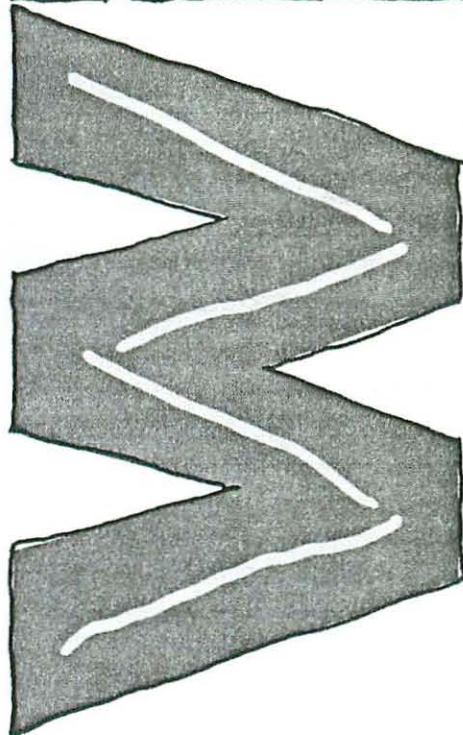
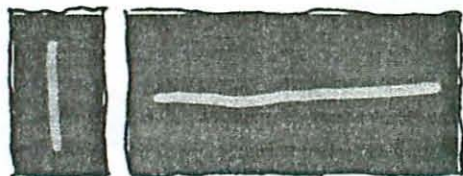
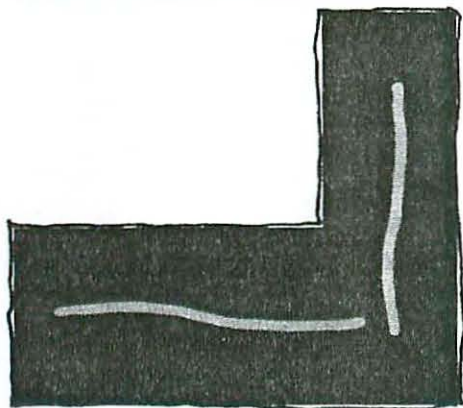
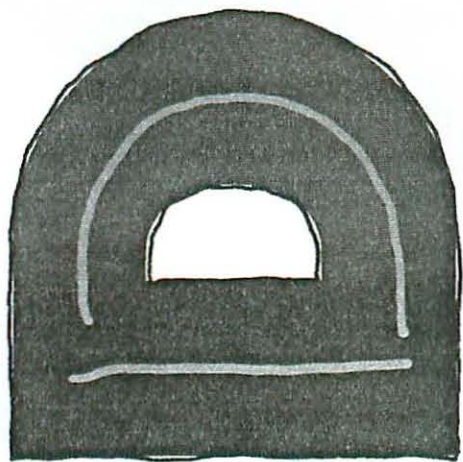


# SOMETHING



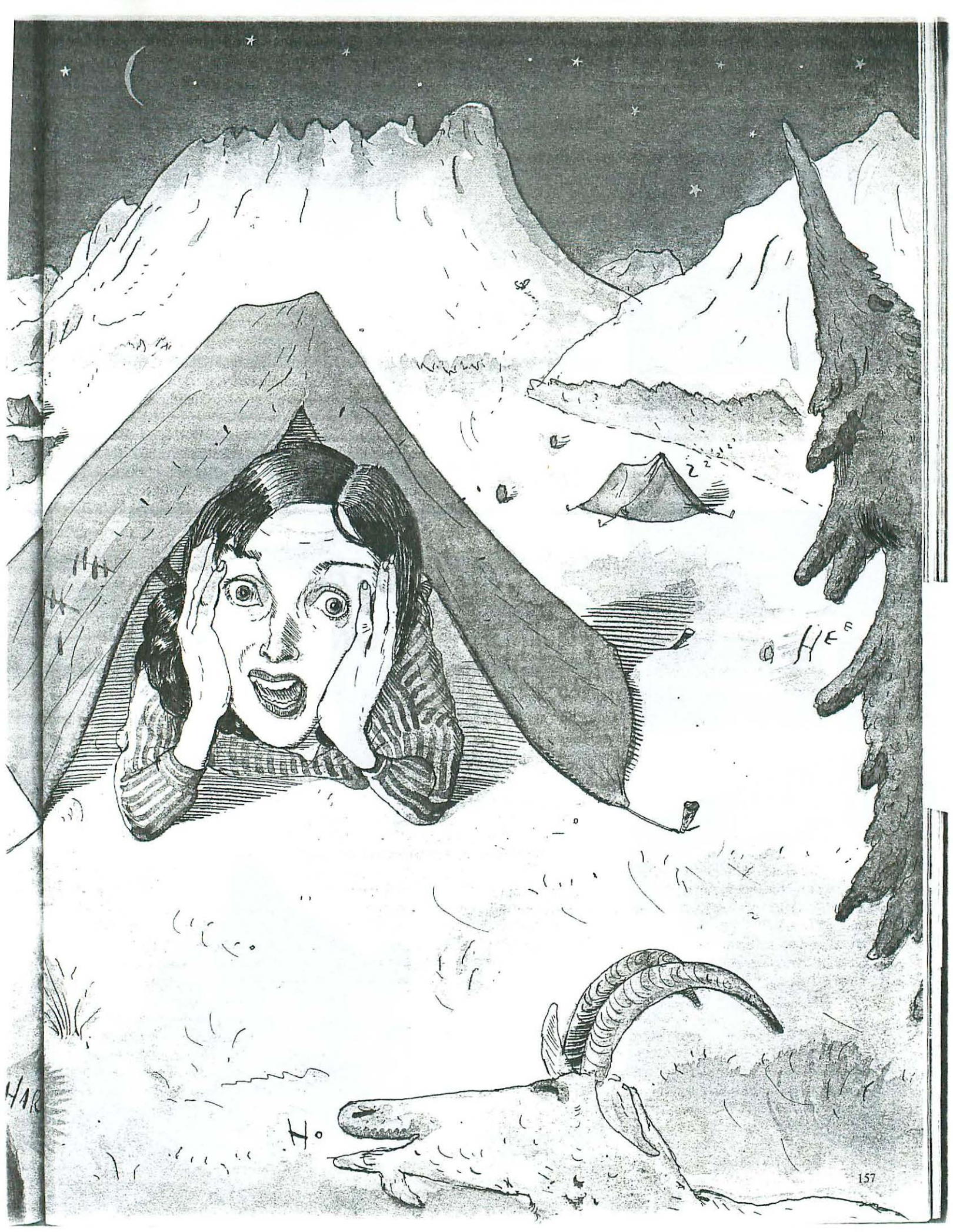
What price total  
attitude adjustment? The  
National Outdoor  
Leadership School spent  
two weeks trying to teach

## TRACY YOUNG

how to survive the  
rigors of outdoor life in  
Wyoming's Wind River  
Range. She learned that  
"minimum impact"  
means packing only a  
bandanna and a pair of  
shorts; in a group of  
twelve, hygiene is the  
least of a person's  
problems; and the  
wilderness is nothing  
compared with the  
challenges of newly  
empowered personalities

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
BARRY BLITT**







IT'S TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, AND THE SILENT night feels as if it might go on forever. Stars, scattered in a gigantic arc, look so close they could be the ceiling of the Hayden Planetarium, and the mountains, thick with lodgepole pine, rise on all sides, dark and suffocating—which may have something to do with the fact that I can't breathe.

I am having a heart attack, I think to myself, lying in a sleeping bag under

a rain fly, still dressed in the clothes I wore all day, including a baseball cap to which I have cunningly affixed a scrap of mosquito net. Yes, I am having a heart attack, and I am going to die out here in some godforsaken mountain range with a bunch of strangers who couldn't give a shit.

Nor is this even my worst fantasy. My worst fantasy is that I have miscalculated and will get my period during this excursion and be date raped (*pace* Camille Paglia) by a grizzly. I couldn't handle that. A heart attack, on the other hand, is a domesticated kind of horror show. It can happen on a golf course, just from looking at those clothes.

As luck would have it, I'm not dying, I'm suffering from altitude sickness. Thirty-six hours ago I flew from New York City to Lander, Wyoming, Rocky Mountain headquarters of the National Outdoor Leadership School, 5,500 feet above sea level. Now I am nine thousand feet up in the Wind River Range with a splitting headache and a lurching stomach and lungs that squeak like an old cracked leather bellows. Did I mention the trembling beginnings of an anxiety attack? All I want to do is sleep it off, which, I recall reading, is a really bad idea because your respiration slows, making the symptoms

Point, North Carolina, who still looks like a Tri Delt—had gotten up in the middle of the night to take a leak and, concerned about appearing immodest, had wandered away from her tent until she was lost. And there she sat, wailing, until a strapping young fellow from the Coast Guard answered her SOS. Gray-egg.

This trip is not your ordinary vacation; it is a two-week course in leadership for people over twenty-five called "Rocky Mountain Wilderness." After breakfast, there is a brief lesson in fire dispersal. Rob and Tod, the instructors, inspect our tent sites and then we split into two groups, shoulder our packs, and set out, single file, down along the creek.

Our new campsite is a little over three miles away as the crow flies, and the elevation gain is a gradual twelve hundred feet. It's what they call an "acclimatization hike," but unhappily I have not been fastidious about going to the gym; in fact, when friends asked what I was doing to get in shape for the trip, I told them I was eating as many cheeseburgers as possible to prepare for a two-week diet of nuts and berries and astronaut food. Consequently, I discover rather quickly that wearing a fifty-pound pack is not exactly the same as schlepping two

Now I am nine thousand feet up with a **SPLITTING** he.

more severe. So I am trying to stay awake, coaching myself—"in/out, in/out, in/out"—breathing shallow, pitiful little gasps. Then I hear it: a bleating somewhere off in the viscous darkness. "Hay-ulp! Hay-ulp!"

Oh, sweet Jesus, some poor thing really is being fondled by Uncle Smokey. I strain to listen, but I'm startled by the rustle of twigs—something's scratching around in the packs *right outside my tent*. I pull the sleeping bag over my head and wait, feeling my heart bang in my chest. Finally the creature moves off. Then I hear the voice again from the general direction of the trail. "Hay-ulp! Hay-ulp!" it calls out, causing every hair on my head to stand up. "Hay-ulp! Gray-egg!"

Greg? Greg belongs to another tent group camped not thirty yards from mine. And the voice? I calm down and poke my head out of the bag. Then I recognize it: Unmistakably female. Unmistakably southern. Of course. It's Becky being attacked. I pull my bag back up around my ears and go to sleep.

Just past 6 A.M. the sun begins to freckle the forest floor. By 7, we've taken down four rain flies, stuffed over six hundred pounds of gear into twelve external-frame packs, loaded the pack goats, and learned that Becky—sweet Becky from High

shopping bags from the Jefferson Market. Not that it's so heavy; it's unwieldy, like carrying a refrigerator. And, it occurs to me, as I wedge myself between two slender trees, this is what it must be like to be really, really fat.

One or two hours crawl by like slugs. Every forty-five minutes or so, we break for ten. Scarf trail mix. Refill our water bottles. Check our feet for hot spots while Rob draws on his knuckles in one last attempt to teach us how to read a topo map.

Another hour expires in the afternoon heat. I eat a Power Bar, mistaking it for food instead of plumber's helper. Trouble ensues.

During the last three-quarters of a mile, the terrain changes to a continuous ascent, and every step is an argument: My legs say yes, my lungs violently disagree. I am moving maybe six inches at a time, and I am wondering, aloud, what would possess anyone to do this for fun. It is hard. It is boring. It is unbelievable that there is such a thing as a backpacking Barbie—the outfits on this trek make sanitation workers' uniforms look like Versace.

By the time we reach a jumble of huge boulders and piney hollows at the base of Roaring Fork Mountain, it is nearly

dusk. My tentmates, Orie and Nancy, have already picked a campsite, so we string up the rain fly, fudging the knots, and stash the packs underneath. Nancy goes to the stream to fetch water in the big collapsible jug, and Orie humps three duffel bags of rations and a portable gas stove up to a rock ledge fifteen feet above the tent to set up our kitchen.

I, meanwhile, have been revisited by mountain sickness and am too nauseated to do much more than crawl out from under the fly and sit on a rock. Which does not impress my tentmates. They grumble as they fix dinner. Some wilderness adventure—this is the life of a fifties housewife: never-ending chores, no laborsaving devices, ungrateful children.

"Do you, uh, eat out a lot?" ventures Nancy, in a stab at diplomacy.

Clearly, I will have to be their scullery maid to make it up to them. Scrub every pot with dirt and pine cones. Maybe I should offer to wash their clothes. Set their hair. Or maybe I should just get my own cable TV show called *Wilderness Bitch*.

After dinner the entire group reconvenes around the fire. The sun has retreated, and we huddle close to the flames and lean back against the rock, shivering in our synthetic fleece. Eight female and two male students, and two male instructors. Late

water-loving ad execs sink like down-market soap on a regular basis. As for scaling Mount Everest—let's just say that in the history of land management, ours might well be called the Extreme Chicalithic Period. The question then becomes whether an increasing number of tree-huggers and macho fitness fanatics can reach nirvana in the backcountry without turning it into another circle of hell.

Enter the National Outdoor Leadership School, founded in 1965 by renowned mountaineer Paul Petzoldt and dedicated to teaching both traditional wilderness skills and a rigorously applied philosophy of minimum impact.

"Minimum impact," like most ideals about simplicity, can be endlessly embellished. At NOLS it has spawned three priorities, the first being care for the environment. What this means in a practical sense is that campers are taught to disturb the natural setting as little as possible. No soap or toothpaste in the streams. Garbage is packed out. Campfires are confined to firepans. Would you believe it if I told you that NOLS students are discouraged from wearing bright neon clothing in the bush?

Which brings us to NOLS's second priority: care for your equipment. A short walk from the school is an old lumber-



## headache and lungs that **SQUEAK** like an old bellows

twenties to late forties. Born and raised and living now all over the country. But each one of us, we discover as the fire throws dramatic shadows and the histories are haltingly recited, has a vaguely noble-sounding reason for being on this trip: Dianne, a black schoolteacher from New Jersey, wants to have an experience that will help her explain to her kids back home about taking responsibility. Mary Boyd, dumped after a twenty-five-year marriage, is sick of hanging out with the gals at the tennis club. Orie's life was changed by Outward Bound. Adrienne works for an ecology magazine.

And I...? I am on assignment: this is not a secret. All I can say for sure is that, miserable as I feel, I am happy not to be in the Hamptons with a bunch of publicists from TriStar.

Ah, well. What they don't tell you in the guidebooks is that every expedition needs a designated asshole. And evidently I am it.

ACTUALLY, THE WILDERNESS IS OVERRUN WITH jerks. You can't climb Yosemite's infamous "El Cap" without scaling a twin peak of garbage, thanks to the ambitious hordes of adrenaline junkies farther up the rock. White-

yard, where a cadre of pleasant young people issue frame packs, sleeping bags, head lamps, and whatever important pieces of clothing are not part of your personal wardrobe. The "minimum" part is in the packing. Pruning away luxuries—like a second pair of shorts. Eliminating nonessentials, which, when it involves personal hygiene, is open to interpretation.

The third priority in the NOLS canon is safety. Accidents in the backwoods jeopardize not only the injured party but also other group members, or rescue workers. And there are the expenses. (Do you have any idea how much it cost to rescue Christie Brinkley from her heli-skiing mishap?) And even if catalogs advertise a \$739 fourteen-ounce gizmo called the Trimble Scout that links you to the satellite Global Positioning System set up by the Defense Department and that makes it virtually impossible to get lost, NOLS is old-fashioned and fussy enough to believe that basic first aid is requisite equipment—and that the exercise of

### ROCK STEADY

The National Outdoor Leadership School offers, among other things, several two-week wilderness courses for people over 25. For just what it expects of you in return, see page 181.

caution is a moral imperative. Consequently, we spend a lot of time learning safety procedures, like the knots for a belay system and rappelling off a cliff with a partner, and basic wilderness skills, like setting up your tent with a slippery taut hitch so you can pull it down in a hurry. Following a game trail. Identifying edible or medicinal plants. (My personal favorite is sedge: You can eat it or dry it out and use it as a Tampax.)



THE L IN *NOLS* STANDS FOR leadership, and lest we forget our higher purpose, there are Socratic dialogues by the campfire. One night we are lobbing ethical Nerf balls back and forth while the instructors try to elicit from us our own notions of leadership. Adrienne has just volunteered her thoughts, the gist of which is that “it can be empowering to follow.”

As soon as I hear the word *empowering*, my brain seizes as once again I have an illuminating flash of insight into why some of us end up friends of Bill C. and some of us friends of Bill W. No one is more surprised than I when Rob asks for a volunteer to lead the hike to the next campsite and my hand shoots up.

Our destination is a knob just on the far side of Roaring Fork Mountain. The only problem I can see from the topo map is that there's no way to get there from here except by crossing through the snow-covered saddle we practiced glacial

maneuvers on yesterday—only now we're carrying our full packs. Best not to dwell on it.

We set out boldly. Part of the leader's role, as we have discussed, is delegating tasks, and I have assigned route-finding to Sandy, whose boyfriend is a Green Beret and who is herself a professor—and so presumably has the right kind of mind for this sort of thing. Besides, we are retracing our steps. Sandy is, however, taking a seminar approach: every few dozen yards she halts, checks her map, and opens the discussion.

At this rate we will not cross the snow before dark, so I suggest that we proceed more *intuitively*, and off we go again, with renewed determination. In her new, decisive mode, Sandy veers wildly from the trail, heading uphill when the path heads down, and vice versa, as if she were topographically dyslexic. “This is the hiking Special Olympics,” whispers George, who has been trying to help by tossing Sandy little navigational hints. There is no restraining the other members of the group, all of whom have very definite, and very different, ideas of where we are and where we should be going. In these morally bankrupt times, I wonder, can there be such a thing as too much leadership?

Soon the terrain becomes too steep for anyone to bicker comfortably, and I am relishing the silence—I may even be on the brink of enjoying this—when Adrienne pipes up: “Coevolution is such a fascinating subject, don't you think?”

I sincerely hope she's not talking to me. I have been trying to steer clear of her, because every time we cross a boulder field, I can hear her breathing down my neck, muttering her mantra: “Small steps, small steps.” She walks so close on my heels that if we stop and turn around to reconnoiter, she nearly knocks

me off my feet with her pack. It's like being on a trip with the Kathy Bates character in *Misery*. “Would you please watch where you're going,” I say at this point, exasperated.

“Oh, don't give me any of your New York attitude,” she responds graciously. Now, to make matters worse, we are lost. Well, not exactly lost. From the vantage point of a large boulder, I can see where we're meant to be: down the slope we've just spent God knows how many hours struggling up, down on the other side of the creek.

“How long are you going to allow this to go on,” hisses Mary Boyd.

“I don't want to hurt her feelings,” I say, although I could be talked into murdering both of them.

Painstakingly we regain our lost ground, and by noon we have arrived at the base of the snowfield, where we rest for fifteen minutes, refill our water bottles, retie our boots, and unhitch the waist strap of our packs for better balance. Adrienne



chooses this quiet moment to confront me about my terrible attitude. I tell her that I can either climb the snowfield or do group therapy, but I do not have enough oxygen for both. Then I strike out on my own, setting a furious pace, hacking away at the slushy slope so ferociously that several times I fall, like a gigantic, graceless clown. I

## I hack away at the **SLUSHY** slope so ferociously that se

haul myself upright easily only because I am so pissed off.

Finally I pull my sorry self up onto a slab of rock, tip my pack off backward, and look down to see what has happened to the rest of the group. Mary Boyd is doing jumping jacks. Sandy is struggling along gamely, glancing occasionally at her map. George has found a good photo op—and there's Adrienne! She must have panicked, because she is plodding up the side of the snowfield, probably thinking it's safer near the rocks. But the snow gets warm from the rocks and—oops! Now she's in a big hole up to her armpits!

Talk about renewal in the wilderness. I now know there is a God.

IF HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE, THEN HEAVEN IS WALKING across an alpine meadow eleven thousand feet up, the sky all swelled up like a bruised lilac fist, hail bullets zinging off the boulders, and the goats' bells ringing you home.

We have thirteen pack goats with us, and eleven of them belong to John Mionczynski, a handsome, weather-beaten fellow who hails from Atlantic City, Wyoming, by way of Quogue, Long Island, and is astounded that I know Quogue. Quogue? Where I come from, Quogue is just the East End branch of Random House. Atlantic City is exotic. “When a few people in town saw *Northern Exposure*,” John says, “they told everybody, ‘Hey, there's a show on here about Atlantic City.’”

Anyway, John wrote the book on goatpacking. Literally. It's called *The Pack Goat* and it is enormous fun to read, even if the closest you've ever been to a goat is *chèvre*. And he is also a saddlemaker, a U.S. government-recognized Big Foot expert.

a botanist—who did time as a med student—and a lone wanderer in Wyoming's Red Desert, where he lived off grubs for months. Did I mention musical prodigy? Or that evenings after dinner are spent listening to John play "goat songs" on the squeeze-box?

John has a song for each of his goats—a Capraesque cast of characters that includes Lander and Precocious, two young brothers who are inseparable; Sweatpea, an ugly old thing who would literally eat tin cans; and Flash, who carries the photo equipment and looks like a male model.

"Flash is good-looking," Rob admits, stirring the fire after dinner.

"Yeah," says my tentmate Nancy. "And he gets better looking every day."

IT'S ABOUT A WEEK AND A HALF INTO OUR TRIP and I've begun to feel this incredible intimacy not only with the goats but with the landscape. What at first was disorienting—the vast scale, the fact that every valley, every stream, every knob of granite looked identical—has begun to make visual sense. Recognizable shapes are emerging like a smiley face in a Rorschach test. The wilderness, which not long ago provoked a primal fear, now feels like one huge IKEA. And primal fear, inexorably, has given way to real estate envy. "Look at this place," Nancy moaned when she saw one of our campsites. "Even the goats won't come visit us." Our neighbors' "kitchen," on the other hand, is set up on an enormous slab of granite that would

not look out of place in a TriBeCa loft.

I guess it makes sense that the outdoors would come to feel like home. Decorating aside, we are living in nature like squatters, each of us adapting in his own peculiar way. We wash our dirty clothes in the creek, beat them on rocks, and leave them to dry on logs. We bathe in freezing streams, too, or rinse our most offensive parts with a bandanna—the same bandanna we use to keep the sweat off our necks when we hike, to bandage an ankle, or to dry a pot. So when Adrienne asks Mary Boyd if she can borrow her bandanna because she has to blow her nose, Mary Boyd cannot quite believe her ears. Adrienne continues to press her, as if this were perfectly normal, until Mary Boyd forces a smile—she is a true Steel Magnolia—and hands it to her. "Don't worry about returning it," she adds.

It's Orië's birthday, and Rob, who is talented at all sorts of unexpected things, has baked a pineapple upside-down cake, with real canned pineapple. Unfortunately, the goats discover the cake cooling behind a boulder and devour it, putting Rob in an even grouchier mood than usual. He's already disappointed that we haven't had any bad weather, nothing to really test our mettle, and tempers are frayed because our rations are running low. Low enough that two grown women (no names) fight over a pan of popcorn made from weeds!

Now we are trying to make a party out of the dishes people have prepared from odds and ends of leftovers. Even I have finally mastered a dish—a kind of quesadilla—but we are out of tortillas. So I make my own from (Continued on page 180)

at several times I fall, like a gigantic, **GRACELESS** clown



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## THE ROCKIES

(Continued from page 161) scratch, mixing water and flour in a Baggie, then rolling out the dough with my eyeglass case.

"You know," I say, anxious to break the mood, "I have been sitting here wondering just how long I'd survive if I camped out in my neighborhood."

"Well," says Dianne, who's from New Jersey and knows what I mean by neighborhood. "If you looked the way you look now . . . and if you smelled the way you smell now . . . people would probably just give you money."

After dinner, when the fires are banked and the moon rises, we lay our sleeping bags out in the krummholz and stare up at the sky. All around us are carved ridges that hump up like the spines of a monster. I am thinking that this whole experience—sleeping out on the ground night after night—has made me aware that the earth is a huge spinning ball. No—actually, it feels more like something alive. And we are all clinging to its surface, whalers on a Leviathan. I find this sensation thrilling—and strangely familiar, like being on a ride at an amusement park.

Rob and Greg and Becky have decided to climb to the top of one of these ridges and sleep there, and while they climb, John plays for them. One of the songs he plays is "Lorena," a doleful ballad that was popular around the time of the Civil War. The Union and Confederate soldiers would sing it to each other at night, trading verses back and forth across the battlefield.

The goats are gathered in the middle of a dried-out lake nearby, and each is standing on a separate rock, looking off in a different direction. In the moonlight, tinted by the dying embers of the campfire, their slanted eyes take on a primeval, even satanic, glow.

Or maybe they are just high on sugar.

**A** COKE WITH ICE. NOT DIET. A Cobb salad. A hot fudge sundae. Nancy and Ori and I are trading hallucinations about what we would like to eat when we get home. It's our last hike, which we have decided to do as a tent group for sentimental reasons, and we move off at a fiery clip, enjoying the fact that the route is a real no-brainer (see how casual we've become, even in our language?).

We are about halfway home when we lose our bearings. It is over ninety, even in the shade, and we can smell the charred remains of an old forest fire when we stop to soak our feet in a stream. Ten minutes later—we are being very strict about our breaks—we lace up our boots and heave our packs onto our backs and take off, when I notice that there are several trails going off in different directions, like the spokes of a wheel. And each of

us is convinced that a different route is the right one. Nancy refers to the map; Orië, to the direction of the stream. I am convinced that the blaze markings on the tree trunks will point us in the right direction.

We argue, teetering close to anger, before I manage to convince them to try my plan, and off we go again. Soon everyone relaxes. We've been lucky; we've gotten along amazingly well—probably because we agreed early on that there's something absurd about a bunch of grown-ups paying to be treated like children—and once or twice seriously discussed making a big sign out of stones that said **BUGGER OFF** and hiking out.

Once on the right track, we travel so effortlessly, and so steadily—moving for fifty minutes, stopping for ten—that our journey plays out like a symphony: For an hour no one says a word; for the next hour, we jabber and laugh about things like Becky coming up from the stream with a big black book in her hand, terrifying us by saying, "Do any of you all ever read the Bible?"

We arrive at our final campsite, ahead of everyone and flushed with all the accomplishments of the past two weeks. Then Rob points out that the lash straps on my pack are not tucked in.

**A**T SIX THE NEXT MORNING WE pull everything together one more time and hike—we're practically jogging at this point—down the road to meet the bus that will take us back to Lander, where we unpack our gear, wash our pots and pans, collect the maps, deissue our equipment, and dive into the communal showers. I stare at the fogged-up mirror. I can't believe what I see. I feel about twenty years old—and I look eighty, with red-welted scratches all over my legs and so many bug bites that the glands in my neck are swelled up like chickpeas.

Later that night, when Nancy has gone off to the Maverick Motel in Lander to debrief her husband, Orië and I hang out, sniggering at our report cards. I have received a poor grade in route-finding, which I think is totally unjust, given the fact that I rescued us from certain disaster during that last hike when we lost the trail. Orië tosses her card in the trash.

We've been told it will take time to acclimatize, just as it took time to get used to living in the wilderness, and I am sure it will.

"I just hope I don't get up in the middle of the night and pee on the floor," Orië says as I turn out the light. □

## ROCK STEADY

**T**HE NATIONAL OUTDOOR Leadership School (NOLS) offers 59 courses that cover everything from horsepacking in the Rockies to rock climbing in the Southwest. Unless you want to get your leadership honed with a bunch of teenagers, you'd best select from the ten two-week "25 and Over" courses, which cover pretty much the same ground and range in cost from \$1,350 to \$3,425. Contact NOLS in Lander for details (288 Main St., Lander, Wyo. 82520; 307-332-6973). The NOLS philosophy of "leave no trace" does not extend to its admissions procedure. The Student Application includes four essay questions, and there are pages and pages of other forms, one that must be signed by your physician. Be especially careful if you plan to buy new hiking boots: Make sure you are fitted by an expert, and give yourself time to get used to them—even if your health club frowns at hiking on the StairMaster.

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