

Wilderness Boundary

By Susan Dragoo

Four-point-two miles. At my pace, that's a 38-minute run back home on the flatlands. I had little concern about a hike of this distance, even at 10,000 feet higher elevation. Reality is dealing my confidence a blow.

We are cold, wet and worried when we finally spot the remains of the silver mine. The sun is low in the sky. There is no doorman at the shack we dub the "Ritz-Carlton Yellow Jacket." Ghosts of miners long dead and vestigial spirits of present-day backpackers comprise the only welcoming party.

We climb over the rotting threshold, taking care to avoid a gaping hole in the wood floor. Rain blows in, around the remnants of the roof and windows. It doesn't matter that there is no plush carpet, no down comforter, no room service. A luxury hotel could be no more welcome at this moment.

Johnny is starting to shiver. It was a mistake to give him the option not to don his rain gear. Three ancient iron bedsteads . . . still showing chips of white paint and still with springs attached . . . are grouped at one end of the shack. We remove our 13-year-old's wet outer gear and put him in his sleeping bag on one of these. No king-size beds, but we are able to get him up off the floor . . . and the wet ground. As he begins to warm up and hypothermia seems to have been avoided for the moment, we look for a dry area to stow our packs in the old bunkhouse.

High in the rugged and remote San Juan Range of the Colorado Rockies, the Yellow Jacket Mine is our first night's camp on a three-day backpack of the Bear Creek Trail. The 15.5-mile trail circles around Ouray on the east from south to north, through the Uncompahgre Wilderness and over passes exceeding 12,000 feet. In spite of its long-ago abandonment by silver miners, the charms of this shack, 4.2 miles and 3,000 feet of elevation from the trailhead, have not escaped the notice of hikers. Perhaps a third of the floor is missing, boards having been ripped up for firewood and used for

construction of a makeshift picnic table in the corner. I silently thank hikers gone before when I find "Jif to Go" peanut butter stashed in a recess of the wall, near the bear rope. Ambrosia. The day's hike was taxing and the nourishment is welcome. I hesitate briefly and check the expiration date. "It's good." I peel the foil off the plastic container and use an oatmeal cookie as a dipper.

By this time, it is pouring down rain. Bill is trying to start a fire just up the mountainside. Everything flammable is wet, but soon my husband has a roaring camp fire going among the pines, and we are drawn away from the shack. We set up our tents as close as possible to the fire and its relative warmth and safety.

I shift my body, trying to find a comfortable spot on the damp boulder. My Gore-Tex jacket shuts out some of the night's chill but still I scoot my feet closer to the crackling fire. As the flames die down, we add another wet tree limb, hoping it will catch. Thankfully, it does. The renewed heat, at first welcome, quickly becomes too much to bear. I back away and the smoke follows, stinging my eyes. It's the law of the camp fire . . . wherever you go, smoke will follow.

Occasional raindrops squeeze through the protection of the tall pines sheltering our tiny camp. They splatter on the tent, and a few find their way under my collar and down my neck. We try to read to each other by the lights of the fire and our anemic headlamps, but the rushing waters of the snowmelt stream drown out our words.

Our camp is a minuscule, glowing island in the vast darkness of the Uncompahgre Wilderness.

I toss and turn all night on my thin sleeping pad, trying to stay level on the mountain slope. A splitting headache awakens me . . . altitude sickness. I had failed to hydrate adequately, trying to minimize rest stops which require the tedious removal of my pack. I should have gone to the trouble, but never considered the possibility of altitude sickness.

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Perhaps there's no real comfort at 11,000 feet.

The night is long, but finally the sun rises on our second day and we emerge, trying not to touch the cold, wet surface of the tent. I am eventually renewed with water, coffee and oatmeal, altitude sickness staved off for the moment. Tent and sleeping bags dried out and repacked, we cross Bear Creek, leaving behind the pines and aspens, ascending into an alpine meadow strewn with lupine and daisies. Atop the rocky saddle ahead we spot a cairn directing us to the next section of trail, leading to American Flats. The sky is almost indigo at this altitude and the high clouds are heavy. More rain awaits us, as do the breathtaking beauty of these mountains and the adventure of making our way on our own two feet. As we approach American Flats we find the Wilderness Boundary marker, prohibiting motorized vehicles and bicycles beyond that point. The fact that we have no cell phone service is another indicator of our isolation.

"This is the hardest thing I've ever done," I tell Bill as we climb, packs heavy, quadriceps muscles burning. Although I say it with confidence that we'll meet the challenge, I am surprised to feel this way. We had thought ourselves prepared and competent hikers, but the journey is more serious and demanding than I had imagined. The trail maps seemed so simple and clear viewed from my armchair, but now seem a total misrepresentation. What resonate are disregarded warnings about the trail's difficulty. I realize that, like childbirth and fine wine, the only way to understand a trail is to experience it. I am reminded of John Steinbeck's words in the opening chapter of Travels with Charley:

" . . . A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us. Tour masters, schedules, reservations, brass-bound and inevitable, dash

themselves to wreckage on the personality of the trip. Only when this is recognized can the blown-in-the-glass bum relax and go along with it. Only then do the frustrations fall away. In this a journey is like marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it. I feel better now, having said this, although only those who have experienced it will understand it."

Understand it I do. It is the third and last day of our hike. Our second night, we camped above treeline in a thunderstorm, forced by darkness to stop before reaching shelter, our pace slowed by bouts of altitude sickness. Our vulnerability did not escape us. The truth dawned on me while huddling under a lean-to trying to cook dinner with a Jet Boil stove as it began to hail on our naked campsite at nearly 13,000 feet. It was emphasized by the storm's assault of what seemed a terribly flimsy tent as we tried to stay dry. We hadn't thought of ourselves as serious hikers, but the personality of this hike was indeed quite serious.

"It's supposed to be all downhill from here." "Surely we're almost there." We tire of saying and even thinking these things as we near the end of the trail. Eventually, Bill spies the sign that signifies our arrival at the Bridge of Heaven. We stop to rest and admire the panoramic view of surrounding mountain peaks from the barren outcropping. But we are impatient to move on. We begin our descent, soon realizing that the 5.5 miles down the mountain has its own challenges. The screaming pain in our knees heightens our joy, seeing our car as we approach trail's end.

As we are concluding this wilderness adventure, we focus solely on availing ourselves of the joys of civilization. Food, in particular. We are tired of dehydrated eggs. And more so of peanut butter. "I want a steak!" "I want red wine!" "I want to sleep in a bed!"

After baths, a meal, and a soak in the Ouray

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Hot Springs, we start to process our experience. We know we appreciate these comforts of civilization all the more intensely because of the (admittedly self-imposed) hardship of the past three days. We came here to test ourselves and to be a part of the wilderness, to see and touch the rocky peaks, to experience the elements. We have no intention of living this one, this only life vicariously.

On the long drive back to our home on the plains, we talk about our next adventure. We know that Steinbeck is right and no matter how much we plan, the trip, whose personality we do not yet know, will indeed take us. The mystery of that only compounds the appeal.