

Wild

by Cheryl Strayed, an excerpt

Prologue

The trees were tall, but I was taller, standing above them on a steep mountain slope in northern California. Moments before, I'd removed my hiking boots and the left one had fallen into those trees, first catapulting into the air when my enormous backpack toppled onto it, then skittering across the gravelly trail and flying over the edge. It bounced off of a rocky outcropping several feet beneath me before disappearing into the forest canopy below, impossible to retrieve. I let out a stunned gasp, though I'd been in the wilderness thirty-eight days and by then I'd come to know that anything could happen and that everything would. But that doesn't mean I wasn't shocked when it did.

My boot was gone. Actually gone.

I clutched its mate to my chest like a baby, though of course it was futile. What is one boot without the other boot? It is nothing. It is useless, an orphan forevermore, and I could take no mercy on it. It was a big lug of a thing, of genuine heft, a brown leather Raichle boot with a red lace and silver metal fasts. I lifted it high and threw it with all my might and watched it fall into the lush trees and out of my life.

It was a world I'd never been to and yet had known was there all along, one I'd staggered to in sorrow and confusion and fear and hope. A world I thought would both make me into the woman I knew I could become and turn me back into the girl I'd once been. A world that measured two feet wide and 2,663 miles long.

A world called the Pacific Crest Trail.

It seemed like years ago now — as I stood barefoot on that mountain in California — in a different lifetime, really, when I'd made the arguably unreasonable decision to take a long walk alone on the PCT in order to save myself. When I believed that all the things I'd been before had prepared me for this journey. But nothing had or could. Each day on the trail was the only possible preparation for the one that followed. And sometimes even the day before didn't prepare me for what would happen next.

Such as my boots sailing irretrievably off the side of a mountain.

I looked down at the trees below me, the tall tops of them waving gently in the hot breeze. They could keep my boots, I thought, gazing across the great green expanse. I'd chosen to rest in this place because of the view. It was late afternoon in mid-July, and I was miles from civilization in every direction, days away from the lonely post office where I'd collect my next resupply box. There was a chance someone would come hiking down the trail, but only rarely did that happen. Usually I went days without seeing another person. It didn't matter whether someone came along anyway. I was in this alone.

I gazed at my bare and battered feet, with their smattering of remaining toenails. They were ghostly pale to the line a few inches above my ankles, where the wool socks I usually wore ended. My calves above them were muscled and golden and hairy, dusted with dirt and a constellation of bruises and scratches. I'd started walking in the Mojave Desert and I didn't plan to stop until I touched my hand to a bridge that crosses the Columbia River at the Oregon-Washington border with the grandiose name the Bridge of the Gods.

I looked north, in its direction — the very thought of that bridge a beacon to me. I looked south, to where I'd been, to the wild land that had schooled and scorched me, and considered my options. There was only one, I knew. There was always only one.

To keep walking.