At its center, the meadow cradled a small pond. Although the pond was artificial, time had muffled its man-echoes, and the meadow's soft greenness helped mute the lingering noise of the outside, flatland world; helped nourish my unfolding sense of solitude, of inclusion.

Beyond the meadow, the jeep track crossed a small creek, tunneled into an oak grove. Off to the right, a deer snorted alarm. I glimpsed its white rump flouncing away up a steep, brushy slope. From the place it vanished, a stone came tumbling down, bounced high, hit the creek's bedrock with a crash. Then silence returned to the little grove. But I knew that I had not yet really broken free. There was more to it, too, than the grove's being on private property and my still having a mile to go before I reached the boundary of the National Forest. When I first knew this grove, ten years earlier, only a foot trail had threaded through it. Then the jeeps had gone in, for firewood. Had gone in almost every year. Gone in roughshod. No live trees had been cut, but the glade had lost its natural harmonies and now, for all its convalescing greenness, it was a place of blunt stumps and the gougings of jeep wheels and dragged logs.

At the far end of the grove the track ended and the foot trail began—faint and indecisive, small and beautiful, just right for its job. Not many people were lucky enough to know the property owner sufficiently well to get permission to cross his land, and the few footprints I ever saw on the trail suggested that I used it more than anyone else.

The trail angled up a slope. Off to my left, a woodpecker plodded away at its work, erratically yet steadily, like a metronome with the queasies. The slope steepened and the trail spiraled around the bole of a ma-

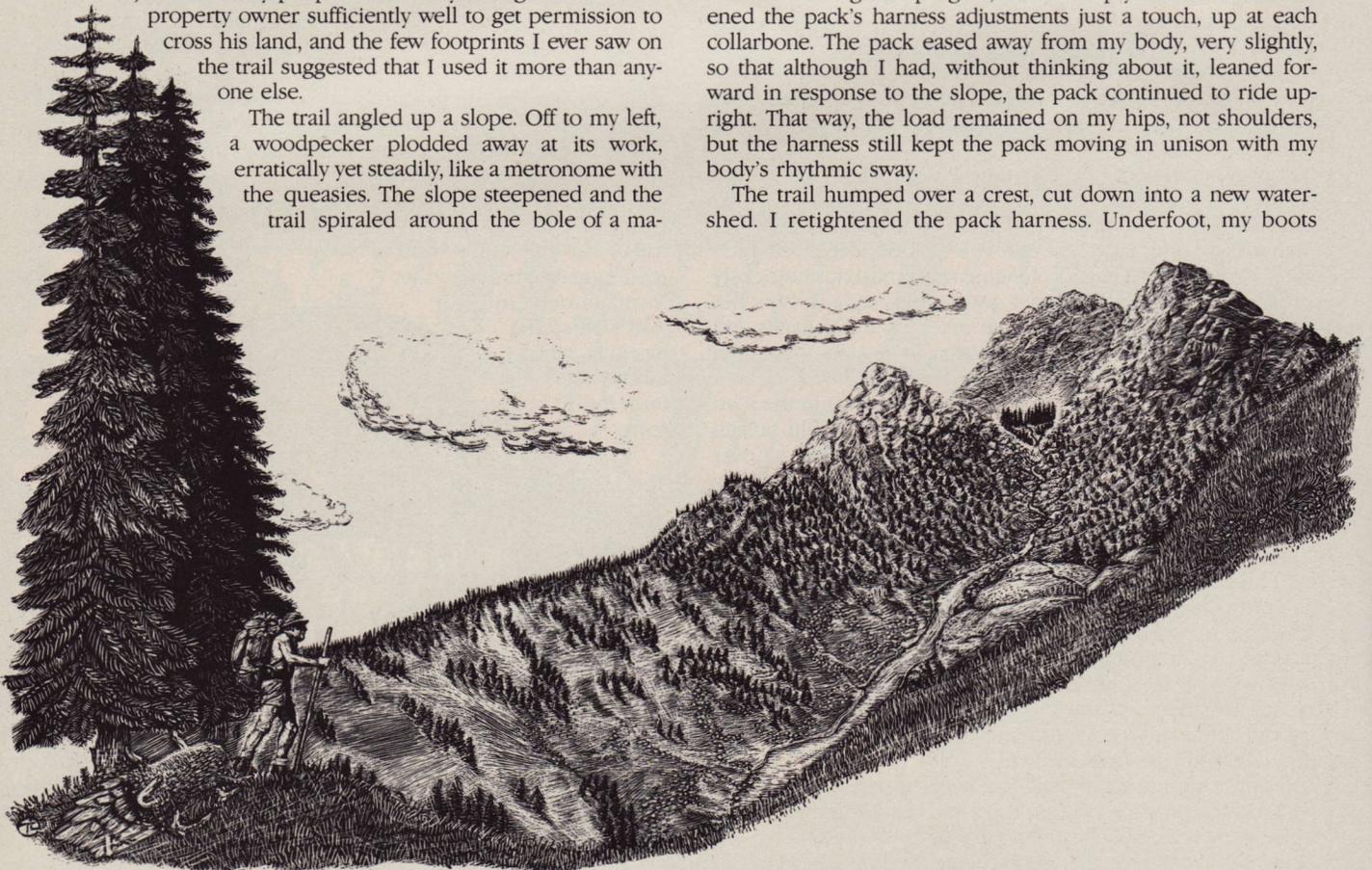
drone. The tree's red-brown roots, splayed and curving, formed a cascade of six steps, like the rungs of a turret staircase. I climbed slowly, deliberately, one foot and then the other, up the rungs' sinuous and almost sexual curves. I took my time, savoring it, because this little natural staircase had, like the bend in the road, become a private signal. On every trip, as I stepped clear of its last rung, I knew that the unheard noise of the flatlands would soon, if I allowed it to happen, be drowned out by the silence of the forest.

Above the madrone-root staircase the trail leveled off. But I did not, as sometimes happened at this point, shift into a higher gear. What mattered was where my mind went, not my body.

Now, I do not mean that I had come up into the forest that day for any very discernible reason. In fact, I would have been hard put to it to say just why I was there. At a guess, an impasse in a certain private matter had triggered my final decision to make the trip; but my frustration was not something you could call "the reason." I think I simply felt that the time had come. I had been away too long. And when I had been away too long the world began to look out of kilter; or to put it another way, as a friend of mine once did, I "turned into a surly Welsh bastard." So over the years this had become the natural thing for me to do from time to time, as the occasion demanded: take a walk up and out into the forest that was, in large part, my reason for living where I now did. In a sense, I suppose, you could say that I had come to need such trips in much the same way as other people occasionally need coffee or booze or affairs or fixes that generate different kinds of trips. Anyway, as I walked without haste along the level stretch of trail above the natural madrone-root staircase I knew that, even though I might not understand just why I was there, it once again felt right and natural to be back, and I rejoiced that I had come.

The trail angled up again, more steeply this time. I slackened the pack's harness adjustments just a touch, up at each collarbone. The pack eased away from my body, very slightly, so that although I had, without thinking about it, leaned forward in response to the slope, the pack continued to ride upright. That way, the load remained on my hips, not shoulders, but the harness still kept the pack moving in unison with my body's rhythmic sway.

The trail humped over a crest, cut down into a new watershed. I retightened the pack harness. Underfoot, my boots



skirled through damp leaves with the rhythm that pulses at the core of walking: the essential, unchanging rhythm that, once achieved, carries your body almost effortlessly over the miles; the rhythm that also lubricates your mind.

At some stage of every day's walking, or almost every day's walking, there comes a moment when your cerebral synapses seem to click into gear. For a few minutes or half an hour or perhaps even for the rest of the day, you fire on all cylinders. You soar, embrace the universe, see everything, solve the insoluble at a glance—you operate, that is, the way you wish you always did.

That morning as I walked on down into the bowl of the second watershed my mind remained tethered, leadenly unsoaring. And I chafed at the constriction. I do not want to suggest that I was traveling Scholar-Gypsylike, waiting for the spark from heaven to fall; you could probably say, though, that for some reason I was vaguely expecting an elevated, or at least clarified, mode of mind to click in fairly early that day—and that I just about as vaguely resented its failure to do so.

The trail skirted a leaning sycamore tree under which I sometimes camped. Beyond the sycamore it crossed a creek and began to climb again. I strode on, then reminded myself there was no hurry, that three days of freedom lay ahead. I slackened the pace.

A side creek tumbled across the trail. My feet moved almost automatically to the right places on the familiar boulders. A covey of quail scuttered off into underbrush. A squirrel complained, high in his treetops, at my unwarranted intrusion. Yes, it was good to be back. I found myself relishing familiar yet changing landmarks: the trailside spring that in a dry year might never break but that now, with the forest's springs all prodigally sprung, was a rivulet tumbling over moss-rich stones; the two halves of the big sycamore that had fallen across the trail five or six winters before and which I had sawed through two summers later; the thimbleberry thicket in which I had once surprised a magnificent buck standing shoulder-deep among the big, fleshy leaves. I walked on, beginning to hear the silence and the new rhythms, beginning to forget the clock. But when I came to a little clearing with a side creek running through it and checked my watch and found that an hour had passed since I left the car and that it was therefore time for a rest, my mind still remained anchored, ordinary.

Ten minutes, and I was on my way again. I walked for another hour, content but still unsoaring, before I came to a certain fallen log that lay beside the trail. I paused beside the log, then stepped over it onto the start of a little cutoff trail that I had begun building almost a year earlier. At the time I had had only efficiency in mind: the cutoff would eliminate an unnecessary loop and two creek crossings. But because I wanted to avoid luring people onto my trail before it was complete I had left its entrance blocked and camouflaged by the fallen log: anyone using the main trail would almost certainly continue along it, unaware of the entrance to the bypass.

Before long I discovered that my embryo detour had created a safe and secret little world, a sort of *sanctum sanctorum* within the forest.

Even on the main trail there was little risk of meeting anyone. I discovered, though, that when I paused or rested or lunched or even camped at any point along the cutoff I knew, about as near as you can ever know, that I would not be disturbed. Now at last, the work on the cut-off trail was almost complete; but as I stepped over the fallen log I knew I would be tempted to leave it in place, camouflaging the turnoff, preserving my sanctuary.

Halfway along the cutoff, in another little grassy clearing with convenient side-creek plumbing, I halted, unbuckled the pack, slipped it off my shoulders and let it slide down onto the short, still-damp grass. I loosened the pack flap, lifted the black



plastic groundsheet from its place on top of everything else, partly unfolded it, spread it on the grass beside the pack and sat down on it.

Sunlight streamed into the little clearing. Rich smells rose from damp earth and leaves, damp underbrush, damp tree roots. Around the edges of the clearing, brambles and poison oak crowded close, but overhead all was space and light. A pair of jays, scrawning at each other, planed blue and raucous across the bright window, from greenery to dappled greenery. Beside me, the creek rejoiced. I felt my shoulders relax.

I took pots and stove and the big white plastic bag of food out of the pack and put them beside me, on the groundsheet. I removed the funny little metal yo-yo of a stove from its nylon bag, assembled it into something that looked rather more like a stove, sucked its inlet needle for a moment so as to coat it with saliva, then slid the rubber orifice of the fuel cartridge over it. I would not have trusted this particular kind of stove under hostile conditions, but had brought it because I knew the weather would almost certainly hold fair and because the stove was easy to light and clean to use. I put the stove down beside the groundsheet, lit it, heated some soup, poured the first cupful into my metal cup. I took my time over eating lunch, over everything.

When I had finished, I leaned back against the pack and let myself doze off. When I opened my eyes again the sun still shone and the creek still sang and the treetops still spread dappled green and the air still hung rich with sweet spring scents. I sat there for a while, leaning against the pack, barely half-awake. Then I relit the stove and brewed tea. But when I had drunk the tea and the juices were stirring in me again, I went on leaning, sitting. Somehow I was not yet ready to move on, beyond my *sanctum sanctorum*. So I went on sitting. The sun eased its slow way across my open window.

At last I stood up, pulled from its scabbard the machete strapped to the side of the pack and walked a few yards on up my trail. The final stretch of the cutoff, before it rejoined the main trail, still needed work. On my last trip, several months earlier, I had reconnoitered an alignment up a gentle slope and had marked it but had barely begun to clear a practical route through the low brush. Fifteen or twenty minutes, I figured, would finish the job.

I came to the end of the section of trail that I had already cleared, and began swinging my machete.

An hour later I was still at work. There had been more left to be done than I remembered; but I also found, as always seemed to happen, that once I started work I did not want to stop. When I had cleared a way through to the junction with the main trail, I turned back and began to tidy up the new

route. It is curiously rewarding work, trail-making, especially if you have the right basic, Neanderthal cast of mind.

When I had finished tidying things up, all the way back to the clearing and side creek, I moved on beyond them. I went to the foot of a certain tree and unwrapped a hoe and mattock from the big black plastic bag in which I had protected and hidden them, last time in. Then I worked my way happily back along the whole cutoff, smoothing out rough places and making surer footholds—but always keeping the trail small and beautiful, so that it did not really wound the forest.

All afternoon I sweated away. When I quit at last the cutoff was essentially finished. But I did not walk back and remove the camouflaging log from the turnoff. I think I told myself that things were not yet quite ready for other people to use it.

When I got back to my pack in its side-creek clearing, I brewed yet more tea. But my mind remained in its ordinary, humdrum mode. At last I stowed the lunchtime gear away, stood up and swung the pack up onto my back.

Once I had moved out beyond my cutoff, back onto the main trail, and begun to walk on up the valley of the second watershed, everything was fine, after all. The late afternoon sun had already sunk behind the western rim of the narrowing valley and ahead the forest sloped dark and quiet. The trees grew taller now, the underbrush less dense. Except for the faint trail, there was no sign that man existed. I walked on and up, at ease.

It began not with a flood but a trickle; hardly more than a seep, really. An idea formed in my head. I paused on the trail and pulled a little red notebook out of the "pocket office" on

the yoke of my pack harness and jotted the idea down. Then I slid the notebook back into the office and walked on. A couple of hundred yards, and another idea. Another pause, another notation. Soon, a third. And then, as I walked on once more to the soft rhythm of my footsteps, the floodgates opened. I saw, almost in a single instant, the thrust of a letter that would breach the impasse in the private matter that had, in a superficial sense, triggered this trip. The letter would be long, and difficult to write, but I felt sure it would solve the problem that had loomed.

I walked steadily on, stepping over and around familiar obstacles, hardly noticing them, just letting thoughts flow out. Details emerged, coagulated, solidified. There were too many of them now, too much complexity, for mere notation. Besides, the thrust of the letter was something I would not forget. I kept going. Before long, though, the information swirled so dense in my mind that I could no longer be sure I would remember it all, and in the middle of a thimbleberry thicket, at a point where the trail recrossed the creek, I halted and slipped the pack off and opened it and took out the groundsheet and the few sheets of paper I always carry in my pack. I sat down on the partly unfolded groundsheet, beneath the canopy of big, fleshy thimbleberry leaves, and began to draft the letter.

I must have scribbled for a long time, for at a moment when the flow slackened I became aware that the light had almost gone. I looked around. There had barely been room to sit down, in among the thin, gangly stalks of the thimbleberry bushes. It was certainly not a place I would normally choose to camp. One evening the previous summer, though, I had reached this same thicket feeling very tired, just as the light failed, and because I knew there would be no more surface water until I crossed the next crest, I had decided to camp there. I had to trample a coffin-size space in the thimbleberries, in the one place that was more or less flat enough for a bed. I had not enjoyed doing so: I like to leave campsites with little or no trace of my intrusions. But now, peering through the thimbleberry stalks, I saw that they had already overgrown my sleeping place so effectively that there was virtually no sign of it. Within minutes I had once again cleared a space, fully unfolded the groundsheet, rolled out pad and sleeping bag on it and begun to cook dinner. Almost immediately after dinner I fell asleep.

In the morning, after my first caffeine-fix of tea, I reread the letter and found it good. I tidied it a bit, put it away. And then, rather to my surprise, I sat on, there among the thimbleberry stalks. When I camped at that place the previous summer I had arrived too late at night and left too early and hurriedly next morning to appreciate it; but now, wrapped in the soft green light that filtered down through the leaf canopy, and in no kind of hurry, I found myself smiling around at the dense, dark, mysterious undergrowth pressing in from every side; at the fleshy leaves that crowded overhead, almost meshing, like airborne lily pads; and, through rare and limited spaces between them, at small and fractured samples of the world beyond. Somehow, it was a new and almost exciting way of seeing the forest. It is often like that, I find, when you are forced to use what seems to be a poor campsite, hardly even a viable halting place. You lack the view or spaciousness or consonances or whatever it is that you tend to favor when you have the luxury of choice; but you gain a fresh, untidy view of the country, so that your understanding of its complexities takes an unexpected step forward.

By midmorning, for all the attractions of the place, I was ready to move on. And although I think I harbored, just for a moment, the hint of a thought that the spark from heaven had apparently fallen and my "reason" for coming up into the forest had therefore been annulled, I recognized at once that this was nonsense. I had no idea of what remained to be done, but



it was still there all right, waiting. And as soon as I considered the matter I knew what I would do. What I would do, that is, on the basic, physical level.

I would go on up for a couple of hours, into the third watershed, and would camp on a certain little knoll that stands capped by a half-ring of madrones. The first time I camped on that knoll, years before, I had stayed two days and finished reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and ever since then it had been one of my favorite retreats. It sat well back from the trail, too, and I had never found any sign of another human's having been there. It would make, as it always did, a perfect place to sit and think—though "think" might not be the right word for what I suspected I still wanted to do.

I restowed everything into my pack, rearranged the thimbleberry stalks as best I could and heaved the pack up onto my back.

At first the trail twisted along close by the creek, past familiar landmarks: the steep, crumbling slope with the urn-shaped boulder that I had to skirt with care; the chopped-off limbs of the fallen alder that I had found blocking the trail when I came down at night, years before, after a big storm, and had had to hack my way past with the axe that I had fortunately been carrying for trail work, up near the crest. I walked on, at peace. Familiarity can breed content. I crossed a small, grassy clearing. I always remembered this clearing, now, the way I had seen it two winters earlier: an oblong of smooth snow bisected by a line of tracks so sharp and vivid that I could almost see golden-brown fur flexing on the mountain lion's haunches as it padded silently from shadow back into shadow.

The trail swung away from the creek, circumnavigated a granite outcrop, rejoined the creek. I paused to watch a dull orange salamander, down beside my left boot, salaclamber up a dead-leaf slope. Soon, a chipmunk quizzed me from a log, all stripes and sinew and twitches, then hightailed away into dark fern caverns. The trail swung away from the creek again, cut steeply upward. The valley closed in tighter, steeper, rougher, rockier. But all around me, except for the creek's faint music and my boots' steady rhythm, there was only silence.

I crossed over into the third watershed, walked on down, came to the little knoll capped by its half-ring of madrones.

The trees enclosed a flat, open space covered with a delicate yellow and brown carpet of fallen leaves, so I did not have to disturb anything before I spread out my groundsheet; did not even have to bend any grass. Soon I was leaning back against my pack, looking around at the velvety, moss-covered madrone boles. The last sunlight beamed low through a gap in the nearby trees. I slid down, full-length, onto my sleeping bag and lay there looking up into the quivering, sunlit, emerald-green canopy of madrone leaves. The sunlight snuffed out. The leaves assumed a quieter resonance. I continued to lie there, gazing up into them. When I woke from a doze, the light had almost gone.

I stood up, grabbed my canteens, scrambled down to the creek that skirted the knoll, filled the canteens, climbed back up to camp.

When I had put the canteens down by the orange sleeping bag I stood there for a moment and then, for no particular reason, walked six or seven paces and stood beside a low granite boulder. The last light was fading now, but I could just see, on the flat top of the boulder, two sets of dark droppings. A coyote or fox or bobcat or mountain lion had dropped them to mark its territorial boundary, and as I stood there I wished, briefly, that I knew which species produced precisely such droppings. Then I stepped up onto the boulder, carefully avoiding my neighbor's signposts, and found myself standing there in the dying light, looking up at the faint line of the valley's rim, far above. Just standing there. Doing nothing but look, really—except that from time to time I half heard two owls question-

and-answering each other across the valley. I began to wish, rather vaguely, that I could tell what kind of owls they were; then unwished. That really didn't seem to matter much, either, and I went back to just standing there.

The line of the valley's rim, far above, dimmed toward extinction. The closer shadows—the pale shadows and dark shadows and pitch-black shadows—were melding, too. Occasionally the owls rehooted; otherwise there was only the quiet lap of silence. I went on standing. Just standing and half listening.

At last I became aware that my bare legs were growing cold. And slowly there eased into me, like a tide easing up an estuary, the knowledge that I must have spent twenty or thirty minutes standing there on the boulder. Or perhaps forty. I realized, now I came to consider the matter, that I did not really know what I had been thinking about—did not really know what I could have been said to have been doing, just standing there and looking up at the diminishing rim or peering deep into the blackness of the forest, and half listening to the owls or to the lappings of the silence.

I stepped down from the boulder and walked back to my sleeping bag. I had precious little idea, really, of what those twenty or thirty minutes had been all about. In themselves, they hardly constituted anything you could call an event. I knew, though, that they had been good minutes. Very good minutes. They lay, perhaps, at the core of the trip. Come to think of it, serene caesuras of that kind—unplanned, concordant pauses—often seemed to lie at the heart of a good trip.

This was the way, in fact, that things nearly always turned out. I mostly came up into the forest—or even went up for a week into higher mountains, or out into the desert—without quite knowing what I wanted and without focused plans about what I'd do. More often than not I did nothing. Nothing you could easily tell someone else about, anyway—because, by flatland standards, nothing had really happened. Yet by the end of the trip, whether it lasted a day or a week, I was almost always ready to go back home. And often eager to do so.

I sat down on my sleeping bag and cooked dinner, there in the darkness and the silence, with the shadowy madrone trunks mysterious and reassuring all around me, their leaves black against dark sky. Soon after dinner I fell asleep. In the morning, after breakfast, I stowed everything back into my pack and came down off the knoll and began the long, slow walk back toward the flatlands—toward that other and better-known world to which I also belonged.

Colin Fletcher is the author of Complete Walker III, The Man Who Walked Through Time, and The Thousand Mile Summer. He deliberately obfuscated critical topographical details in this story to preserve the privacy of the places he writes about.

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