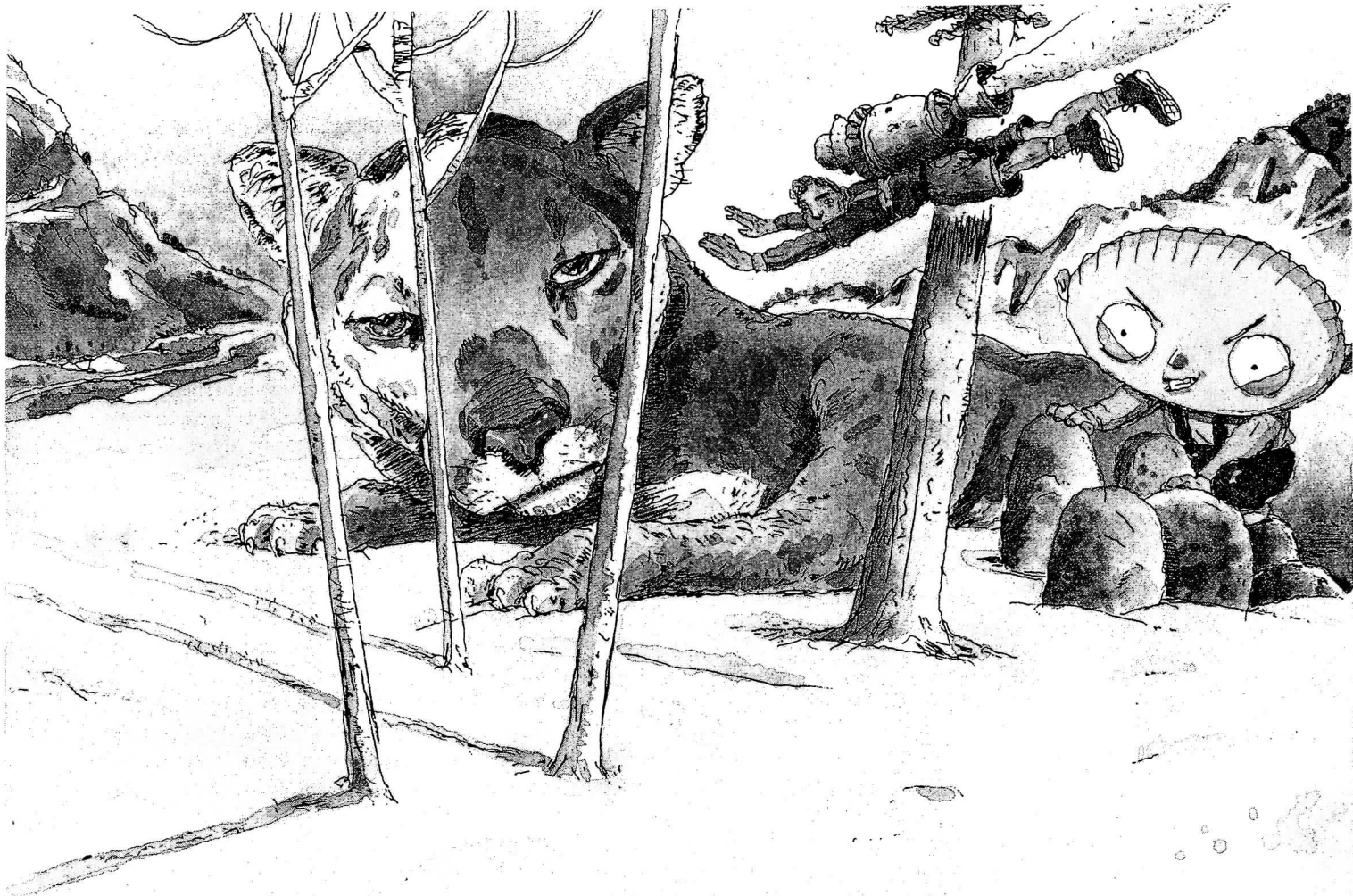


Lone at the top

A true story of one man's noble quest for solitude,
wilderness, and a shred of lingering sanity

By Steve Friedman
Illustrations by John Cuneo



*Climb the mountains and get their good tidings.
Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows
into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into
you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off
like autumn leaves.*

John Muir

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.
Blaise Pascal

Drunks I know like to fantasize about walking into the wilderness. Not to drink in peace, but for peace itself. What they see in their shimmering visions of leafy solitude is a sweet spot far from the critical wives and needy children and hectoring parents and demanding bosses and relentless bill collectors who are screwing up their lives. A grassy little hollow so silent and soothing that a drunk wouldn't need to drink.

I saw the path, too. It started far from the dirty dishes and empty beer bottles stacked in my grimy kitchen, and it led up miles and miles of tricky switchbacks and over icy streams and further and further from the infomercials and televangelists I cursed every night. At the end of the trail, I was sure, was a hidden campsite where I could put myself to sleep under twinkly, blinking stars and open my eyes to soft dawns where all was right. Especially me.

Of course, this fantasy didn't include such vexing little issues as food and cooking utensils and how I was going to pay for the water purifying system and what exactly one does in a place where there is no TV or critical wives or needy children or annoying friends. I wasn't thinking about those things when I most desperately wanted to disappear into nature. For a man seeking salvation (or self-annihilation) through wilderness, messy little details like survival seem so...minor.

I was 30 then, and instead of vanishing into the woods, I quit drinking. I saw a shrink. I got a job and a 401(k). I began to seek salvation (or self-annihilation; it's still sometimes hard to tell the difference) through exercise and work and prayer and, perhaps less nobly, through ice cream binges and brief romantic assignations with much younger women.

And then, 20 years later, I was offered the opportunity to

spend a week alone, in the mountains. Not to find myself. Not to lose myself. No, this time, I would go to learn something. What? I'm glad you asked.

The plan: Rent a deserted cabin high in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado and bring nothing but the tools necessary for survival. To avoid, for an entire week, human contact of any kind, including but not limited to Internet, radio, and telephone. That would be the physical agenda. The spiritual goal: To harness the potent double dose of nature and isolation so that I could learn something about myself and my place in the world. A simple plan, undertaken by a simple man with at least a smattering of self-awareness. A simple man perfectly capable of some boneheaded maneuvers.

In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have read the 400-page treatise on alpha predators right before the trip. And maybe it was a mistake to spend the better part of the afternoon before my departure poring over the warning label on the elephant-strength anti-inflammatories I had insisted my doctor give me before my journey, warnings that specified that if my "vomit looks like coffee grounds," I should immediately seek medical attention. Vomit? Coffee grounds? And how am I supposed to seek medical attention from an isolated cabin with no phone or Internet access or electricity? And I guess if I had to do it all over again, maybe I wouldn't have studied and printed and underlined that page from the Internet about altitude sickness, especially the passage that says while headaches and malaise are to be almost expected up in the mountains, by the time I notice "bloody sputum" seeping from my various orifices, I am pretty much a dead man.

But I did study those various tracts, of course. (In addition to being a low-level hypochondriac, I possess an arthritic knee and suffer from the occasional episode of gout—thus the anti-inflammatories.) I prepared in other ways, too. I sampled from the Canon of Great American Solitude Literature, including Thoreau, John Muir, and the Unabomber (who, and I know this isn't popular to say, made some good points, if you factor out his psychosis and acts of murder and mayhem), until I thought I had the secrets to enjoying alone time pretty much down.

I prepared. I purchased the six volumes of Harry Potter, and then agreed with my best friend and unofficial trip advisor, chastened, when he told me to "lose the kid stuff" and instead recommended *Crime and Punishment* because "you want to peer into the abyss of human existence, and whom better to do it with than that mad Russian?" I pleaded with my younger sister and offered her free future babysitting until she agreed to gather a week's worth of food for me. I spent the better part of my weekly therapy session talking about how far I thought I had come in the past few years, asking whether young women and ice cream were mere distractions, or perhaps the rewards for a life well-lived. I demanded of the editors behind this scheme that they give me snowshoes and a satellite phone, which would cover the bloody sputum and/or a premature request for extraction.

It was an action-packed week, those last hours before my pilgrimage to peace. I told family members I loved them. I apologized to a couple former girlfriends. I made lists of Must Do's and Should Do's and Can Do's, which included healthy mountain mornings filled with sit-ups, push-ups, and jumping jacks. I confessed my fears concerning bloody sputum to my three-year-old niece, who found the words "bloody sputum" hilarious. I peered into my bathroom mirror, imagined myself wiser and sadder, leathery but strangely alluring to all manner of women. I practiced staring into the distance, and said "I have seen things no man should ever see" until it sounded convincing. I shopped around for solar-powered batteries, because even though I was going to be cut off from the outside world, alone on a perilous and exhilarating journey toward peace and wisdom, my laptop had a DVD player and I thought with some wilderness ingenuity and a few sunny days, I might treat myself to the third season of *Family Guy* when darkness fell. But only one episode per night. I didn't want to block my view into the existential abyss.

I am alone, but I am not lonely.

I've heard about this state before. From an episode of *Kung Fu*. From Tony Robbins infomercials. From the shrink, naturally. Most recently, from a 30-year-old yoga instructor/corporate litigator I was dating. But Penny also touted the wonders of colonics and drinking one's urine, so I tended toward skepticism whenever she was enthusiastic about anything. She said I was hostile and overly cautious because my chakras were blocked, and that was preventing me from genuine intimacy. And I said that maybe she was just conflicted because even though she professed an appetite for world peace she spent much of her life defending ravenous corporate megaliths, meanwhile crushing decent, god-fearing men and women, and maybe if she would just relax and eat a cheeseburger once in a while she...

But I digress. Even though I am older now, and wiser, and infinitely healthier than the 30-year-old beery dreamer who saw his future on an imaginary footpath, I am still somewhat of a chowderhead. And now I am alone and not lonely in the mountains.

I realize at this moment I've never understood the alone/not lonely thing. Maybe my realization is due to the untold acres of spiky brown grass swaying before me. Or the cheerful little stream to my left, burbling its happy and solitary song, a melody to whose delights I and I alone am privy. Or the snowy ridge to my right, a ridge that for all I know guards a Shangri-la even more perfect than the one in which I now sit. I make a mental note to climb that ridge, to inhale the 13,000 feet of crystalline oxygen over which it stands sentinel.

Above me shines a blue and profoundly beneficent sky, and a sun whose kindness and concern I have until now

never fully appreciated. Maybe Penny was right. Maybe my chakras *are* blocked. Or were. Certainly, they are in the process of unblocking. I make a mental note to sign up for some chakra work when I return to civilization.

Below me—directly below: a trusty three-pronged backpackers' stool I have lugged up to my alpine redoubt, an item that my friends and family belittled when I stuck it in my pack, along with copies of *Crime and Punishment* and the Bible and *Walden* and Jack Kerouac's *Lonesome Traveler* and a 500-page study of CIA involvement in Afghanistan and three spiral notebooks and seven pencils. Oh, I wish they could see me now, my sunburnt face caressed by the alpine winds, my alone/not lonely soul soaring and dancing in the tundra. Would they laugh at my three-pronged backpackers' stool, those earthbound chakra-blocked dupes, as I soaked in the kindness of the mountain sun—I, omnipotent and undisputed (but benevolent) emperor of my own private and undiscovered paradise, would they laugh, those doomed, miserable creatures who don't know the meaning of true happiness because they are so hopelessly tied to their daily routines, their, pathetic, petty, judgmental and... I tilt my face toward Mr. Sun. This is not the place to be wishing anyone anything but peace and happiness. I breathe deeply. I remind myself that kicking booze was good, and regular exercise and a semi-steady paycheck are nice, but I should probably work on what my shrink calls "free-floating rage."

Where was I? Oh, yeah, the solitary bliss. And behind, a sloping snowfield I have just traversed, virgin except for some strange and purposeful tracks that when I noticed them seemed to fade into nothingness, and... suddenly I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, as spiky as the wind-blown tundra grass. What if those tracks belong to the stealthy

I have an epiphany. While perfect vision isn't a prerequisite for survival, it makes it more enjoyable.



and remorseless cougar? The cougar who, I know from reading the man-eater book, like to sneak up on its clueless, alone-but-not-lonely prey from behind, bite deeply into their necks, separating tendons, snapping cords, and finally commence the slow, languorous business of noshing on tender flesh, with no witness but the sneering, cruel sun.

I snap my head to the left, then to the right. And now I have a neckache. Which is worse, a sore neck or a severed spinal cord? Twenty years of relatively clean living (the young women and ice cream notwithstanding) and a lot of therapy and prayer, and this is where it's landed me: Sitting on a mountain, trying to enjoy the immense solitude, the alone/not lonely thing, whipping my head back and forth to check for hungry mountain lions.

I have been alone for 18 hours. I have six days to go.

Day One

I first peek at the dark center of the abyss at dusk. It is an appropriate time, a zone of change and shifting perceptions, an hour of metamorphosis.

Four hours earlier, the owner of the cabin had driven me up a rocky, rutted dirt road that breaks from the Animas River Valley just north of Silverton, Colorado, and ascended and ascended some more, through pine forest and past a sign that announced the presence of tundra and, finally, to a rectangle of wood that marked the spot where no vehicle could ascend further. Then we hiked until we arrived at a cozy little wooden cabin perched on the western ridge of the valley. No cars in sight. No highways. No buildings. Nothing to interfere with my search for unblocked chakras and peace, if you don't count my seven books, the DVD containing season three of *Family Guy*, my laptop, two giant blocks of ice and a cooler to store my perishable items which include half a pound of Jamaican coffee and a pint of peanut butter cup ice cream that my sister had recommended I eat the first night to calm me down, "because you're a baby, and the kids have karate practice, and I don't want you calling me up on that frigging satellite phone when it gets dark."

I had requested of the owner that, before he left, he instruct me in some of the fine points concerning survival in his wilderness outpost. So he had shown me how to open the marmot-proof toilet paper dispenser in the outhouse, how to work the kerosene lanterns hanging from the wall, how to chop the huge discs of lumber under the cabin ("Use the ax, dude") and where the drinking water was located (in the big containers marked WATER, as it turned out).

As he disappears over the hummock toward his jeep, the hour of metamorphosis turns nasty. Sleet and rain pelt the cabin and clouds drift up from the valley. In my normal life at this time of day, I would be on the phone or the Internet, or watching television, or stuck somewhere in traffic, or pursuing some doomed romance with a comely urine-drinker. No longer, though. I am learning to be alone, but not lonely. So I unpack, build a fire in the wood-burning stove, crack open *Crime and Punishment*, and get to page 2 before I turn my attention to the crackling of burning wood and the drumming

of rain and the low moan of mountain wind.

And now I am drooling. It is dark and I am drooling and confused. The rain has stopped and the world has gone dim, and quiet. Where am I? I blink my eyes, look for the light switch until I realize there isn't one, until I realize that I must have fallen asleep and oh, yeah, I'm here to find myself and to understand being and nothingness. I decide I don't need the lantern yet. It's dim, not dark. I'm not a baby. I hear a noise and it startles me. It's me, whimpering, "I'm not a baby."

I squint at my digital watch. It's 7 p.m. I stare into the darkness, vow to train my eyes to adjust to the dark, like the proud and noble Uncompahgre Indians who once inhabited these mountains. I also vow to wake up with the sun and gradually adjust to the natural rhythms of the world and do my best to quit whimpering. I vow that I will leave my computer/DVD player untouched, that I will only watch *Family Guy* if I start to freak out, if the weight of solitude proves too much to bear and I calculate that the single thing between me and a psychotic break is viewing a chunk of 21st-century popular culture. I vow that I will conduct a painstaking examination of myself, and that what I discover will make me stronger. My determination

I vow I will only watch Family Guy if the weight of solitude proves too much to bear.

cheers me. So does the view. I look out the windows, at peaks and valleys and snow and tundra. I wish some of my friends were here to see this. I congratulate myself on being man enough to admit that I long for human company. I wish my sister and her kids were here. I wish my girlfriend were here. I wish I had a girlfriend. I make a mental note to get more involved in my community when I return to civilization. Also, to stay away from women who use phrases like "inner child" and "cleansing regimen." My resolution cheers me. This trip has already proven worthwhile. I decide I'm going to become a better citizen as a result of my time up here, alone. A better, more natural, less corrupted by the silly trappings of 21st-century citizen. Like the Unabomber, but nice.

Then I declare, in a voice that could not be further from a whimper:

"O Solitude! if I must with thee dwell,
Let it not be among the jumbled heap
Of murky buildings; climb with me the steep,—
Nature's observatory—whence the dell,
Its flowery slopes, its river's crystal swell,
May seem a span; let me thy vigils keep
'Mongst boughs pavillion'd, where the deer's swift leap
Startles the wild bee from the fox-glove bell."

I'm not sure what a pavillion'd bough is, but I look forward to telling people I recited Keats in the mountains. I am listening to the crackling of a fire I started. I am reciting

poetry. I am not even looking at my satellite phone. I am getting to know myself. I am alone, but truly, I am not lonely.

But I am exhausted. Not with the fatigue of the city-dweller, but something cleaner, sharper. My limbs take on weight. Suddenly it is as if I am moving underwater. Also, the mountain air is exceedingly thin, and I'm gasping a little. I feel a torpor and sluggishness and realize how completely drained I have become, due no doubt in part to the emotional preparation for the trip. My city-dwelling self would drink some coffee now, watch soul-rotting television, or surf the Internet for information that wouldn't improve my life at all. No longer. An afternoon and a long night in the mountains alone, and I have changed. How long have I been peering into the abyss? It is tiring business. It must be past midnight, time for all creatures to sleep. And, after all, stripped of our televisions and Internet access and telephones, aren't we all merely creatures and shouldn't we embrace our creaturehood? And so I prepare for sleep, happy that I have finally realized I should now and forevermore accept myself, that being tired is part of being vital, that I should honor the natural cycles of the world, which my body is part of. I will sleep...I stretch. I yawn. I congratulate myself on a good, long day.

I check my watch. It's four minutes after seven.

And now I am terrified. Not of cougars, though I will continue to think about them from time to time. Not of bloody sputum, though I must remain vigilant. What scares me is the thought that I have to entertain myself for seven entire days. I'm sober and relatively self-aware, and I have given up the notion that the wilderness can save me and abandoned my more obvious schemes for self-annihilation. I am here just for some self-knowledge and enjoyment. And still, I'm terrified. What scares me is the fact that the only companion I'll have for the next week is me. What if I don't like him?

I roust myself from the couch, stoke the fire, walk outside to brush my teeth and spit down into the valley. I crawl into bed. It has been a long day, filled with hard-earned wisdom.

Five minutes later, my computer is humming. I watch two episodes of *Family Guy* while I spoon semi-liquid peanut butter cup ice cream into my mouth. I'm alone, and I'm lonely. I try to look some more into the abyss. After awhile, I give up, switch on my headlamp and stare at the satellite phone.

Day Two

NINE THIRTY A.M. I have just made instant oatmeal with raisins, and coffee. This fills me with an oversized and, I realize, slightly pathetic sense of accomplishment. I brush my teeth and use the outhouse, and do dishes and chop some wood and now it's almost lunchtime. I have an epiphany. With no electricity or running water, just taking care of things takes time. I decide I will remain open to epiphanies during my time alone, and that I will write them down in a notebook. The blue one or the red one or the green one? I make more coffee and ponder notebooks and epiphanies for an hour.

Having made the decision (red), I decide to try the abyss again. I recline on the couch to dig into *Crime and Punishment*. I make it to page 3 before I fall asleep.

I wake up, drooling again. Does high altitude induce drooling, or have I just always been so preoccupied with things like nabbing a seat at Starbucks before that shift-eyed woman and her screaming kid get it that I have never pondered the altitude-drool connection before? I make myself a sandwich of cheese and turkey and head out for a hike to a nearby ridge. Maybe I should carry the satellite phone with me, just in case I get stuck in a crevasse, helpless

Am I peering into the very heart of the universe, or do I have altitude sickness?

and desperate as small predators with big incisors come to devour me, slowly munching on my fatty outer layer of skin and muscles as I writhe in impotent agony. Am I obsessing about toothy flesh-gobblers because I don't want to confront myself? Or am I just constitutionally fearful? Who knows? But I don't take the satellite phone. I think it's because I feel guilty about watching *Family Guy* last night.

I make it to a ridge overlooking another valley, with its own charming river and spiky grass and snow and rocks. I see a red fox as I traverse a snowy field. "Hello, Mr. Fox," I say. I see some strange brown-and-white-speckled birds that run around on the ground. I set up my trusty backpackers' stool and marvel at the glories of nature. I enjoy the spiky grass. And that's the moment I sense the remorseless mountain lion sneaking up behind me...I am alone. I am not lonely. I am terrified. Of being alone and of being eaten.

EIGHT P.M. Back at my cabin, after eating dinner and stoking the wood-burning stove and brushing my teeth and setting myself in a seat by the window to bear witness to the wonders of dusk and to lean back into the rhythms of nature and to watch shadows creep across the face of the mountain peak and to continue the search for being and nothingness, I have another epiphany: The sky does not merely darken at dusk. It changes color in bizarre, almost surreal ways. At the horizon is a dark blue, above it a darker blue, then pink and above that, a lighter blue. Am I peering into the very heart of the universe, or do I have altitude sickness? And should I have looked more closely at the drool from my nap? Might it have contained bloody sputum? What exactly was Penny's problem? Why do I end up with women like Penny? What exactly does sputum look like? I get up, take the satellite phone outside and turn it on, just to make sure it works.

Now it's dark, and I'm feeling happy and at peace, which, a few minutes later, turns into terror and despair. Why? Because it's only 8 p.m. and I don't know what to do. And because I know my only company for the next six days will be a nut job with an overactive imagination.

I take a deep breath, toss *Crime and Punishment* onto the floor and pick up Kerouac's *Lonesome Traveler*. Something a

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little more modern, but no less timeless. I last one and a half pages. That's when I have another epiphany: I'm too hard on myself. I should banish "I must" and "I should" from my emotional vocabulary. But isn't that an existential paradox: "I should banish 'I should'?" I miss New York. I decide that "I don't need to think in terms of 'I should'" is better. That makes it into the red notebook.

Freed from the shackles of "I must" and "I should," I settle into my bed, take a last look at the deepening night outside, pull the sleeping bag to my chin, then grab my computer to watch another episode of *Family Guy*.

Day Three

SEVEN TWELVE A.M. The only thing I can hear is the scribble of pen on paper. I have had my oatmeal and my coffee. I have chopped more wood. I have given up on Kerouac and am halfway into a John le Carré thriller. It's so refreshing to be forever emancipated from the tyranny of "must" and "should." Plus, I like thrillers. I consult my map, trace a walking adventure for the afternoon, and decide that life is simple and good. I decide that there is no joy like the joy of eliminating one's own solid waste in the chilly mountain air, in an outhouse with no door. I decide that chopping wood has made me a better man. I decide that chopping wood centers me, that *Crime and Punishment* speaks to the existential hero in us all, that one is incapable of really comprehending what it means to be fully alive until one has faced death, until one has felt the hot breath of the predator on one's neck, until one has peered into the existential abyss, without using a satellite phone. I imagine saying to friends that I have seen things no man should see. I think about ice cream cones and central heat. I am alone, but not lonely. I hear a strange sound and I swivel my head. It is the theme song from *Family Guy*. I am whistling it.

I HIKE THROUGH THE TUNDRA, AND past a lake, then dip into a pine forest before rising toward a view of snowy

peaks. I breathe deeply and stride with purpose and then I stop to set up my three-pronged stool so I can pull out my Epiphany Notebook, in which I scribble: "It is not solitude that brings acceptance, wisdom, and all that stuff. And it's not exercise. And it's not wilderness. It's all three!"

Striding with purpose again, I spot tracks in the snow that appear to belong to the indomitable and ravenous cougar, but that, on investigation, are more likely from a jackrabbit. I hike and I hike and I whistle the *Family Guy* theme song to the peaks and valleys that surround me.

FOUR THIRTY P.M. Back at the cabin, I am too tired to do anything but look at the twilight and sip hot tea. I open *Crime and Punishment*, not because I think I should, or that I must, but because I want to. I read half a paragraph about the main guy's hat, then drift off into another drooling nap.

SIX THIRTY P.M. After a dinner of eggs and cheese and bread and gorp, I peer into the darkness across the valley and see something odd. Lights. Moving lights. They belong to a jeep, descending the other side. My first human contact in more than three days. But it is as the ocean liner is to the island castaway. I see it; it doesn't see me.

I lay myself down to sleep. I wish I had company. I am alone, and I am lonely. The feeling is keener without television and the Internet and the crabby chair-grabbers at Starbucks to distract me. But it's also, in some way I don't quite understand, cleansing.

I wake at 2 a.m. and go outside to urinate, and when I return to the cabin, I grab the Epiphany Notebook, which I now keep close at hand at all times.

This is what I write: "1) Constellations really DO wheel. Even the Milky Way rotates. 2) The river is louder, the stars brighter, right before dawn. 3) Urinating in the middle night is a much, much bigger deal when the air is this cold."

I fall back asleep and dream of sitting down with Ariel Sharon and the leaders of Hezbollah, working out a peace plan,

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then I'm playing softball in Islamabad and all the infielders are smoking cigarettes, and then I'm attending a bar mitzvah in Iran. I make a mental note to discuss this with my therapist when I return to civilization. And maybe I should start going back to temple.

Day Four

SEVEN FIFTEEN A.M. I wake up gasping for air. Partly because the air is thin. Partly because I broke my nose playing basketball 20 years ago, and in spite of four doctors advising me that repair of my deviated septum would lead to better sleep, I have avoided it.

I lie in bed and I consider that if I did get my deviated septum fixed, the surgery would go wrong and I would walk the world as a gruesome, gasping ogre, a person featured in a newspaper article about ordinary surgical procedures gone horribly awry, or even if it worked, people would see the bandages and/or the wonderful result, and assume I was a preening, vainglorious fop. Then, still gasping, I decide I should talk to my sister about more effectively disciplining her strong-willed little girl so she wouldn't laugh about things like bloody sputum. And then I decide I want to get out of here, then out of Colorado, then back to New York City, filled with traffic and well-dressed women and tabloids overflowing with utterly useless and compulsively readable crap. I decide I'm sick of the existential abyss, that I'd be happy mindlessly passing the time, talking with friends, haunting bookstores, displaying the titanium-strong, thousand-yard gaze that I hope someone notices so I can tell them about my days in the wilderness, my new and hard-earned wisdom about creaturehood and such. I am alone and I am lonely and I don't want to be either.

I make a calendar of a month of things I should do, which calms me down a little bit, even though it violates my epiphany about the wrongness of the word "should." I make oatmeal and coffee. I visit the outhouse. I chop some wood and then I take dishes outside to wash and rinse, and sitting on my

plucky but oft-mocked camper's stool, I realize that I'm not really a morning person. That goes in my Epiphany Notebook. So does this: "Activity and regularity and being alone leads to something like cheerfulness. I wish I had someone to share it with."

I study my topo map while I make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and trace a route down the road I traveled to get here, then up the gulch on the other side of the Animas Valley. It's an ambitious plan: More than 1,000 feet and two miles down, then another 1,000 feet and two miles up, before turning around and covering the same distance and elevation change. I pack my lunch, my stool, a couple of extra layers, then, as I raise my arms, I'm hit with another epiphany and pull out the Notebook.

"I haven't showered in three days. Is it the mountain air or the dryness? How else to explain how, after 72 hours without bathing, I have NO SCENT!?! Or maybe it's an evolutionary adaptive thing. Maybe if people living far from running water, as most people do, could smell themselves, they'd go crazy."

THREE P.M. By the time I get to the meadow at the top of the other side of the valley, I am panting and almost out of water and my feet hurt. But I am not frightened. I decide I have become calm and tranquil, conquered my fear, and that if I use the satellite phone when I return to the cabin, it'll be because I'm moving toward friendship and family and community, not away from myself and my fear of death by predator cat and/or bloody sputum. I sketch my three-pronged stool and gaze across the valley, where I spot, perched high on the opposite ridge, my cabin. I sketch a man with a rocket pack strapped to his back, flying across a mountain valley.

I scribble in the Epiphany Notebook: "Rocket packs would be SO cool! Why are they not more popular? Investigate marketing possibilities."

I take a self-timed photograph of myself, prone in the meadow. I pack up to leave and after walking about an eighth of a mile, I am struck at how blurry the world looks. I remember taking

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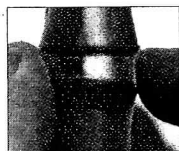
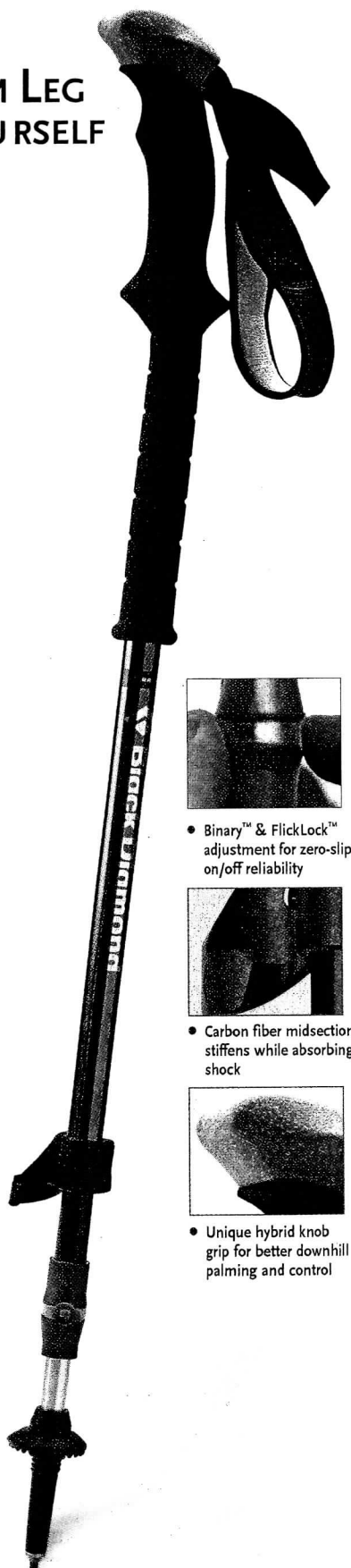
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LONELY AT THE TOP

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off my glasses for the photo. I look back at the expansive meadow, a sea of green. I have an epiphany. While perfect vision isn't a prerequisite for survival, it makes it more enjoyable. I don't write it in the Epiphany Notebook, though. I'm too busy crawling around, cursing. After 30 minutes, I find the glasses.

By the time I make it to the cabin, I have decided that this is the most brutal hike of my life, factoring in elevation, distance, grade, and my deviated septum. I also decide that even though Thoreau said that "Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourse and all foolish acts, a balm to our every chagrin," it would be even more salming with some company. I have also realized that there is very little in life, mood- and inherent-meaning-wise, that can not be reflected on by singing/whistling "Jingle Bell Rock" or Darth Vader's theme song, and furthermore, the former can be whistled in a melancholy key if the situation turns bitter-sweet, like sunset, and the Dark Lord's song can be pepped up to, say, signify that the end of the trail is in sight.

Why am I not whistling *Family Guy* anymore? An ineffable mystery.

FIVE TWENTY-FIVE P.M. My inner thighs are chafed raw. There is an oozing blister behind my left heel.

I eye the satellite phone. Am I going to pick it up and plead with my sister to meet me at the bottom of the jeep road because I miss e-mail and milkshakes and can't face myself or because I've stared into the abyss and seen wisdom and realize I have nothing left to prove or because even if I'm very lucky, due to the dwindling power on my computer battery, I'll get in at most one *Family Guy* tonight, and the vision of a night peering into the real abyss, without my cartoon, on another night alone, makes me want to cry? I don't know the answer. Does it matter? I ask this question three times to the empty cabin. It's hard to decipher, but I'm pretty sure I can make out a "no" in the vast silence. Still, I am a man. I am not a baby. I do not pick up the satellite phone.

FIVE FORTY-FIVE P.M. What was I rushing back toward? Revelation? At twilight, I'm peaceful and tired. Maybe instead of a third triple latte and cookies during the day, I should honor my fatigue and simply be still. I make a mental note to never use the phrase "honor my fatigue" when talking to another person. Then again, I bet it would make Penny and her colonics-happy yogi girlfriends swoon.

I am so glad I didn't use the sat phone 20 minutes ago. My panic has passed, like the wind passes over the tundra, like the clouds pass across the winking sun, like darkness passes into light. The secret is to let things pass, to honor solitude, to embrace the moment. All we have is the moment. That goes into the Epiphany Notebook. "All we have is the moment."

FIVE FORTY-EIGHT P.M. My sister says yes, she can drive out tomorrow morning. She's been expecting my call.

Day Five

EIGHT FIFTY A.M. I have been up for two hours, watching clouds drift past the peaks, listening to crackling wood, reflecting on how I have changed. I learned how to cook oatmeal and spaghetti. I chopped wood. I did dishes outside. I lasted four nights with only myself for company.

Epiphany Notebook:

1.) I love the outhouse.

2.) New credo: Eat when hungry, sleep when tired. And when blue or confused, walk in nature. Twenty-four hour sports highlights, Internet dating, and hot fudge sundaes at midnight don't help in the long run but are okay in moderation. Stay away from Penny.

THREE P.M. I am sitting in a coffeehouse on the main street of Silverton, Colorado. I have told my sister about my revelations, my new credo. I have told her about the cruel wisdom of the cougar, and about my plans to investigate the manufacture and mass marketing of rocket packs. She has suggested that I take a shower.

I am tired, and restless, but not really hungry, or even thirsty. I consider my new credo. Then I order a hot-fudge sundae and a triple espresso. Then I chat with the coffee girl, who is about 14 and looks

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LONELY AT THE TOP

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frightened. Then I boot up my laptop, so I can check out some baseball scores.

I am alone, but I am not lonely. I plan to brag about my adventures in the abyss to everyone I know. I'm thinking about the future, but I am in the moment. My sundae and triple espresso arrive. I dig in. This moment feels very good.

Afterword

Two months have passed since my time alone in the mountains. The woman I'm dating turns 51 next week and I invite her for a birthday dinner. She tells me, as she hadn't heard from me about the big day, that she's made other plans. Other plans? What kind of arrant nonsense is that? A year ago, I think, I would have posed that question to her in slightly different language. I would have asked why she didn't assume we would be celebrating together. Was this her way of breaking up with me? Maybe I should just save her the trouble! Or I would have made a barbed joke. Or started an argument. Not now. Now, I

offer to take her out another night: "You can have two birthday dinners." Behold Mr. Sensitive, filled with nature's peace and the wind's freshness. Or Señor Chump. I'm not sure. I don't spend a lot of time worrying about it. Let me be more accurate: I don't spend as much time worrying about those kinds of things as I used to.

And now I am at my sister's, back in Silverton, Colorado, and on my third afternoon of babysitting duty, after taking my niece and nephew sledding, then watching *Shark Tale* for the fifth time with them, and baking chocolate-chip cookies, and agreeing to a best out of seven sword fight/Greco-Roman wrestling match, my sister returns from shopping and thanks me for my help. She tells me she can't get over how "centered" I am.

I'm not sure, but I think she's right. I really do. I still conduct long, angry debates with people no one else can see. I still worry about things like bloody sputum and vomit that looks like coffee grounds. (On the upside, I've cut back on the ice cream and late-night television.)

I'm not John Muir. I'm not Jeremiah Johnson, or Grizzly Adams, or even a guy who can unfurl a sleeping bag and put up a tent without imagining psycho slashers and ravenous carnivores tearing them (and him) apart in the predawn darkness. But I spent some time by myself, at altitude, in the mountains, in late autumn. I didn't do it to lose myself, or to find myself. I did it to learn something.

And what were the lessons, beyond what I jotted in the Epiphany Notebook? That I'm still a neurotic chowderhead, and that's okay? That maybe I'm not as much of a neurotic chowderhead as I imagined I was, and that's okay, too? That it doesn't matter what I think or imagine, because the trees and the mountains and the valleys don't care, and while the wilderness might not have been able to save me, it sure can help heal. Is that the lesson—that if I'd just quit worrying, I'd realize that everything's okay?

I'm not sure. And that's okay, too. ●

Writer at large Steve Friedman worked out some other wilderness issues by telling ghost stories in our October 2005 issue.

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