

A Beautiful Place

I try to go every year: an annual pilgrimage into the wilderness, leaving behind the clamor of traffic, turning off the beeper, ignoring the voicemail, shrinking the world to the pounding of my heart and the warmth of the sun on my legs – and expanding it to embrace wide hilltop vistas, gushing streams and a thousand twinkling stars in the midnight sky. Mountain backpacking has been my passion since I was in my twenties.

I missed a few years when my daughter was young. We made one trip when Abby was a toddler, with her in a backpack carrier and everything else for an overnight crammed into another pack. But then she grew too big and we had to wait until she could join us on her own two legs. She managed 3-mile day hikes by the age of six. When she was eight, we took her on a carefully selected overnight trip, with another family who had a daughter the same age. The trail started at 10,000 feet – no endless slogging up switchbacks in deep forest – and had magically-placed lakes every three-quarters of a mile. There were enough adults in the party to allow the girls to carry small day packs containing only a sleeping bag, a few snacks and one permitted stuffed animal.

I knew it had been a success when after our return to civilization, I heard Abby explain backpacking to a school friend. "Well," she announced in earnest, "it's when you go for a long hike and you take all your things with you, so when you get to a really beautiful place, you don't have to turn around and go home, you get to stay."

In the following years we made gradually longer one-night trips, until at age thirteen she was ready for the real thing: a three-day trip to Thousand Island Lake in the Eastern Sierras. By then our family included our Cairn terrier Kieran and he came along too. As we made our final

preparations in the parking lot, tightening out bootlaces and adjusting our packs, he ran back and forth in excitement, sniffing at the Ponderosa pines, kicking at the dirt with his hind legs, stirring up a cloud of hot Sierra dust. He clearly sensed that this was no ordinary walk. Before heaving my huge pack onto my shoulders, I stashed his leash and the car keys deep into one of the pockets; we wouldn't need those for three days.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the pristine mountain air. Eight miles to our destination, according to the sign at the trailhead. Eight miles to our lake, nestled beneath twelve-thousand foot peaks. We were off! After days of preparation, measuring portions of oatmeal and noodles into ziplock bags, packing tiny plastic containers with brown sugar and olive oil, we finally hit the trail.

My delight at being back in the wilderness was amplified by watching Kieran relish what it meant for him. He could run free. Not just for half an hour at the off-leash dog park, but for days at a time. He could run ahead to explore wherever his nose took him. He could leap like a deer through meadows of wildflowers; or roll on his back in an isolated patch of snow; bury his nose in a gopher hole or lie in a babbling brook to cool off. I couldn't help smiling. His body exuded pure joy, his tail held high in delight.

We met other dogs on the trail, but they were at least three times his size. The sight of a fifteen-pound Cairn terrier holding his own in the backcountry turned heads. But he did just fine on his 8-inch legs. And his endurance helped spur Abby along whenever she faltered on a steep part of the trail: we had to catch up with Kieran. He would run ahead, briefly out of sight, but return to check on us, cocking his head at a jaunty angle as if to say "Come on, you guys! Don't you know there're some great smells up here?"

At one point, more than six miles in, we made a wrong turn and lost the trail for a while. When we were finally back on our intended route, but still with a mile to go, we came upon another group's campsite. Kieran spotted an open tent, sneaked in and collapsed onto a fluffy red sleeping bag, as if to say "Enough already". It took several dog cookies to coax him onward.

Abby started to whine too. She had to be egged on with a combination of songs, stories, bribes – and human cookies. For the final ascent up to the lake, I ended up taking her pack as well as mine. She was already carrying almost a full load for that trip. I struggled up the final incline saddled up like a mule, her pack in front, mine on my back.

And then, after one final turn in the trail, the lake came into view: glistening in the bright afternoon sun, with snow-capped Banner Peak rising majestically beyond, and dozens of tiny rock islands dotted across the surface. We turned left to explore the meandering shore, and found the perfect spot to camp, in a grassy meadow sprinkled with wildflowers, with a sheltered place for our 'kitchen' tucked behind a smooth granite boulder, no other campers in sight. Here was the pay-off, the long haul forgotten as we soaked our feet in the clear cold water and stretched out on the warm rocks. Kieran discovered his second wind and established himself on top of the boulder for guard duty, ears perked and nose primed, ensuring that no one invaded his new-found territory.

We had reached a beautiful place, no doubt about that, and we got to stay. We resisted the urge to drag our tired muscles into the tent as soon as we'd finished dinner. We stayed up long enough to watch the splendor of the Milky Way streaked across the black sky.

We've made trips every year since then. Abby is now a twenty-year old athlete and she charges ahead of me on the trail. I don't want to gloat – because really, how much control do any

of us have over these things? But I do consider it one of my triumphs of parenting that my daughter not only loves backpacking as much as I do, but that she still chooses to go with me.

Kieran, sadly, no longer joins us. He's fourteen years old now; over ninety in dog years. Heart and lungs in great shape, the vet says. And still capable of brief bursts of energy. But most of his walks are slow meanders around the block, sniffing every single blade of grass, as if there could be significant changes from one day to the next. Once a week, he'll venture further afield, as we hike two to three miles in the East Bay hills. He trots along behind, slowly bringing up the rear. No more dashing ahead for him. He seems to enjoy these expeditions, but he'll be stiff the next day, zonked out on the couch. He rises gingerly from a lying position, limping as he takes his first few steps. He has prescription-strength dog Ibuprofen, which helps.

As for me, I turned sixty last year. Blessed with good health, I am in denial about my age most of the time. Inside, I feel thirty. I hike and bike and stay trim and can touch my toes. When I catch my reflection, I refuse to recognize those grey hairs, neck wrinkles and liver spots as mine. And I continue my backpacking trips every August.

But that's when I *can* tell that my body is aging. I still carry a forty-pound pack, but six miles is about my limit, not ten, certainly not twelve. It's much, much harder for me to go from zero to ten thousand feet and catch my breath on the switchbacks. "Wait for me at the top," I pant, as Abby races ahead. I slowly bring up the rear. My hips ache after a long climb uphill, and my knees complain on a steep descent. I have prescription-strength human Ibuprofen, which helps.

As I plan this year's route – (go back to the incomparable Thousand Island Lake, or finally do the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne?) – I realize with a start that I have only a finite number of these trips ahead of me. I want to continue as long as possible, but realistically I have

what? Ten more years of this, at most? Not the endless, infinite possibilities of youth. My mortality is suddenly right there in front of me. A day will come when I can't do this any more. When I'll have to stay home, zonked out on the couch I guess, listening to Abby tell me about a trip she takes to a beautiful place – with friends her own age.

Better chose wisely, and make every hike count.