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Trails and tribulations

In 'Wild,' a woman's 1,100-mile hike becomes a journey of self-discovery

WILD: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail, by Cheryl Strayed. Alfred A. Knopf, 315 pp., \$25.95.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to *Newsday*

What should you do when you have truly lost your way — when a combination of bad luck and bad choices leaves you in a place you do not recognize with a person you do not know, and that person is you?

- A. Go to rehab.
- B. Find God.
- C. Give up.
- D. Strap on an 80-pound backpack and hike 1,100 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail by yourself.

Few of us who would even come up with D, much less do it. Yet that is exactly what Cheryl Strayed did in 1995, at

age 26, though she had no serious experience backpacking or hiking. Within days of beginning her trek — already bruised, bloodied and broke — it occurred to her that this whimsical choice was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

"Immediately, I amended the thought," Strayed writes in her new memoir, "Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail." "Watching my mother die and having to live without her, that was the hardest thing I'd ever done. Leaving Paul and destroying our marriage and life as I knew it . . . that had been hard as well. But hiking the PCT was hard in a different way. In a way that made the other hardest things the tiniest bit less hard."

Strayed is known for two essays, "The Love of My Life" and "Heroin/e," both collected in "Best American" anthologies, that speak with signature intensity and honesty about her self-destructive implosion in the years following the

death of her mother. Those events are back story to the harsh cure she prescribed herself, the hike. The physical journey is made tougher because her pack is too big and her shoes are too small; she is ill-prepared for the trip in every way. What she does have is brute persistence, sheer will and moxie, and her belief that there is only one option: "To keep walking."

This is never clearer than at a moment during her sixth week on the trail when she tips over her pack and it knocks into one of the hiking boots she's just taken off. The boot bounces off a ledge into tree-tops far below. "I gasped in surprise and lurched for my other boot, clutching it to my chest, waiting for the moment to reverse itself, for someone to come laughing from the woods, shaking his head and saying it had all been a joke."

But she knows otherwise. "The universe, I'd learned, was never, ever kidding." And so she keeps walking — now in "shoes" made of duct tape and bandages.

What lightens this trial by

fire are the people Strayed meets on the trail. She describes with dry humor encountering a man named Jimmy Carter, who is interviewing hoboes. Her continued insistence that she is not a hobo leaves him unconvinced, and he presents her with a "standard-issue hobo care package": a cold Budweiser, a pack of peppermint gum, two aspirin, six butterscotch candies, one Slim Jim, one cigarette, a book of matches and a can of baked beans.

Aside from the dangers of nature, there are other bad things that can happen to a pretty blonde in the middle of nowhere. Every encounter with a man or men has a charge of danger, but every time things turn out OK. Strayed has the wits to escape the worst of the lot and to succumb to the charms of the best.

One of the customs on the PCT is to give trail names to the through-hikers who criss-cross each other's paths. Strayed meets The Kid, The Eagle Scouts, the Preppies and the Statistician, and forms a particularly close bond with The Three Young Bucks, "extraordinary hiking machines" just out of college in Minnesota. Up to the end, she wonders if she's been given a trail name herself, imagining it best she not find out. But the Three Young Bucks dub her "The Queen of the PCT," because "people always want to give you things and do things for you," they explain. "They never give us anything."

In her journey from the most hapless hiker on Earth to the Queen of the PCT, Strayed offers not just practical and spiritual wisdom, but a blast of sheer, ferocious moral inspiration. New fans won't have to wait long for more such guidance: "Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life From 'Dear Sugar,'" collecting greatest hits from Strayed's pseudonymous column on the Rumpus website, comes our way in July.

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