

The Unbearable Lightness of being Scott Williamson

To hike from Mexico to Canada and back, a man needs strength and speed and luck.
He needs something else, too. If only he knew what it was.

Story by Steve Friedman

Photography by Michael Darter

Campo, CA, Nov. 18, 2004 Yesterday long-distance hiker Scott Williamson, 32, stepped off the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) at California's border with Mexico, completing the first-ever continuous "yo-yo," or round-trip of the 2,560-mile trail that stretches from the Mexico to Canada through California, Oregon, and Washington. This was Williamson's sixth bid to yo-yo the PCT.

Your father and the man known as Mr. Beer find the deaf girl at a store in town and they learn that she's been chasing you for 700 miles.

When they bring her to your campsite, you don't know it, but that's the moment your grief finally starts to lift. That's when you find what you need, what you have always needed. It's a year ago, May 14, and maybe that's where your story begins.

But starting there leaves out too much. It leaves out the crazy man with the gun and the miracle of the corned beef hash and that sad day on the river when the magic ducks honor the dead boy. It doesn't even mention Hobo Joe and Walking Carrot and The Wall and The Abominable Slow Man and Real Fat. And what about the nightmares? What about the years of failure? What about the autumn of loss, the seasons of mourning?

To understand those things, it's better to begin with the day searchers find a bear feeding on your best friend's body. Or the afternoon you lose the deaf woman. Too grim? It's your story, and it's filled with the strangest and most unexpected gifts, so maybe it's best to begin on the rock in the snowfield where you find her again. But that's too happy. It's misleading. What about in a spot you know all too well, where you have spent way too much time: under sodden skies and sneering peaks during an early winter blizzard, as you sink to your thighs and know that you are—once again—doomed to defeat?

You've always struggled with beginnings and endings. How can anyone expect you to say when you started, when you finished? Might as well ask when you decided to start living.

Still, an epic journey—and if your journey is anything, it's definitely epic—must begin somewhere. The first step, the first time, out of Mexico? That's accurate, but inadequate. The victorious stroll last November into the crowd of photographers and friends? Touching, but incomplete. No, better to begin in the midst of setback, struggling. Better to start with what you know. Better to start with isolation and pain.

It is exactly ten minutes until five in the afternoon—you remember that because the man in the hooded sweatshirt asks you what time it is and you tell him, right before he shoots you in the face. It is 4:50 in the afternoon on January 20, 1996, and you aren't scheduled to work that day but when the convenience store owner calls and asks you to come in you say yes, because you can always use extra cash. You work hard when you work—tree-feller, logger, construction—so you can take off for months at a time, and such an approach to labor and to life has made for many sublime sunrises and peaceful sunsets and occasional moments of Zen oneness with nature and...a job in a convenience store. You are reading an article in *The New Yorker* when the man in the hooded sweatshirt comes in and asks what time it is and you look at your watch and tell him and then you notice he seems nervous, his eyes are darting, he is rocking back and forth, and then he lifts something and points it at you and you feel heat and searing pain on your cheek.

The bullet enters the left side of your face, clips your jaw, rips through flesh and stops. You run to the back of the store and the door is locked so you hit it with your shoulder. It is a steel door with a deadbolt but you tear it from the wall. The man in the hooded sweatshirt follows and fires six more rounds and you keep running. You keep running and running until you see a man and a woman and their young child lifting groceries out of their car and you tell them you've been shot.

They take you inside and you call 911 and you worry because even with a towel you're dripping blood on their floor.

The doctors give you morphine and they check for nerve damage. They tell you that the salivary gland on the left side of your mouth might never function again. They tell you it's too risky to remove the bullet, which is lodged near your spine, and that another quarter of an inch and you would be paralyzed. You leave the hospital and you have nightmares and get spooked when you see men in hooded sweatshirts and you resolve to change your life.

Some men might bend their will toward jobs with desks and health insurance and 401Ks, away from double shifts at convenience stores. Not you. You decide that life is short, that the future is uncertain. You decide that time is precious. You have already hiked from Mexico to Canada once, a huge summer trek on the Pacific Crest Trail. It was wonderful, but now that you've been shot in the face and reevaluated your life, you want more than wonderful. You decide you will hike from Mexico to Canada again, but this time, rather than celebrating at the border, you will turn around and hike back to Mexico. You will need to travel lighter this time and pack smarter and move very, very fast to beat the winter storms before they make the south-bound journey impossible. You will need to hike more than 25 miles a day, every day, for almost 7 months. No one has ever accomplished such a feat before. No one has even tried it.

Maybe the moment you make the decision is the best place of all to start.

But even that's not right. No, if you want the best beginning to your story—the real beginning, the *right* beginning—you need to start with the kid. The first time you see him, he is crouching next to a spring at the bottom of a canyon, feral, like a wild child. It's May 3, 1993, and you have been hiking for a week, on your way to Canada on the PCT, one way, just like any other young man longing to escape life and find himself. The kid is 17 years old, skinny and overpacked and he's in trouble. That's the first thing you notice. His pack must weigh 90 pounds—it's bigger than he is. He carries a gleaming stove,

IT TAKES A HARD MAN TO WALK THE PCT—AND BACK AGAIN—IN ONE YEAR. JUST DO THE MATH: WILLIAMSON HIKED INTO THE RECORD BOOKS BY COVERING 5,120 MILES AND AN ESTIMATED 637,000 VERTICAL FEET IN 197 DAYS.

and a fat down sleeping bag. Shiny pots and kettles hang from his pack. Countless straps and bungee cords. He has the newest and heaviest of everything. A kid who must have read some books, who has no idea that the secret to happiness out here is packing light and moving fast. He reminds you of yourself, when you first made the trip the year before. You made it to Oregon, and you suffered, and you learned, so this time you've come stripped down. This time, you carry only 20 pounds.

You're not very nice to him. You don't need extra baggage of any kind on your hike. That's something else you've learned. But he's delighted to be outdoors, delighted to meet you, delighted to learn from you. He's even delighted to learn how little you think of his style. He tags along, and every day he digs a hole and buries a piece of equipment, or a piece of clothing. He wants to do it like you.

You have never met such a person before. Wake at 4 a.m. for a predawn march? No problem. Log 45 miles in one day? Can do. Climb every mountain, ford a gazillion streams? Now, *that's* living!! You have no idea about the sadness he carries, the sadness he will bequeath to you.

It's funny—you're only 21 and already you have chosen a life of long-distance hikes and labor high up in trees and meticulous, solitary planning and you spend more time alone on the Pacific Crest Trail than probably any person on earth, but every so often a person crashes into your life and even if you're careful, even if you're not very welcoming at first, even if you're not very nice, your plans get all screwed up.

When he leaves the trail to return to his mother's house, you're surprised. Not that he's leaving—even burying so many things, the kid was still carrying too much. You're surprised that you miss him.

Then, one day in early July, at the post office in Sierra City, you see his name in a register: Kenny Gould. He's come back and he is trying to catch you. He doesn't realize he's already ahead of you. Every few days you see his name in another log. The kid is humping 40 miles a day. You cover distances like that every once in a while, but the kid is doing it day after day. No one can keep up that pace.

You didn't make this trip to baby-sit anyone, to save anyone from himself. You didn't start in Mexico in order to make friends. But something happens. It's funny how a man's plans can change, in spite of himself. You start logging monster distances, too. It takes you 2 weeks to catch him.

When you find him at Crater Lake, in Oregon, he is carrying next to nothing. He has taken scissors and a knife to his pack, slicing off all the hanging straps. When the kid does something, he's all in. That summer, you're all in, too.

You hike together through the rest of Oregon and all of

WILLIAMSON AND HIS 20-POUND LOAD CRUISE THROUGH THE LAGUNA MOUNTAINS, LESS THAN 40 MILES FROM THE MEXICAN BORDER—AND THE END OF HIS QUEST. HE WENT THROUGH 12 PAIRS OF RUNNING SHOES ALONG THE WAY.

Washington, to Canada. Over campfires and at sunrise and in meadows you talk about the misapplication of technology in the world, how it is serving powerful interests rather than people. He's just a kid and you're barely an adult. You talk about how society is going down the tubes, how neither of you will be sucked into the machine. You talk about the tricky business of living in a troubled world without becoming part of the trouble. He is impulsive, carefree—sometimes to a fault. You help him settle down, think things through. And you are meticulous, painstaking—sometimes to a fault. Hiking with Kenny, you quit planning so much and start living more. Kenny talks about how nothing is impossible. You can't help it. You believe him.

The next summer, while Kenny climbs in Yosemite, you hike the Continental Divide Trail, from Canada to Mexico. The summer after that—Kenny's still climbing, and you hear he's going through some tough times with his family—you travel the Appalachian Trail, but you tack on the Florida Trail first, then walk 450 miles of road between the two. You want to make it from Florida to Maine. Now you have achieved the Triple Crown of long-distance hiking, which is as rare as it sounds. What's next?

The kid has an idea. You run into him that fall at a meeting of long-distance hikers. His folks have split up and he's spent a little time in a psych ward where the doctors told him he's got a mental illness, and he's ashamed about that, but you tell him it's no big deal, they're just words, like "flu" or "virus," that he doesn't have anything to feel bad about. He appreciates that, it makes him feel better. Do you want to hear his idea? You do.

What if next year, Kenny asks, you try something *really* ambitious? What if next year, you hike the PCT again? But this time, instead of stopping in Canada, what if you turn

around and hoof it back to Mexico? And what if he tags along?

You promise to think about it. And then the man in the hood walks into the convenience store and you decide life is short and a man can spend too much time thinking and you decide that you and Kenny will embark on a great adventure.

You lug your sewing machine up from Richmond to Kenny's mom's house in the Sierra foothills, in Auburn, California. One night she looks in and sees you and Kenny, both longhaired and bearded and plotting, each one of you hunched over a sewing machine. You are sewing your own sleeping quilts and she shakes her head at her woolly son and his woolly friend and thinks, "Gee, this is never going to work." But she's smiling and laughing and while you might not know about it, *she* knows the sadness that her son carries and you seem like such a nice boy and Kenny seems so at peace when he's with you—she worries often about him but never when he's with you.

She takes you boys—to her, you are boys—to dinner at Auburn's Mongolian Barbecue for all-you-can-eat dinners and

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the Chinese proprietor smiles when he sees the three of you coming, and you might not know it, but Kenny's mom knows, he hates the sight of you three, because you and Kenny sit at the table for hours, plotting adventures and talking about the trail and spinning dreams, but mostly piling bowl after bowl after bowl full of rice and broccoli and spinach and bamboo shoots, mashing the food down, and eating and mashing it down some more and eating some more and it's a wonder you don't drive that restaurant out of business. Kenny's mom loves her son and she's beginning to love you but she can't help it, she feels sorry for that little Chinese man.

A young man can imagine great adventures in the foothills, in the winter, over sewing machines and bowls of rice and vegetables. And you do. You both do. But the adventure is greater than even you can imagine. It's funny. For all your great plans, the greatest times happen when the plans fall apart. It happens after a snowstorm—there are so many snowstorms in the life you have chosen—and you and Kenny are short on food, so you bushwhack 43 miles through the mountains to the nearest town and you know it's going to take at least three days to even make it back to the trail. You buy onions, and garlic and lemons and a roll of tinfoil and a 6-pound bag of rice and some fishing gear. Not what most people think of as fishing gear. No, you buy two spools and a couple of hooks and a few lures.

And now you are standing in the middle of a river in a hidden canyon, holding a stick. Standing upstream, holding another stick, is your hiking partner, who has somehow become your best friend. The stream carves through a canyon, which slices through a section of California's High Sierra that is very difficult to find, even on a map. You have tied the hook to one end of the spool and flung it into the river. It is a foolish, absurd way to fish, but in hidden valleys, life is foolish and absurd and bountiful and the word "failure" doesn't mean much. Kenny catches a fish. Then you. Golden trout. You have been a vegan for five years. But Kenny has taught you, so, just like him, you look into the golden trout's eyes and you bash its head on a rock and you feel its life slipping from its body and you have always thought of meat as something people buy in grocery stores, but you will never think this way again. Years later you will say that this is the moment you learned that death not only is part of life, but that death can sustain life. For three days and nights you and Kenny toss lines into clear water and make your way upstream and east, along the river and up a snowy path toward the Pacific Crest Trail and for breakfast and lunch and dinner you feast on golden trout over crackling fires and the days and nights are cold, but you are warm and well-fed and alone and together in a place that is difficult to find, even on a map. He

tells you wild, hilarious stories about the people he met in the psych ward, which always make you laugh. And he calls you "Duckface," because you carry a rubber duck that you found in the street in a mountain town and sometimes you start quacking, which always makes Kenny laugh.

You make the turn in Canada and head south and make it all the way to Reds Meadow, near Mammoth, where it starts snowing on October 18 and doesn't stop until a week and 5 feet later. It is your first and most glorious failure.

You try again the next year, alone, because Kenny has taken up whitewater rafting, and he's busy with that. You struggle through so much snow on the way north that you stop at the Canadian border. The next year, you read the weather reports and you know it's impossible, so you start in Canada and take a leisurely stroll south with your girlfriend, a poet and student named Rebecca. You try to make it both ways in 1999 and 2000, but each time, blizzards stop you before you're even out of Southern California.

The rest of your life? Off the trail? There are the tree-felling jobs, and a winter spent logging in Maine with Rebecca, but with all the trips and hiking, a relationship is tough and you split up. Your mother has been sick with lung cancer for a few years. She's a chain-smoker, and that makes you angry, and things have never been easy between you two, with her always telling you to get a regular job, buy a house, settle down. And besides, she carries her own sadness. People scare her, and open spaces and new things, so she avoids all that. When you were a kid, and friends came over, she would hide in a room. Those friends remember fleeting glimpses of her, in a hat and dark sunglasses, peering from behind a door. "Agoraphobic," doctors said, but to you, it's just a word. She's your mother. The last summer of her life, you don't hike. She dies in October 2001 and you don't hike the next year either.

That summer, on July 6, you meet a pretty girl with sun-streaked hair outside a restaurant called Chop Stix, near Santa Cruz, where you're doing some tree work. A month later, you

and the pretty girl, a climber and acupuncture student named Michelle Clark, move in together. Women have always been attracted to you, and you to them. And in January, you're on a dayhike together and you tell her that come spring, you think you're going to try yo-yoing the PCT again and she says that's nice, what exactly does that mean? Well, it means you might be gone for 7 months. She's not happy, but she's a climber and a good sport, she believes in you, so she works on your résumé and on letters trying to drum up publicity and sponsors and she helps organize a slide show and rents a hall in Santa Cruz and gets some local musicians and she helps you raise

In your eulogy, you tell the 400 mourners that you have lost your best friend. Three other speakers say the same thing. Weird, how such a young man, carrying so much sadness, could have so many best friends.

\$250. Then she drives you to the border, and when you call her after your first day and tell her your knee hurts, she puts together a package of moxa and ginger—Michelle practices Chinese medicine, too—and sends it to you.

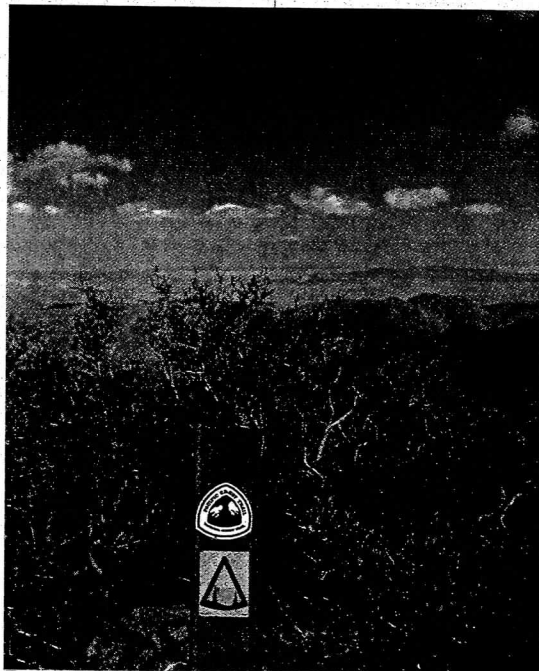
Your knee gets better, but the weather worsens. You have never seen so much snow, so early in the season. Every day it dumps more and at Cedar Grove, on June 7, 2003, you hike for 15 hours and make it exactly 15 miles. That's when you quit. It's your fifth try, your fifth failure. You don't know if you'll ever try again.

Kenny? The kid who gave your story the best beginning, the right beginning? While you're trying to yo-yo the PCT, Kenny is making himself into one of the premier extreme kayakers in North America. While you're financing your hikes by climbing giant redwoods and little fruit trees in Santa Cruz, Kenny is scaling communications towers for pay near Auburn, hanging vinyl on tall buildings. One day in the spring of 1999, you visit him at his mom's and while you're on a dayhike together, he tells you he's been having a tough time, that he has to take pills every day, just to feel normal. You hadn't known, but you aren't shocked. Kenny had never been what you would call normal. You find out later that different doctors called Kenny's difficulties different things. Bipolar disorder. Schizoaffective disorder. Brief reactive psychosis related to stress. It doesn't matter to you. They're just words. Kenny is your partner, your best friend. Somewhere along the way, Kenny has become your brother.

In the early winter of 2002, you climb North Palisade, a 14,000-footer. It's so cold your equipment is freezing, and you have to take your gloves off to brush the ice away and eventually your fingers freeze up and you have to turn back, just 300 vertical feet short of the summit. You don't know it, but Kenny returns a few weeks later and completes the climb.

You talk to him again that spring. You and Michelle have driven up north and you're going to hike to a waterfall that Kenny took you to once, down a remote canyon of the American River. You call him from a pay phone, near the river. Does Kenny remember the waterfall? Can he give you some tips on how to get there?

Does he? Can he? There's a slot canyon, and you can rappel down it, and the bottom is hidden, but unbelievably beautiful, another world! It's incredible! It's amazing! Kenny is so enthusiastic, shouting so loud, you have to hold the phone away from your ear, smiling. You remember that. It's funny the things you remember. Michelle, standing next to you, can hear him, too. She has never met Kenny, but she has heard you talk



about him, has seen your scrapbooks filled with pictures and writings from him. You don't know it, but she worries about you a lot. This is the first time she hears his voice, and she loves how it makes you smile.

You hear from him one more time—in early September. He calls and leaves a message—"Hey, it's me, call me back," but you're busy. Would things have turned out differently if you had called him?

You don't know it, but things are bad. The sadness isn't coming and going anymore. It's staying. He checks himself into the hospital, but that doesn't work. He takes medication, but that doesn't work. Now he's doing free solo climbs, running riskier and more dangerous falls. He talks to people about kayaking off Yosemite

Falls with a parachute. He talks about skydiving in a kayak, "to see how it handles."

Kenny's mom tries to help, but she doesn't know what to do. She wishes Kenny had a kindred spirit in his family—someone who could understand him. But his dad and his older brother are doctors, nose-to-the-grindstone kind of men, and Kenny has never related to that life. He has a younger sister, but what can a younger sister do? What can a mother do? Kenny's mom thinks of you. She worries about Kenny all the time, but she never worries about him when he's with you. She tells Kenny—okay, maybe she nags him a little—why doesn't he call you? Why doesn't he pick up the phone so the two of you can plan another one of your epic hikes together? But he doesn't call.

He makes eight trips to the hospital, and the doctors do their best, adjust his meds, but each trip is worse than the last. When he leaves the eighth time, he's so desperate, so crestfallen, his mom tells him she doesn't want him to ever have to go back and he says he doesn't want to go back either.

You pick up the phone on the 1st of October, 2002. No one has heard from Kenny in four days and Kenny's mom is scared, she asks if you know where he is. She calls back on the 5th. Searchers have found his truck, parked near the top of a rocky bluff. They had combed the area for days, with no luck, and then one of the searchers had looked down and seen a bear at the bottom of the cliff. It was feeding on Kenny's body.

When Kenny's mom is going through her son's things, she finds a note. It's addressed to you. It's a goodbye note. He didn't want to go back to the hospital. He hated his pills. He didn't see any other way out.

You give the eulogy, on the banks of the American River,

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UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS

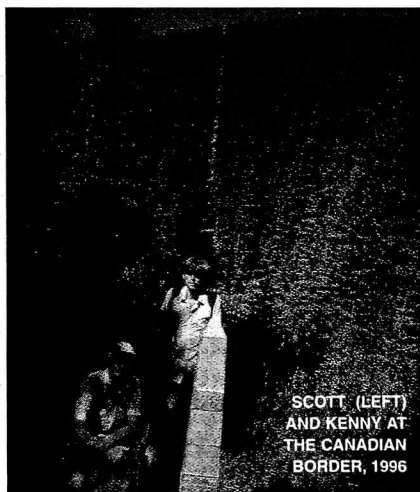
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where Kenny loved to hike and fish and raft. You tell the 400 mourners that you have lost your best friend. Three other speakers say the same thing. Weird, how such a young man, carrying so much sadness, could have so many best friends.

After Kenny's friends speak, the preacher rises, walks to the front of the crowd. He begins to talk and at that instant a flock of ducks flies overhead, quacking, and they land behind him, on the river. He raises his voice and they quack louder. The preacher keeps trying, but the ducks quack so loud no one can hear what he's saying. You and Michelle look at each other. "It's him," she says.

It is a terrible winter, a season of grief, and Michelle is worried sick about you, she hopes spring will bring healing, but it doesn't. The next winter is terrible, too. You write to Kenny's mom. "How do you go on when you lose your best friend?" You talk to her once a week and she tells you she has lost a son and you have lost a mother, but now you have each other.

You can't sleep. Mornings, you're bone-tired. The times you manage to drift off, you wake screaming. You wake Michelle. And some nights, Michelle



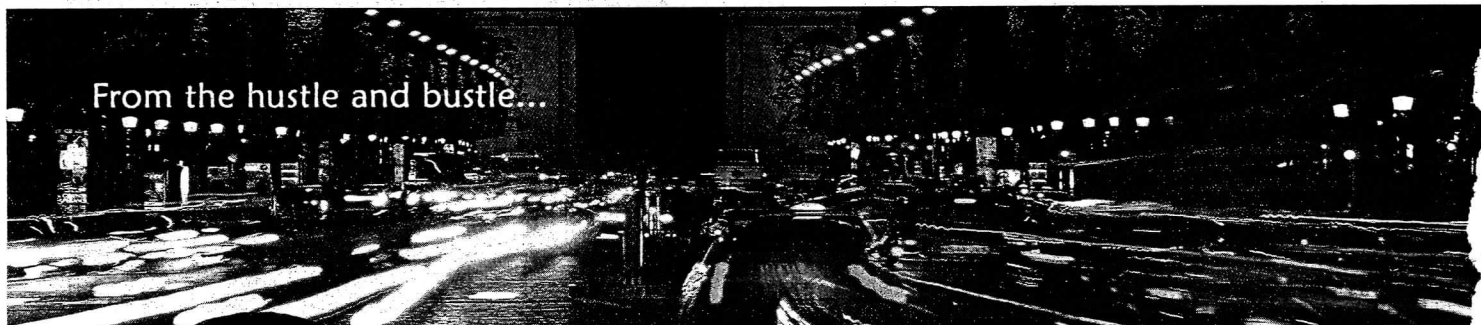
SCOTT (LEFT)
AND KENNY AT
THE CANADIAN
BORDER, 1996

wakes on her own and finds you staring at pictures of Kenny, holding the scrapbooks with records of your hikes together. You avoid other people, spend more and more time alone. She doesn't know what to do. Ever since she met you, she has worried about you. But she never worried when you were with Kenny. She tells you to get outside, to hike, to climb. Michelle knows the climbing community in Santa Cruz, they're her friends, so she calls them. She calls people she knows, asks them if they'll climb with you, then tells you—okay, maybe she nags a little—that they're waiting for your call, but you don't call. Sometimes, desperate, she prays. Not to God. She prays to Kenny.

You and Michelle break up in February—it just got too intense—and you don't have any work lined up, or anything else tying you down, so you try again. You leave Mexico April 22, 2004. You're not sure you're going to yo-yo. You're not sure of anything.

On the trail, you grieve for Kenny, but you don't worry about him anymore. You don't have to. And you don't have to worry about how sick your mother is, or what she wants you to do with your life, or the sadness she carries behind her dark sunglasses, in her dark little room. You don't have to worry about your next job, or packing, or whether you are going to attempt the hike again. All you have to worry about are water and food and shelter and it's liberating. Maybe no man is an island, but god the waters can be choppy, they can drown a man if he's not careful and there is something to be said for hiking alone in the Sierra in early spring, with no girlfriend, no job, no family, no skinny kid carrying unbearable sadness in his stripped-down, strapless pack. You have your beans and corn chips and tarp and sleeping quilt. You think you have everything you need. You're so wrong.

PHOTO BY SCOTT WILLIAMSON



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WHEN YOUR DAD AND THE MAN known as Mr. Beer take you to her, the first thing you notice about the deaf girl is how weathered she looks, how worn-down. She scribbles notes. She says she has been trying to catch you since she left Mexico two weeks ago, four days after you. You work that out in your head. She has been covering more than 30 miles a day. She says she has covered all of Southern California without a trail map. She says she is trying to break the women's speed record from Mexico to Canada.

As you scribble back and forth, literally comparing notes, you look at her again. She has just walked through a section of the American West where water sources are sometimes 30 miles apart, where the best way to locate them is with a map, and the second best way by sound. She has just hiked through a region infested with rattlesnakes (she has seen 10). And here she is, to your eyes malnourished, still without a map, cheerfully outlining her plans to race to Canada.

Later, when you remember meeting Patti, and you talk to strangers about things like inner peace and karma and living in harmony with the universe, you

will apologize; use words like "cheesy" and "new-agey." But here, late at night next to the Current River, you can't ignore what you see. What you feel. It's spooky. It shakes you a little. You have only met one other person in your life who approached absurd difficulties and daunting challenges with such unreasonable joy, such blithe good humor. Climb every mountain? Ford a gazillion streams? Now that's living. You never thought you would run into anyone else like him.

Can a man be sad and bursting with joy all at once?

The next morning, your father drives away—he'd come all the way down from Richmond just to see you for a night—and the man known as Mr. Beer, who you met on the trail and camped with for one night, takes off. Then it's just you and the deaf girl, Patti Haskins. She has a master's degree in biochemistry, and she works at a day-care center in Yosemite Valley. She's fast, but you're faster, and you move ahead. You wait an hour for her in a meadow, and then an hour and a half. Then you leave a note. Gotta go.

A man travels fastest when he travels alone. You camp alone that night, and

hike the next day and it surprises you, but you're worried. And maybe you miss her a little. And at the end of that next day, skirting a snowfield, you hear a strange sound. There she is, yelling on a rock, like she knew you would find her—or she would find you. She had lost the trail, had simply continued north, mapless. It's funny how people can shake up your plans. This was going to be a solo trip. The rest of the summer, all the way to Canada, you hike together.

You learn to sign. You tell her that the Top Ramen and Cup-a-Soup she has been eating is wearing her down, that she should start eating organically, like you. She tells you that for someone who talks so much about organic food, you eat an awful lot of Snickers bars whenever you're near a store, and by the way, you should start slathering on sunscreen, like her. She sticks with Top Ramen. You stick with Snickers and bare skin.

You watch out for each other. When Patti gets sick and has to go to the bathroom 20 times one day, you worry. When you bite down on a chip and a molar on your right side breaks, you spit it out. Now the nagging about the Snickers gets

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UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS

intense. She spends a lot of time peering in your mouth, at the half tooth, worrying about decay and infection.

But those are minor things. They're bonding things. Life in the mountains with Patti is okay. It's more than okay. One evening, she walks to a stream to fetch water and she disappears around a bend, and then you hear her scream. It's a weird thought, you have no idea why it comes to you, but you're certain she has found a body. You have never heard such screams. You sprint down the creek, around the bend, panting. And there she is, screaming and singing. Patti is a beautiful woman, all dark hair and smooth limbs and sharp angles and she is trilling with joy. She's holding a bullfrog as big as a cantaloupe, laughing and singing. Only one other person in your life ever found such wild, outsized delight in nature.

On sunny days, you plunge into frigid alpine rivers, then scramble out and lay down in sun-soaked beds of wildflowers. On rainy nights, you huddle together underneath your tarp. And the more okay things get with Patti, the more you worry. Not about her nutrition, or her intestinal health. You are now just weeks from

Canada, and you suspect that this time, you have a shot at making it all the way back. You also know how people can creep into your life and shake up your plans. You know that a man travels fastest when he travels alone. You remember the last person you loved like you love Patti. He was just a boy, and then he was a man, and it's different, of course, Patti is beautiful and soft, all smooth limbs and sharp angles. But it's the same, too. You never thought you would meet someone like him again and now you have and it scares you. You know what loss feels like. You know what loss can do to a man.

You walk into Canada on August 8, 105 days after you left Mexico, 101 days after Patti started. She misses her record by a week, and since she has no money left, she catches a bus back to Yosemite. Hiking south, alone again, you cover 43 miles your first day. The second day, you walk 40 miles. The third day, 38 miles.

LATE SUMMER IN THE CASCADES IS A glorious time. Long days, and lush flowers and torrents of water and plenty of time to think. You think about Patti and your mother and your damaged salivary

glad and the man who shot you, the man in the hood, and how you'd like to teach kids about the wilderness, about how tree-felling is a young man's occupation and how you're 32 and you won't be able to do it for much longer and maybe you ought to really consider college. You think about beef and spinach and coffee, you think *hard* about those things. You think of the long days and nights talking with Kenny about how difficult it was to be true to yourself when you were surrounded by wage slaves and soulless corporations and creeping technology, and how you told Kenny that a man couldn't spend his entire life on the PCT, the important thing was to find balance in your life, and Kenny did his best and his best wasn't enough. You wonder how the man known as Mr. Beer is doing back at home in Sapporo, Japan (which is why he's known as Mr. Beer). You think about all the hikers you have met over the years—Hobo Joe, the homeless Vietnam vet who every few years scrapes enough money together to hit the trail, and does fine until he hits a town with a liquor store, then ends up in the county jail for a few nights; and Maineiac, who

Andrea Bisig
*Chalking the hands at
Castle Hill, New Zealand*
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UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS

lives in Maine, and Walking Carrot, who loves carrots and Real Fat, who is really fat, and The Abominable Slow Man, who is astoundingly pokey, and the Leprechaun, who stands six foot eight.

The kid? He comes to you at the oddest times. In southern Oregon, you run out of water and hike 15 miles to a stream near Mt. McGloughlin to refill your bottle, but the stream is dry and it's 15 miles until the next one and you're thirsty and in trouble and then, there, right on the trail, is a water bottle, 16 ounces just sitting there and you know it's cheesy, you know it's new agey, but you can't help it, you think about death, and life, the cosmic wheel and all that, and how even when someone leaves you, maybe he's not gone at all. You feel Kenny's presence then; you know he's with you.

You think about Michelle, who really is sweet, and supportive, and beautiful and all-around great, and you wonder if the two of you might ever get together again. And you think of Rebecca, in Maine, and the poem she wrote called "The Mandible Bullet," about the convenience store shooting. Rebecca was sweet, too, and you loved that poem, you wish you still had a copy of it. And you think about other former girlfriends, and how women are great, but relationships are complicated, especially when you have a goal, and maybe you're better off not exactly in one right now. And of course you think some more of Patti, whose trail name is Silent Running, which even by trail-name standards is weird, because she's deaf, not mute.

Women are tricky. Relationships are tricky. The trail is simple. You wake at 5:30 and by six you're hiking. You hike till nine o'clock and you stop for a 15-minute meal and then you hike till the early afternoon, eat another quick meal, and then you hike a few more hours, when you stop just to chop some garlic and to mix your dried beans with water, and you hike another few hours, and then you have dinner, a leisurely 30 or 40 minutes, and then you hike until it's dark. Every day, you hike at least 35 miles, and most days, you don't see a soul. From Crater Lake to near Tahoe—1,000 miles—you don't see anyone on the trail. You're alone. Days and days alone.

Why? Because you can't survive off the trail? Because things like steady work and marriage and a house fill you with

fear, because the only place you feel safe is here, strolling through fields of golden yarrow and red maids and prickly poppies and yellow and white monkey flowers, sleeping under wheeling constellations? That's what Michelle thinks. To her, God is everywhere, but she's pretty sure you only feel Him—or Her, or It, or The Great Whatever—on the trail.


Or do you do it because you love deeply and grieve deeply and sometimes

you don't know the difference, and you're trying to come to terms with your friend's death? That's what Kenny's mom thinks. She didn't start to feel better about Kenny until she visited the rivers he rafted and the trails he hiked—all the spots he'd been happiest. She's sure you're on a journey of acceptance and healing.

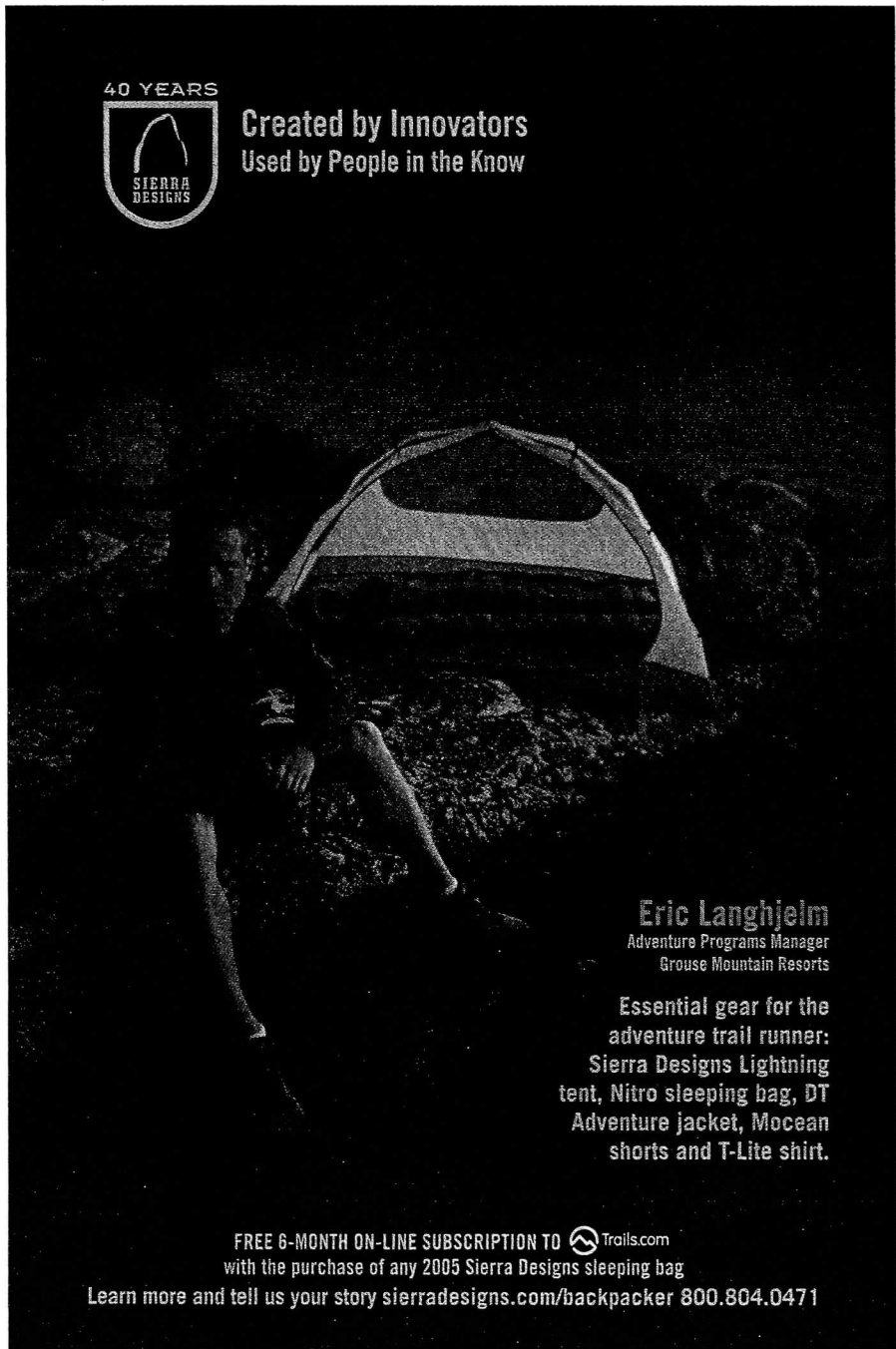
And you? What do you think?

"Kenny's death played a part," you say politely but firmly. "So I suppose you

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could say I did it for him. But as I've told a lot of people, the only reason to do something like this is for yourself."

You can tell the temperature within two degrees just by the viscosity of the mucus in your nose, and you can predict snow by how the air feels on your skin. But you have never been very good at explaining yourself, at dissecting your feelings, at sharing your inner life.

Still, even a man as self-contained as you, even a man who has been shot in

the face and whose mother has died and whose best friend has killed himself—even a man who has responded to injury and loss and death by walking away from others and into the woods—even a man like you must feel joy and relief and a tremendous sense of accomplishment as he closes in on the goal that has eluded him for nearly a decade.

How do you feel?

"Very neutral," you say, with profound and oddly moving blockheadedness.

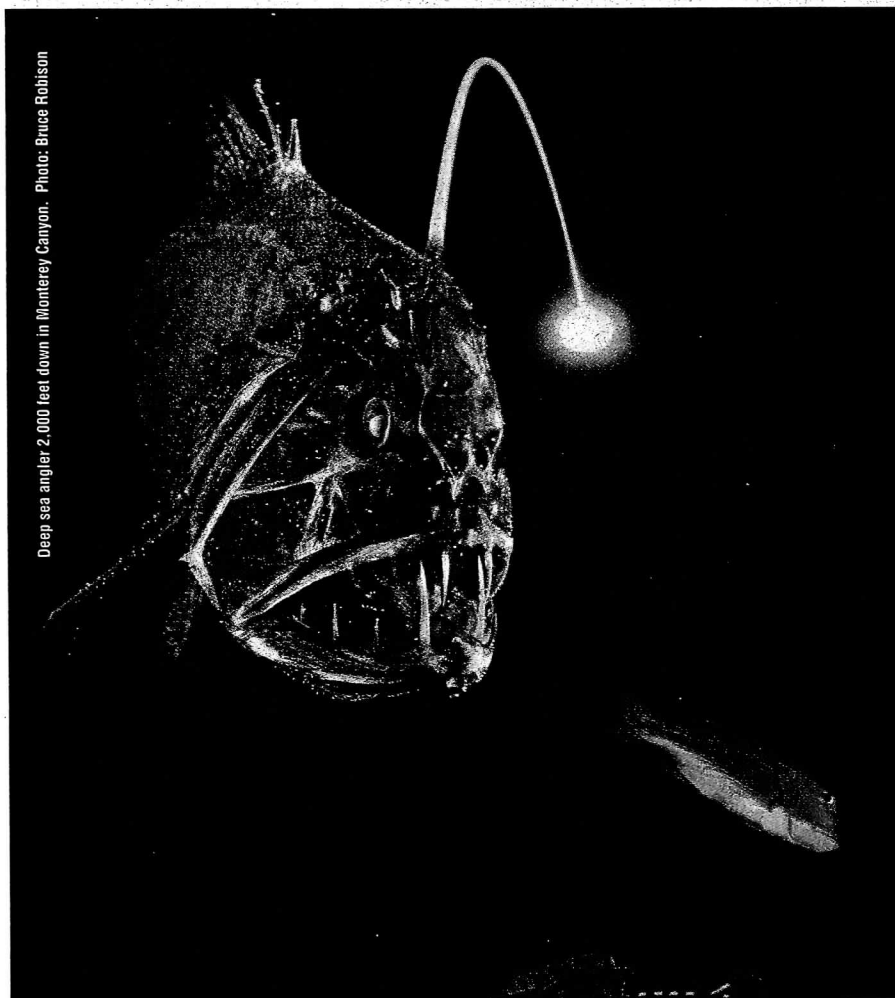
You reach the Mexican border on Saturday, November 13, 2004 and there to greet you are your father, who has driven 12 hours from Richmond, and Patti, who has driven 8 hours from Yosemite and Kenny's mom, who has driven 12 hours from Auburn. There is a photo crew, too, and dozens of long-distance hikers who know about you. You tell Patti you can't believe it's over. You tell her that finishing makes you sad. Kenny's mom hugs you and tells you that Kenny would be proud. And that's a sweet ending to your story, but it's not the best one. It's not the right one.

It leaves out what's next. It leaves out Patti asking you to spend more time in Yosemite, and Michelle, who has moved from Santa Cruz to Truckee, asking you to visit Truckee more often and you feeling guilty and annoyed that you can't do either—that you don't want to do either. It leaves out the way the daily e-mail with Patti becomes weekly, then biweekly, then merely occasional.

It leaves out where you are now, living in a 1984 Toyota 4x4 in the Santa Cruz mountains, taking the occasional tree-felling job. It omits the fact that until recently, fifteen rolls of slides from your trip sat in your father's freezer, because you couldn't afford to have them developed. He did it for you, as a Christmas gift. It leaves out how you can't afford to rent a room somewhere. How you can't afford to fix your tooth.

You'll figure it out. Or you won't. You turn 33 in May. You have many trips in front of you. Or you don't. The money will come. Or it won't. The answers will present themselves, or not. You have to be patient. You have to avoid gazing too far into the future. These are the lessons that any would-be yo-yo hiker must learn. You have learned them. You have to savor each day, to love the journey. A step at a time, an hour at a time.

So let's pick a good hour to end your tale. There are so many to choose from. What about the afternoon in San Diego, where you and Patti drove after finishing in Mexico, where you swam in the ocean and floated on your back and marveled at how everything flows from the mountains and ends up in the sea, and you were no different; where you drank cup after cup of coffee and ate plate after plate of spinach salad? No? What about rush hour in the East Bay, stuck in traffic, doing your best to apply the lessons



Deep sea angler 2,000 feet down in Monterey Canyon. Photo: Bruce Robison

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of the trail—the lessons of patience and acceptance and grace and being a part of the troubled society you and Kenny talked about? No? What about midday in Barney's Burgers, on the Berkeley border, where you tuck into a one-pound monster patty and a half-order of curly fries and a blackberry milkshake and spin tales about Hobo Joe and Real Fat and The Wall and the folly of long-distance hikers who leave the trail and reenter society with rage and bitterness and hatred for things like traffic jams and jobs, not realizing that those things are as much a part of life as soaring hawks and fragrant sunrises?

No? You have always had difficulty with beginnings and endings. You have been through enough grief. So why don't we pick a moment in the middle. The right ending. Let's choose a moment of peace.

It has been raining for a week. It's late July and you and Kenny have been on the trail since March 2, through blizzards and windstorms and hidden canyons filled with golden trout. And now, in Washington's Glacier Peak Wilderness, headed north, at mile 2,450, high on a ridge, your food supplies are practically gone, and you're not only cold and wet, you're hungry. A chilly, damp twilight and you throw off your packs and set up your tarp and try to build a fire to dry out and to get warm but most of the wood is wet. Kenny scrabbles into the dirt at the base of a tree, looking for dry kindling. It's a western hemlock. Isn't it funny the things a man remembers?

Kenny shouts. "I found a beer!" It's a Miller Icehouse. You remember that, too. Then he shouts some more. He has dug up six cans of food. Chili and corn and corned beef hash and okra. But only one beer. You and Kenny convene for a crucial Pacific Crest Trail yo-yo summit conference. Together you decide that half a beer simply will not do, that one of you should drink the entire thing. You flip a nickel and Kenny wins. Has a single beer ever filled anyone with such utter, outsized delight?

It's the spring of 1996 and the left side of your face is missing a functioning salivary gland. You don't have a steady job or health insurance. You don't know if you'll make it back to Mexico this year, or even if you'll make it to the Canadian border. You have no idea about the difficulties and pain that lurk in the decade ahead, about what loss will do to you. It doesn't matter, though. You are blessed, rich beyond anyone's wildest dreams. You have the mountain peaks and the stars and a warm fire and corn and chili and okra and corned beef hash and your tarp and your very good friend drinking a beer, your brother who you have tried to teach about balance and who has taught you so much about joy. You have never been good at beginnings and endings, but that's okay, because beginnings and endings don't really matter here. Maybe there is no beginning, no ending. Maybe—yeah, it's cheesy, it's kind of new agey—life and death are part of the same cycle, and sometimes one death can sustain another life, the cosmic wheel and all that. So maybe the story ends in 1996. Maybe it begins here, too. Maybe all that counts is the journey and you have that. Maybe there is only now, and you have now. You have this moment, underneath the branches of the western hemlock tree, with your hiking partner, who has become your best friend, who has become your brother. You have everything you need. You have everything you will ever need. ☘

Writer at large Steve Friedman took five rookies on a memorable camping trip for a story in our April issue.

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