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Everything
Is
(NOT)
Fine

FINDING STRENGTH WHEN LIFE
GETS ANNOYINGLY DIFFICULT



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CHAPTER ONE

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Keep your eyes on the path and don't step in bear poop.

I like to hike in the mountains, but I also have anxiety. Sometimes those things don't work well together.

When my husband, Kyle, and I were nineteen, we spent an entire summer living and working in Glacier National Park, Montana. We lived in a little white cabin built in the 1930s at Swiftcurrent Motor Inn with a bunch of other roommates and a communal bathroom with concrete showers. Everyone there that summer, just like decades of employees that came before us, was there to do two things: work a little and hike a lot. The resort sat right in the heart of a valley surrounded by mountains, with endless trails to hike, mountains to summit, and backcountry campgrounds to explore. The lakes in Glacier are teal, the mountains have snow on them, and at any point you can run into a mountain goat, which is pretty awesome.

Kyle and I would crank out twelve-hour double shifts at the restaurant, doling out trail recommendations and bear-avoidance advice to the tourists dining at our tables between their soda refills. We would tell them what hikes were closed because of bear activity, what hikes were easy, what ones were hard, what ones were the most beautiful. If we really liked the tourists, we

would tell them about the secret lake where a handful of massive moose would gather each night to eat, but mostly that was sacred insider knowledge.

Then, after two days of double shifts spent smiling, chatting, and serving, we would head into the wilderness. We would hike our favorite trails and try our hand at off-trail climbing, armed with nothing but a book written in the 1970s that vaguely explained where to go. We would do backcountry camping trips way up in the mountains, cuddling a can of bear spray the entire night, just in case. We would hike and hike until our socks were bloody on the heels and our legs felt like *al dente* noodles. It was magic. That summer, Kyle and I both logged more than 250 miles and loved every second of it.

The reason we knew about Glacier to begin with is because my own father worked there in college, and then took us out almost every summer of my childhood. The first time I summited a mountain was as a one-year-old in a sketchy 1980s baby-carrying hiking backpack with a metal frame. My family went back for years after that on family vacations. So as Kyle and I drove away from such an idyllic summer that year to return to college, we knew we would be back to the park.

And we did return, a few years later with my mom, dad, sister, and brother-in-law. Kyle and I were in our midtwenties then, freshly married and neck deep in Kyle's grad school program. Our brains, at the ripe age of twenty-five, had finally fully developed. Or at least that's what my mom told me. She'd frequently remind me, "Remember your brain isn't fully developed yet!" anytime I wanted to do something stupid from the ages of eighteen to twenty-four. She is definitely not a doctor, but things moms say always feel real.

Even though we were not super youthful anymore, and our frontal lobes were now plump and fully cooked, we still kinda *felt* like we were young. Feeling like an old person usually kicks in around thirty-three. So on that trip, Kyle and I wanted to do a really big hike, just like we did back in our glory days. I mean, those times of hiking triumph were only a handful of years prior—we could still do it, right? A short few years of stress, studying, drinking cheap beer out late with friends, and shame eating Taco Bell in our cars alone one-too-many times surely had no effect on our physical ability, right? We were twenty-five! Practically invincible!

We decided to hike the Highline, which is a seven-mile trail set at about seven thousand feet above sea level and one of our all-time favorites. Some parts of the trail are so narrow and high on the side of a cliff that there is a garden hose nailed right into rock so you can hang on and not, well, fall off and die. I am fairly sure it is the same hose my dad clung to with me in the baby backpack. It is always fun having your entire existence on earth dependent on cracked vintage rubber and old nails, right?

But the meager Highline wasn't enough for us—that is for the common tourist humans. We were Glacier regulars after all. We knew the tricks and secrets and wanted to go all out.

So, we walked the seven-mile trail overlooking deep mountain valleys and bright teal lakes so beautiful they didn't seem real. We stepped over small patches of snow that crossed in front of us, saw some cute goats, and filled up our water bottles in ice-cold streams trickling down the mountain. At the end of the trail was a little chalet, where we stopped, ate a candy bar, drank a Gatorade, and continued on our way.

Most people at this point simply turn around and hike back, or take a little loop trail straight down through the woods and catch a shuttle that takes you back to the trailhead parking lot. But we wanted to keep going. If we continued on a bit, we could do a one-mile climb almost straight up to a fire lookout where a ranger lived—how intriguing! So we did. But the ranger wasn't even there—what prior engagement they had that particular afternoon is beyond me. Perhaps there was a sale going on at IKEA two states over and they casually stepped away.

So there Kyle and I sat at the top of the mountain and tried to catch our breath. We had run out of water—the cold, lovely streams were now a far thing of the past, so, in desperation, we drank the juice from fruit cups we had packed. As we sat there, high on the mountain, we looked down—way down—into the valley where our cabins were. That is where we were heading. Easy, right? False.

We were already exhausted and had hiked ten miles and gained thousands of feet in elevation. Now, we had to basically do it all over again, but on a downward angle.

Oh. And it was starting to get dark out—the shady subtle stillness that comes right before dusk. The shadows were getting longer, the air just a bit breezier and cooler. We knew not only were we going to have to make it down the gigantic cliff, but we were going to have to hustle.

I think at this point we finally realized we most definitely were not nineteen anymore. The sheer optimism of our fully developed brains was not enough to keep us going full steam. We were exhausted and winded and our legs felt weak, like little potbelly pigs with asthma. At this point, I began to question all of the day's prior choices leading us to the top of this very tall

mountain, miles away from the comfort of our cabin and ample supply of snacks. What was the point in all this again?

But there was only one option. To keep going forward even though we didn't want to. The situation didn't feel great. We were not feeling great. But we had to keep walking forward even though it was hard.

So, Kyle and I ate the sad remaining soggy fruit from our cups, picked ourselves up, and began to hike the mile back down the lookout mountain. As we began walking the short trail toward the cliff, we were surprised to see a group of hikers on their way up the valley. It was getting late in the day, and this wasn't a popular trail, so we were not expecting to see anyone.

We gave little winded half waves to the group as we approached, and one said to us, between pants of breath and with worried wrinkles on their forehead, "You are not going down that way, are you?" pointing to the trail we were about to descend.

Kyle and I looked at each other. Why were they asking that? *Yes. Yes, winded concerned human. That is where we are going.*

We had no other choice! This group walking up was staying at the chalet—something you have to book a year in advance. There was no room at the inn for us there. And we couldn't hike back where we came from—we would never make it eight miles before it was pitch black and we were left groping in the dark for the stupid garden hose nailed into the cliff. We couldn't go down the loop at this point—the shuttle had stopped running, we had no car, and there was no cell phone service to call someone to pick us up. And while we did hitchhike a bit in our youthful days in Glacier . . . NOPE. That chapter had long passed. So yes, we were going down that trail, because we had to.

"Yeah, our cabins are down in the valley," Kyle explained.

"Well, there is a huge grizzly bear on the trail," they said. "Be careful."

Cool cool cool guys, cool cool. So now not only was it getting dark and we were exhausted with miles left to go, but there was also a furry death beast in our direct vicinity that could jump out at any moment and devour us like we were nothing more than a blood-filled Pop-Tart.

We got to the top of the cliff and looked ahead at the switchback path, which had to zigzag one way, then cut back sharply the other because of how steep the mountainside was. This section of the trail, since not as frequented by tourists, did not come with a garden hose on the wall. But oh, how I wish it did. Because apparently, since our brains were now "fully developed," we were now able to realize just how terrifying this narrow trail really was. When we did it years before, I didn't think twice about it. Now, I was horrified. One stumble or step on loose rock and well, ya know. Falling, certain death, and all that jazz. So lame.

And oh yeah, the grizzly bear was also a very real issue.

But again, we had to keep moving forward. We had to walk down the narrow, scary path with the potential of encountering a teddy bear from hell, all before it got pitch black outside and our family called the rangers for a dramatic search-and-rescue situation.

We in no way wanted to, but we *had* to keep going. Did we feel strong enough? That was questionable. Did we feel emotionally calm, brave, and ready to tackle it? Not a chance—we were terrified. But somehow, we still had to walk forward.

So, we began the descent. My heart was pounding, my breaths were shallow, and everything around me felt fuzzy and spinny.

My anxiety—which I sometimes get just walking in grocery stores on solid ground—was at peak levels as I tried not to look down over the cliff ledge. Kyle was also visibly nervous, which says a lot. The man is usually a stoic, so if he expresses one tiny feeling, it means he is feeling it times one hundred.

We, two scared and exhausted twenty-five-year-olds, began a little chant. A rhythm that kept us going ahead, focusing on exactly what was in front of us, not the big frightening situation surrounding us. Like total hiking dorks, we started to say together out loud, “Right foot, left foot. Right foot, left foot.” Over and over we repeated that, watching exactly where each foot fell on the path and keeping our eyes firmly fixed on what we could control.

With fear swirling around us, we had to simplify and focus in. Right foot, left foot was all we could muster in that moment. “Right foot, left foot” was the chant and mantra keeping us moving forward. By focusing on what was exactly in front of us, not all the possibility for doom and destruction surrounding us, we were able to remain (mostly) calm, and just take the next step we knew to take. Then the next, on whatever solid ground we could see in front of us. They were not fancy steps, big steps, or fast steps, but we kept doing them. Little by little, bit by bit, making our way through the super hard stuff, until the walk was safer, easier.

But it wasn't just the fear of falling down the massive cliff that was throwing us off. As we were walking, even while being careful and taking little steps, something else got in our way. Fresh, steaming piles of grizzly bear poop. That group of hikers was right to express their concern. There was a big ol' bear in our midst, as evidenced by these stanky half-digested berry piles still warm to the touch.¹

¹Okay wait—to be clear, I didn't actually touch the poop piles. You could just feel they were warm from their glisten and swarming flies. Ew.

But guess what—we didn't let the unwanted poop piles distract us from our focus on the path ahead. Right foot, left foot, step over the extra piles of crap trying to throw us off, and keep moving forward to the end game. We couldn't control if there was a bear. We could only control the steps we took to move forward, so that is where we focused.

Finally, we made it down into the tree line where things felt less steep, and then to flat, safe, solid ground. Well, mostly safe. Yes, we were not at risk of falling, but we still had miles of trail through the woods as the sky got darker by the minute, with the very real possibility of a grizzly showing up around any corner. The moment we hit flat ground, we knew what we had to do: run. So, we ran the rest of the way back, fueled by adrenaline and the very real fear that we could be eaten by a furry, wild beast, our bodies suddenly forgetting we had just hiked more than a dozen miles. So we ran and ran, no more talking, no more right foot left foot, just our entire bodies and minds focused on finishing the hike and getting to a better spot. By the grace of God, the bear's fresh poop was as much of him as we encountered. We didn't even hear a grunt from the brush or an ominous rustle in the bushes. Whatever he was after that night, it wasn't us.

But then after about a mile of our desperate sprint through the woods toward the finish line, I heard something. Someone was calling out a whistle, loud and repetitive. It was my dad, somewhere further down the trail from us, making the sound of a loon call. It was the same sound we hear every summer night at our cabin in the north woods of Minnesota, and also the whistle that we make when we are lost in Target and need to find each other. It is very helpful, this familiar family whistle, but expect to get a few weird looks from people if you try it when

you get lost in the hypnotic haze of Studio McGee pillows. But there in the woods that evening, my dad had started doing the hike in reverse to look for us, knowing it was getting concerningly dark and we were still somewhere out in the vast wilderness. It was basically a mountain rescue, on a very small and nondramatic scale.

I can still hear the sound of his whistle, and remember the spark of joy and relief it put in my heart as it cut through the now mostly dark woods. I knew we were done, and it was going to be okay. No, my dad couldn't be there as we took step by step over piles of bear poop. He couldn't physically carry our aging bodies up and down the thousands of feet of elevation. Mostly because he is way more aged himself, clearly. At this point it would be far more likely for us to be carrying him around. Kyle and I had to do the hard work of the hike ourselves. We had to take the emotional steps forward on our own.

But my dad was thinking of us the entire time we were gone. And then, he was there to meet us at the end. Kinda like God cares about us and thinks about us and loves us when we are walking through our own hard seasons, on our own scary trails full of poop and unknown. Except God actually is right there with us, the entire time, helping us along. We might not see him every step of the way. We may need to step over the piles of bear crap on our own, but he is with us to strengthen us, protect us, and guide us down the best path.

So, Kyle, my dad, and I tackled the last mile of the trail together, as the dusk began to settle in and the crickets got louder. When we got to the little circle of white vintage cabins we were all staying in, Kyle and I collapsed in camping chairs and washed away our adrenaline and anxieties with food, drinks, and a

dramatic retelling of our day to my family. This, to me, is the very best part of big scary outdoor adventures—retelling the story.

I will always remember the little focused rhythm Kyle and I had to get into in order not to, well, freak out. Right foot, left foot, again and again. All you can do is just keep taking the next step ahead of you that you know to take. Avoid the piles of crap that show up in your path that will try and throw you off, and keep going forward, little by little until you reach a more solid ground. Right foot, left foot, eyes focused on the next little step to take.

Have you ever been through something like that? Not necessarily a crazy hike, but in life? Having to walk through something really hard and frankly scary that you did not want to walk through, but had no other option—boo. A breakup. A death. The dumb pandemic. An illness. A sick child. A rocky marriage. Ya know—all those tough, complicated things. We all go through these at some point, right?

That wild hike—which included a rogue grizzly bear because why not—taught me two things about hard seasons. First, you can push yourself farther than you think you can go, especially if that is the only option. You *are* stronger than you realize, and sometimes you have to be forced a bit to see that side of you. I wish this never happened to anybody. I wish the only thing we were forced to do was take a nap with a gaggle of kittens. But sometimes, life pushes us to do things that stretch us physically, emotionally, even spiritually, and in those moments, we *can* grow.

Second, narrowing your focus to what is exactly in front of you, exactly what you can control, is vital for survival. For the hike, it was the exact next step to take that was safe, right in

front of me. Not fixing your eyes on the dizzying, scary things surrounding you, but the solid little bit of ground you know to be safe. And then the next. Keep moving forward, even if your steps are slow and shaky.

In times like these, I hope you know that God is there, cheering for you and loving you fiercely. He can provide you strength as you stumble along the path. Even if you don't fully feel or see him at the time, he is *always* there and will see you through. And, by his grace there will be an end to the hard passage. The grizzly bear eventually takes a nap in a cave. The path gets easier—less of a life-and-death situation and more solid flat ground. One day, this long hard thing may even end, and there might be a chance to rest and reflect. Perhaps, if we are so lucky, the hard things will even become a good story to tell. Or at least something to remember and keep tucked in your heart as you keep on walking forward, step by step.

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