
Those Footsteps in the Sand Will Be Your Own

ABSTRACT This essay is an account of the author's life in rural Idaho during the late 20th and early 21st century. The essay chronicles the author's experience as a young woman in a community that was predominantly patriarchal and examines the ways the author had to adapt in order to function within such an oppressive system. The story details the author's decision to work in the wilderness as a means of seeking spiritual transformation, but, instead, she finds herself confronting the same intersections of class and gender that she had been raised with in her hometown. **KEYWORDS** Wilderness; Creative nonfiction; Rural; Class; Gender

When I was 24, I went into the wilderness seeking transcendence. I had been raised by a gentle, forester father in an outdoors community in the rural American West where transcendental narratives of wilderness as salvation were ample. John Muir spoke of two pines as a doorway to a new world, and like so many others before me, I sought access to that new world through my retreat from civilization.

What was I retreating from? I didn't really know. It's nearly impossible to articulate a sense of persistent dissatisfaction and malaise, but that was where I was at. In the world I inhabited of rural Idaho, I felt like an outsider. Even in the early 21st century, Idaho wasn't a friendly place for women, and I had spent my lifetime watching men *do things* while women stayed home. The mythology of the hero's quest was alive and well, but as a woman, there were few models for me to follow, so I followed the models of men.

Somewhat like Edward Abbey in *Desert Solitaire*, I worked for the US Forest Service as a wilderness ranger. A backcountry plane flew me to a remote airstrip and dropped me off at Indian Creek Guard Station. As I sat on the porch of my Forest Service cabin, I heard the words in my head, "This is a story of a woman who went into the wilderness and came out unchanged," but that wasn't true. The truth was that I did come out of the wilderness changed, but not in the ways I had wanted or expected.

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Part of the dissatisfaction and malaise that had led me to that job was that I had grown up in a rural, patriarchal community. Even as a child, I was outspoken, fiery, and smart. “She’s got that redheaded temper,” they said about me (because everyone knows who *they* are in a small community). “She’s too smart for her own good,” *they* also said. In high school, *they* made assumptions about my sexuality, did things like scrawl the words “Fucking Dyke” over a picture of me that was tacked to a bulletin board. I didn’t retreat; I bit back. *They* were unfazed, and I was miserable.

For a girl who grew up poor in the rural American West, there weren’t a lot of opportunities to leave. I dreamed of leaving my state, of traveling the world, of working in New York City, but those were just dreams. My reality, it seemed, was that I would have to stay. Migration, in the traditional sense of the word, wasn’t an option for those of us who grew up with a lack of resources and education—even for the smartest of us. Our migrations often happened in the spiritual realm. We accessed our “spirit guides” as a way of finding tolerance for our own lives. Our reality was that, though progressive politics wasn’t yet a thing in the rural American West, white New Age mysticism was alive and well.

In high school, I had worked at a local bookstore that was owned by a woman. The store carried books with titles such as *Women Who Run with the Wolves* and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Crystals hung in the windows, a tiny plug-in fountain gurgled next to the cash register, and wooden flute music piped through the speakers. Like every other bookstore at that time, we also carried the book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. My high school English teacher had bought the book, and he would read chapters to us in class. I remember him telling us that it was never too early to learn that men want to be “needed” whereas women just want to be “cherished.” I remember thinking that my English teacher made me uncomfortable. I remember watching him sit on top of a desk in front of the class, then spread his legs wide open as if he sat that way all of the time. I remember thinking that, if I didn’t get out of that town, I would never be the person I wanted to be.

When I graduated, the three women I worked with at the bookstore gave me a meditation pillow and my first set of runes. They hugged me and told me to seek guidance from the spirits when I felt lost. They told me that they were so proud of me, that they had so much hope for my future. None of them had been able to finish college, and I knew that I was lucky to be going to college at all.

I had wanted to go to a progressive liberal arts college in the Midwest, but my family couldn’t afford it, so I landed at the University of Montana in Missoula.

Missoula was the closest “city” (population 58,000) to my hometown, but it was geographically difficult to access. First, we had to drive up, then down a winding mountain pass that crossed the Continental Divide and two mountain ranges—the Beaverheads and the Bitterroots. In many ways, Missoula felt like home, but in other ways, it felt foreign. There were students like me—students who had grown up in the impoverished local communities of Montana and Idaho—and there were students who the locals referred to as “Granuppies” (Granola + Yuppie). The Granuppies were the students who had come from the East Coast to have the exotic experience of studying in the Rocky Mountains. When I told the Granuppies that I had grown up in Idaho, they peppered me with questions, always curious what it had been like to actually live in that region. They commented on how beautiful the nature was there, and I found myself building up that aspect of my upbringing; I was too proud to admit that I had been miserable in such a pristine place.

Here’s the thing about towns that are reliant on the land for their income: To us, the land isn’t as beautiful as it is utilitarian. My county had an economy that was dependent on mining, cattle ranching, and logging. By the time I was in high school, federal lawsuits from environmental groups had shut down most of the logging, and my family bore the weight of the community’s anger. My father was the representative from the US Forest Service who had to tell the logging companies that there would be no more clear-cutting, and when I was in high school, he received death threats on our family’s answering machine. The neighbors had signs in their windows that read, “This House Supported By Timber Dollars.” Those signs felt directed at us, and the realities of their homes were such that it was obvious that support wasn’t paying their bills.

Those neighbors were poor. Poorer than us, at least, and in a community that was so small, so angry, and so desperate, the folks who weren’t hungry were “rich.” To be rich was to be contemptible, and it would be dishonest of me if I didn’t admit that I had internalized that mind-set. In Missoula, I envied the ease of the Granuppies’ lives, but I didn’t respect them as people, and no matter how much I meditated or consulted my runes, the spirits didn’t give me guidance on how to reconcile such extreme class imbalances. I dropped out of the University of Montana after one semester and returned to my hometown. Between three jobs, I worked 70-hour weeks in the service industry while living in my parents’ basement. This was not the life that I had envisioned for myself, so when I had the opportunity to work for the Forest Service in the Frank Church River of No Return, I took it. It was an easy decision. In rural Idaho, working for the Forest Service was one of the few ways to make a living wage,

and beyond that, I would get to experience the wilderness as I envisioned it was meant to be experienced.

During my one semester at the University of Montana, my freshman composition instructor had themed her class around wilderness. We'd read Edward Abbey and Henry David Thoreau, and I'd learned that wilderness could both heal and restore the spirit. I'd grown up in a strict Christian family but had stopped being a believer in my early teen years. Still, the spiritualist in me craved nature's transcendence. I often thought of a print that was on my neighbor's wall. It was called "Footsteps" and had a painting of footsteps in the sand, along with a dialogue between Jesus and an unnamed person. Jesus told the person that he would always walk beside them, but the person asked why there was only one pair of footsteps in the sand during the toughest times.

Jesus answered, "Because those were the times when I carried you." The picture was cheap, and the sentiment trite, but, still, I looked at those footprints in the sand and yearned to be carried.

At Indian Creek, I spent a lot of time alone, but I also spent more time with men than ever before. There was the trail crew that came in after week-long hitches in the woods, the backcountry pilots who popped in to my office to chat with me, and the river guides who led guided trips down the Salmon River. Those trips billed themselves as offering the "full wilderness experience." For a mere \$2,000, tourists could float through 60 miles of wilderness while dining on fresh seafood in the evenings and participating in group-led beach yoga in the mornings. The river guides were good-looking, tanned, and charming. The trail crew, rugged and rough. The pilots, surprisingly intellectual. Being the only woman in a forest full of men meant that I got a lot of attention—mostly unwanted. After killing a nest of baby mice for me, one of the trail crew guys asked if he could sleep in my cabin that night. I said no and locked my door. One river guide told me that, as a "woman in a certain industry," my role in the wilderness was to let men into my bed. Another river guide said that I could be "pretty if I tried." I was so tired, by then, and started crying unexpectedly. He got flustered. "I know it must be hard," he said, not unkindly. I'm not sure what he thought was hard. I didn't know how to tell him that I wasn't crying out of sadness; I was crying out of anger.

And then, finally, there was the coworker who talked constantly about his ex-wife. He called her a bitch and told me that he'd been arrested for pulling a gun on her. Still, he complimented me, said that I was nothing like her, that I was "soft" and "sweet." I enjoyed his praise, didn't take the time to think about

what it meant that he had abused his wife. At one point, I complained about the other men, and he said, “Don’t listen to those men. They don’t deserve a second of your time.”

“Thank you for being nice to me,” I said.

He looked down embarrassed, then back up. “Girl, you’re easy to be nice to,” he replied.

And I was. Somewhere between the first river guide, and the trail crew member, and the next river guide, I had learned how to be a woman who was *easy to be nice to*.

My boss was a woman, an Amazonian, psychic redhead named Sheri. She flew in occasionally to check on me, and perhaps it was her stature—she towered over most of the men—but they cowered beneath her. They hated her, but also respected her. Sheri was gruff—known for being difficult and opinionated—but she was kind. One night, we sat on the porch of my cabin, and she laid out a spread of tarot cards. “You’re smart,” she said, “but you’re going to have to get tougher.”

I understood what she meant. I had gone into the wilderness seeking the experience of a Granuppie or one of those tourists who had paid to float the river in comfort, but, instead, I was having the experience of a working-class woman at work.

“Transcendence would have been easy to find if I was rich,” I thought.

But I wasn’t rich. I was a woman trying to exist in a man’s world, and no amount of meditation or divination was going to change that. Only I could change that, so I did. It took me a long time. I went back to college. I moved out of Idaho. I graduated from three state schools with an MFA, PhD, and a mortgage-sized amount of student loans. I got married, had a child, lived through an abusive marriage and subsequent painful divorce, then became a single parent. I became tougher, harder. No longer soft or sweet, I was kind, but not nice, and I chose not to care if I was *easy to be nice to*.

On the night of the 2016 election, when America elected a man like my former coworkers, like my ex-husband, and like so many other men I had known in my lifetime—and when my hometown in Idaho went overwhelmingly red while I lived across the country in Ohio—I curled up with my feelings of betrayal on my bathroom floor and sobbed as quietly as possible. I didn’t want my son to hear me, so like all of the other women I knew, I picked myself up off the floor.

I went to bed and held the rose quartz that I keep on my bedside table. Rose quartz is purported to help with love, particularly feelings of self-love. In the same way that I no longer believed that wilderness could save me, I didn't really believe in the power of the crystal, but I believed in the power of beauty. By then, my father and I had hiked into the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana. The most inaccessible wilderness in the lower 48, we had climbed 7,000 feet in our first day of hiking. At the summit, my father took a picture of me standing in front of a field of beargrass. In it, I am smiling. When I look at that picture, I hear my father's words when we reached the top. He said, "I had no idea that you were so strong."

I had no choice. This world dictated that I had to be strong. There was no spirit who was going to carry me through my tough times. Those footsteps in the sand had to be my own, and that was as close to transcendence as I would ever get. ■

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