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Almost Somewhere

Suzanne Roberts

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SOMEWHERE

Twenty-Eight Days
on the John Muir Trail

SUZANNE ROBERTS

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For Dionne and Erika,
both strong women, each in her own way
And for women hiking everywhere

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PREFACE

After college I set off on a hike that I imagined would be a diversion from thinking about my future. The year was 1993, the United States was in a recession, and most college graduates were finding it difficult to secure jobs. Many of my friends moved back in with their parents while they figured out what to do. When I'd left for college at seventeen, I knew I would never move back home. My friend Erika suggested we hike California's John Muir Trail, and the 211-mile path seemed like a fine adventure, a good distraction from what I considered to be "real life." I couldn't imagine a twenty-eight-day hike would change my life.

We ended up picking up another girlfriend, Dionne, making it an all-women's hiking trip, but at the last minute a fourth decided to tag along, a guy we picked up in Mammoth Lakes before the trip. He didn't last for long, and if this weren't a memoir, I might have written him out completely. But I think he shows how even though I claimed to be committed to the "girl power" of an all-women's trip, I really wasn't. Not at the beginning, anyway. To some degree all of us had internalized the stereotype that we were "just girls." The need to prove ourselves within a largely male world put us in competition with each other until we finally realized what we needed was connection.

When we lost our token man and the hike became an all-women's trip, we encountered both men and women who could not believe that three twenty-two-year-old "girls" were wandering around out in the woods for weeks, miles away from paved roads, before cell phones and GPS systems, "alone."

No records exist of the number of people hiking the John Muir Trail, but the Pacific Crest Trail does keep track. In 1993, 13 percent of the people completing the PCT were women, and many of them, I imagine, hiked with male companions. Today there are more women hiking, and many more hiking with other women or solo, but still, only 26 percent of the people who completed the PCT in 2011 were women. While the PCT is much more monumental in scale than the JMT, the records do offer some information regarding the number of women backpacking versus the number of men. Anecdotally, I can say that I see many more women on the trails now, and when I hike alone, people don't react with the shock or dismay of twenty years ago.

Although I have hiked the John Muir Trail several times in the nearly twenty years since this trip took place, that initial journey, my own first summer in the Sierra, ended up altering my view of myself and my notions of the natural world. I had always felt a connection to nature, been bookish, and looked for a way to combine the two. The nature writers we read back when I was a girl and young woman were all men: Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, and of course, the father of preservation himself, John Muir. Although I had, and still have, great respect for these writers, I could not relate to the way they viewed nature and their relationship to the natural landscape. While these male writers sought autonomy, I craved community. Where they were out to conquer oceans and deserts, woods and mountains, I wanted only to connect.

John Muir says when we go out into the woods, we are really going in. I wanted to see the Sierra Nevada in all the glory that Muir did, but when I got there, I still couldn't adopt his vision, at least not wholly. Over time I realized I needed a uniquely feminine way of being in nature, of "going in," one that included fears and failings

(and even crying) but also intimacy and community. On the trail I wrote in a tiny journal every day, in search of my voice. I didn't know I would write a book at the time. I first needed to find Isabella Bird, Mary Austin, Annie Dillard, Linda Hogan, Mary Oliver, and the other women nature writers who would help me navigate the way. Since then, I have found a whole community of women writing about the natural world, and this memoir is my attempt to enter the conversation, a conversation that is finally starting to include women of color as well.

Certainly, there are now women writing guidebooks and natural histories of the Sierra Nevada, which was not the case twenty years ago. I have not found many women who have yet written personal narratives about the Sierra Nevada. Mary Austin writes about the high desert in *Land of Little Rain*, and Isabella Bird provides a short excerpt of Lake Tahoe in *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*. When I searched "women and the Sierra" online, the book that came up explored the early prostitutes of the West. A fine book, I am sure, but not exactly what I was looking for. Because of various fears of being in the outdoors alone, many women write from their own backyards. After twenty-eight days on the John Muir Trail, I moved to the Rockies and then finally settled in South Lake Tahoe, where I now write from my own backyard. That hike in 1993, my own first summer in the Sierra, led to a lifelong love of the mountains, of the place I now call home.

The twenty-two-year-old girl who set off for the mountains in 1993 is me and not-me in the way that we all carry our younger selves with us. That young self knew she needed something; she just wasn't sure what. Luckily, she hiked into the Sierra to find out.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to acknowledge John Muir, who writes about the Sierra Nevada with beauty and grace and whose reverence for the land led not only to the creation of the John Muir Trail and the Sierra Club but to the United States National Parks system. Also, without Thomas Winnett's *Guide to the John Muir Trail* we might still be wandering around out there, lost. I would also like to acknowledge Laird R. Blackwell's wildflower guides, which helped me to key out the various flowers along the trail, as well as Dr. Sue Kloss, who taught me how to identify trees. Many thanks also to Mark McLaughlin, the "storm king" for information regarding the 1992–93 snow levels. I am grateful to Centrum for a residency, where I completed the first draft of this book.

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And finally, many thanks to Dionne and Erika, who not only allowed me to use their real names but also let me tell their stories along with my own.

Although this memoir adheres to the truth of my fallible memory, some of the names of minor characters have been changed.

ALMOST SOMEW

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The John Muir Trail.

*I only went out for a walk and finally concluded
to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found
was really going in. / JOHN MUIR*

Day 1

Summer's 3 Percent

Whitney Portal (8,360) to Outpost Camp (10,080)

3.8 MILES

Going on twenty-three, I fancied myself a self-stylized naturalist, thought I knew about the wilderness, about wildness, because I had been an avid reader of John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. I enjoyed reading about Muir's exciting climb into a giant Douglas spruce during a torrential windstorm. I liked to imagine a young bearded Muir climbing into the treetops, wind whipped like a kite.

Once on the trail, however, I had my doubts.

Bent under the weight of my backpack, hiking through rain, I began to see that Muir's windstorm appealed to me in the figurative sense. Now the rain was more than metaphor. I splashed through puddles, and a stinging rain pelted my face. Soaked chaparral and spicy sagebrush layered with damp earth, with pine. A plastic poncho hid my head, and a garbage bag covered my pack. I wanted to revel in the outdoors, feel, like Muir had, a part of the wilderness; instead, I thought, *Mile 2. What have I gotten myself into this time?* We followed the trail through swaying Jeffrey pine and red fir. Our guidebook claimed that only 3 percent of the year's precipitation would fall during the summer, yet gray sheets of rain drenched the forest. I tried to forget the weather then realized if I was going to

make it, I had better do my best to accept all of it—the wind and the rain, summer’s 3 percent. Lightning cut white branches through a cloud-ribboned sky. I waited for the rumble of thunder, counting the seconds between claps to determine the distance of the storm, as I had as a child. One—one thousand, two—one thousand. Thunder seemed to shake the pewter sky. Trees wavered like indecision.

We had bragged to our friends in the bar, told them how we’d be hiking for a month, following the 211-mile John Muir Trail from Mt. Whitney to Yosemite. Completed in 1938 as a memorial to the nineteenth-century preservationist and writer, the John Muir Trail, or JMT for short, is California’s most scenic trail. The JMT follows roughly 211 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail along the spine of the Sierra Nevada, through one of the most stunning mountainscapes in the world. We imagined swimming in high alpine lakes, sunning on granite rocks, walking out into the wide blue sky. “A diet with a view,” I’d told all my friends.

I can’t remember how we initially came up with the idea to hike the trail, and certainly, it had been proposed by Erika, but once we settled on it, I believed it as fine a plan as any. It was the summer of 1993, and I had just graduated from college with a degree in biology and carried no aspirations aside from chasing boys and complaining in my journal about how they didn’t like me back. In college I could concentrate on those things, staving off the seriousness of adulthood. Though some of my friends moved back home after college, I knew I couldn’t. The night of my college graduation I went out to dinner with my parents, and my father, as usual, drank rye for dinner. My mother, in her typical manner, ignored it. After dinner we went for a walk along the cliffs on Shell Beach, and I told my father I didn’t want to see him anymore if he didn’t stop drinking. I stared out at the sea, refusing to look at him, making him feel all the more a failure. Did I think my words were cruel then? Or was I merely acting out of self-protection? Certainly, I was thinking only of myself and my need to escape. At the time I didn’t know that my

father was undergoing chemotherapy for leukemia. I didn't have any idea that within the next year he would be dead.

So, I adopted John Muir as a sort of father figure, a ghost I could manipulate into a benevolent man who loved flowers and gray squirrels, windstorms and water ouzels. With a copy of Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* in my ridiculously heavy backpack, I set off to hike the John Muir Trail.

Backpacking seemed like it would come naturally to me, at least in theory. Even though I grew up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, I had always enjoyed playing in the dirt, collecting insects, planting gardens. I joined our college wilderness club and liked to describe myself as "outdoorsy." I thought, like some of the male nature writers I had read, that Mother Nature was a kind grandmotherly woman who smelled like oatmeal cookies and would hug me to her soft bosom and make everything okay. With the idea of both Grandmother Nature and Papa Muir on my side, it's no wonder I embraced the idea of hiking the John Muir Trail. People had asked me what I planned to do upon graduation, and I now had an answer: why, I was hiking the John Muir Trail. The trip became my postcollege plan, a vacation from considering grown-up concerns.

While Erika and I were sitting at Pismo Beach, figuring out the food drops and our daily mileage, the trip seemed romantic—like riding off into the sunset with a gorgeous cowboy without ever having to pick up dirty socks or touch a toilet seat. The numbers—the nine mountain passes over eleven thousand feet, the forty-eight thousand feet of net elevation gain—seemed like minor details, unreal and hazy like the plot of a dream. So, to prepare for the trip, I read Muir's effusive prose, certain that I could follow in his footsteps, learn to see the Sierra as he did, a glorious range of light.

The original plan was that after graduation Erika and I would set off on our own to hike the John Muir Trail. Erika and I, the two most unlikely picks for our sorority—neither of us had a clue which fork to use first at a dinner party—gravitated toward each other on pledge welcome night and became fast friends. We both had an

affinity for long-haired boys, the Grateful Dead, skiing, and the outdoors in general. That's where the similarities stopped. She was, and still is, a mystery to me. The fastest, strongest, most athletic woman I have ever met, Erika sometimes seemed more machine than girl, whereas I could usually be found bumbling around in circles, certainly daydreaming, most often lost. Erika's world, however, didn't include the nonsense of daydreams; she was practical to the extreme, and for her the world presented no more mystery than a solvable algebra equation. She didn't see obstacles, only challenges. And I admired her. She represented what I wanted in myself—the ability to let go of the uncertainties that made my head spin and see the world as a controlled system, one that I could navigate, if only I tried harder.

Erika, built like a deer, seemed equipped to spend the summer in the Sierra, her legs long and lanky, her body hard and angular. With her long blonde braids, she looked like a Viking woman warrior. I took two clumsy steps to her deliberate one and felt hungry hours before she started to think about lunch. Erika had been backpacking since she could walk and planned a whole list of long-distance trips—the Tahoe-Yosemite Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, the Appalachian Trail, El Camino de Santiago. The John Muir Trail, she said, was just the beginning.

Erika wanted to complete the trail for a sense of accomplishment, for bragging rights. She also thought it might get her in with a mountain man, which at the time didn't seem wholly unreasonable to me. She had joined our college logging team, her specialty the ax throw, for the same reasons—to boast and meet men. On the trail Erika wanted to hike at least twelve miles a day. In her mind she had arrived to Yosemite before setting one boot on dirt at Whitney Portal. From the beginning she talked about the trip as if it were in the past tense. When we applied for our permits, she told the ranger, "We'll be in Yosemite by the end of the month." At the trailhead, she told fellow hikers, "We are just beginning the 240 miles we plan to hike. We're hiking out for our food, so we are going to have hiked 240 miles, not 211." Erika had the ability to enjoy the

romantic notions of a long-distance hike without ever dwelling on the discomfort of the present moment.

I knew that hiking for a month alone in the wilderness with Erika would most likely kill me. In part that's why I agreed to invite Dionne, who didn't know the first thing about hiking or camping, but that fact hid among the secrets I intended to keep from Erika. With short blonde hair, close-set blue eyes, and a ninety-eight-pound frame, Dionne resembled a pixie. Although she lacked experience in the outdoors, Dionne was all grace. Her heels tapped the earth like a bird's, the toes following, always pointing outward. A trained ballerina, she had danced her entire life. Aside from my not wanting to be alone with Erika, I invited Dionne because her boyfriend, Geoff, had begged me to bring her along. We had been college housemates, and he thought this trip might function as a cure.

"If she goes on the trip," he had said, "maybe it will help her get better."

"Maybe," I answered, "but no way. She's not coming."

Geoff sat on my bed and started to cry.

I told myself it was a good cause and at the same time—the selfish truth of altruism—a way to make myself feel better because I could be so helpful; more than that, however, I couldn't stand to see a man cry. I had seen my father cry only once. And he was drunk, making both the drinking and the crying frightening. I couldn't do anything to stop my father from crying, but I could do something to stop Geoff. So I said yes.

Geoff whisked Dionne off to the sporting goods store, outfitted her with gear, and handed her over like a kitten we'd adopted from the pound. She had never been backpacking, or even hiking, in her life. And there she was, on the first day of our month-long trip. Rather than dwell on the true gravity of the situation, I thought about myself—what a good Samaritan I was—and about my reward: I would no longer have to hike alone with Erika.

Erika and Dionne hardly knew each other before the trip, so I decided it best that Erika didn't know about Dionne's lack of experience. Or her illness. Erika had looked a little suspicious when

Dionne pulled out all her shiny gear, so I quickly said, “Dionne got all new gear for this trip,” as if old, well-worn hiking boots and backpacks were squirreled away in her closet at home. I saw Dionne as an ally, so I acted out of selfishness. I didn’t think about how dangerous the hike could have been for her. I didn’t think about how the trip that Erika had so carefully organized could have been jeopardized.

And once Dionne joined our group, the three of us bragged about “girl power” and how it would be us three women, out in the wilderness “alone.”

That didn’t last long.

We didn’t really know Jesse—we picked him up in a bar three weeks before the hike. We were in Mammoth Lakes, planning our trip, and met him through our friend Jason’s stepbrother Neil. Erika, Neil, Jesse, and I ended up skiing together at Mammoth Mountain on closing day, the Fourth of July. Jesse was a twenty-five-year-old snowboarder, one of those guys who always said things like “It’s cool” and “No worries.” Being a friend of a friend’s stepbrother, he was technically a stranger. At the bar after skiing, I told Jesse about our plan to hike the John Muir Trail, and after a few beers he decided to join us. And I encouraged him. “We’ve planned it all,” I said. “All you have to do is show up. It’s going to be a blast.” Maybe Erika didn’t want to spend a month alone with me and Dionne either, because she agreed to it.

In my twenty-two-year-old hormone-addled mind, a man’s value was directly proportional to his relative attractiveness, but with Jesse’s lanky body, pimple-scarred face, and swoopy, sun-bleached snowboarder hair, try as I might, I didn’t find him attractive. So this once it wasn’t the fling factor. I thought having a man around in the wilderness might come in handy, proving I hadn’t been quite as committed to girl power as I had let on. I liked the idea of an all-women’s trip, yet still, something in me felt relieved when Jesse decided to join us. Even then, I hated myself for feeling it.

Also, because of the secrets about Dionne I held from Erika, I

hoped Jesse would function as a diversion. Jesse, however, imagined a little hiking, some fishing—fun and relaxation. He clearly had no idea what he'd gotten himself into.

Our Day 1 Plan, making it the six miles to Trail Camp, proved ambitious, considering our late start, the elevation gain, the rain, and our heavy packs. I had already nicknamed my pack “Big Fucking Heinous Load,” “Big Heiny” for short, because I couldn’t even get her on without either sitting on a rock to do it or else having someone else help me.

Mile 1 rated wet but novel. I enjoyed the sagey smell of earth, the sounds of water filtering through the canopy above. The trail twined through a mixed pine and fir forest, into the cool, misty air. I tried to remember the names of trees, looked around for wildflowers, watched the rivulets of water stream down our trail. I felt self-sufficient, smug even, carrying everything I would need on my very own back. I didn’t feel like quitting.

Not until mile 2.

That’s when raindrops snapped at my face like rubber bands. My wet bangs hung into my eyes, making me feel like a soggy sheep-dog. That’s when I had that feeling of panic, rising like acid from my stomach: *What was I doing out there?* Water puddled on the trail, soaking into my cotton socks. I tried to keep from feeling sorry for myself by imagining conversations with John Muir. He would have said something about the “glorious” rainfall or the “noble” roar of the wind. I tried to see it that way.

“Isn’t this so great?” Erika turned around and asked. “The perfect start.” With her poncho draped over her large external-frame pack, she looked like a giant turtle. She claimed that the old-fashioned external frames were superior to the new internal frame packs. No sweat on my back, she had said, and I can find everything right away. I had only worn a backpack like that once, when I first went backpacking a few years earlier and had rented one; I felt like I was carrying a refrigerator down the trail, so I quickly went out

and bought an internal-frame pack. The salesman called it “sleek,” though on the trail I would not describe anything about myself as sleek.

The pines creaked to the wind’s rhythm. Muir says he “never saw a discontented tree. They grip the ground as though they liked it, and though fast rooted they travel about as far as we do.” At my pace the trees seemed to be traveling faster than I did. By mile 3 I wished I no longer had Muir’s prose in my head. Day 1, and I wanted nothing more to do with Papa Muir’s positive attitude. The gray mist turned to true rain, and I wiped water from my eyes. I gave up trying to avoid the puddles on the trail. I knew it rained in the mountains, yet somehow that detail had never made it into my picture of hiking the trail.

The trail followed Lone Pine Creek, and I watched as the raindrops vanished into the tumbling water. “I’m a little hungover,” Dionne said to me. Her face glistened. I nodded, not because I felt hungover but because I imagined her face shined wet with tears, not rain—something I could relate to.

The night before, we had gone out to the natural hot springs with Jesse and his roommates. After only one wine cooler Dionne laughed and swayed about like a dinghy in wind. We toasted our upcoming trip. Erika and Dionne went into the springs naked. I wore my bathing suit and consequently ranked the least interesting. In truth I was probably the most likely to engage in a little last-minute fling before our foray into the forest, but I had already learned that nice girls weren’t supposed to do those types of things, so whenever possible, I feigned modesty.

Like many young women, I wanted more than anything to attract men. I tried to fill the space inside of me with flirtations and flings and, truth be told, fucking. I felt sure that if I persuaded a man to love me, I would feel complete, worthy. Of course, like many young women do, I equated sex with love, yet the second I slept with someone, he inevitably lost interest. And like many young women, this never stopped failing to surprise me. At the time I didn’t have any idea what a cliché I was. All I knew was that the way I went about

relationships left me feeling empty, like an abandoned suitcase left in the attic.

After a while I tried, not always successfully, to change tactics. Though I failed to question the impulse behind my desire, I finally figured out that men would be more interested if they couldn't see it all up front. Why give away the entire shop, as my mother would say, in the storefront?

I had studied biology and tried to make sense of the human dating world through the animal world—something like the opposite of anthropocentrism. I told myself, the male peacock and mallard were adorned with the fancy plumage; the male lion and buck endowed with the ostentatious mane and horns. In biology the females aren't flashy, and the males are quick to fight over them. By the end of my college career I had created my own dating-by-Darwin theory. So that night I soaked in the hot sulfur water, sipping a bottle of Zima, watching steam rise while the sun sank into the folds of the mountains. I hoped someone would notice me, but to no one's surprise save my own, no one did—not even the guy I had briefly dated.

Meanwhile, Erika and Dionne posed for photographs, black silhouettes against the Owens River Valley and brindled sky, all feathers and flash. The guy I had briefly dated seemed to be flirting with Erika. I told myself he spelled *t-r-o-u-b-l-e* anyway, and Erika knew that. I can't remember if I felt smug or jealous. Probably a mixture of both. Either way, my relationship with Erika had always been complicated. Too often we ended up competing for the attention of a man who didn't really want either one of us. Rather than displaying a true sort of girl power, we turned on each other. I was passive-aggressive to her aggressive. Because of the various jealousies in our friendship, a former boyfriend had once told me he thought Erika liked me, that she was a lesbian. I told him that, unfortunately, it wasn't that simple.

At Outpost Camp Jesse asked, "Should we stop here?" Rain washed over the trail, through the creek, and into a waterfall. We could hardly hear him. The rumble of water echoed like a passing train.

“Here. Stop. For tonight. Now,” he yelled. We were supposed to make it to Trail Camp the first night according to the Day 1 Plan. We were only at Outpost Camp, just 3.8 miles in.

“Yes, yes, yes.” It seemed too cold for rain yet somehow wasn’t. We huddled under a canopy of lodgepole pine and red fir. I felt sure more than 3 percent of the year’s precipitation had already soaked into my skin. I wanted to stop too, but I didn’t dare say a word. I knew all about the Day 1 Plan. Six miles on day 1. That was that. I stood still, shouldering Big Heiny, listening to the wind and rain, waiting to see what would happen.

“We have to stick to our agenda,” Erika said. “We need to stay on track.” Dionne’s face glowed red like a radish. Jesse crossed his arms over his raincoat, making it evident he wouldn’t be moving anytime soon. Would Erika make us hike on without him?

It wasn’t in Erika’s nature, like it was mine, to swerve from a plan. The main reason I had agreed to hike the John Muir Trail with her was that with Erika I knew it would happen. Even my mother had said, “Without Erika, you and Dionne would be wandering around the wilderness in circles.”

“Well, you do what you want. I’m stopping here,” Jesse said. He let his pack drop to the wet earth. Dionne and I waited there like two aspens connected by a single root, until Erika finally agreed. Jesse had already come in handy.

I dropped Big Heiny with a thud, and I felt light, as if I were floating. I had used that cliché about a load being lifted from my shoulders, but I don’t think I ever really appreciated exactly what that felt like. Psychological burdens may weigh on us, yet in reality they are forgotten once we are faced with actual physical ones. Maybe that’s why we choose to carry the physical burdens—they take our minds off the intangible, the real troubles in life.

“Dionne and I will sleep in my tent. You and Jesse sleep in yours,” Erika said. I pulled out the tent poles and stopped for a minute to watch Jesse unpack. I tried to find him attractive. A fling could take my mind off all the walking. A little excitement, and I might not care so much about the rain, the switchbacks, or Big Heiny. We set up

the tents, ate granola bars, and got into our sleeping bags. Before I could talk myself into Jesse, he fell asleep.

Wet chaparral and pine filled the evening air. The metronome of rain and Jesse's snoring created a weird trancelike song. I listened for a while, feeling a yearning I couldn't name, unable to sleep. Then the panic began rising again like floodwaters. Determined to push it back, I turned on my headlamp and pulled out my paperback anthology of Muir's writings and my journal. Muir says, "The weather of spring and summer in the middle region of the Sierra is usually well flecked with rains and light dustings of snow, most of which are far too obviously joyful and life-giving to be regarded as storms." I tried to imagine the rain and wind as joyful and life-giving. I turned onto my side to write in my journal: "August 2, 1993: The joyous rain welcomed us today into the forest." I sketched a tiny picture of our camp by looking out the mesh window: Jeffrey pine, granite, manzanita, water, red fir, sky. Even though I couldn't see it, I added a moon because I knew it was full. Day 1 and already lying in my journal.