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# Whitney

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## Whitney

*Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.*
—T.S. Eliot

Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous United States at 14,494 feet, has been calling me.

I've always been an avid outdoors woman, camping and hiking. Four years ago in my forties, I went backpacking for the first time with my son Jarrod, then 16, both of us learning by trial and error what we were doing. The experience was exhausting, frustrating and painful —but mostly magical. After a particularly difficult day, Jarrod and I found ourselves sitting on a massive outcropping facing the snow-encrusted Western Divide as the sun sank behind us, painting the ice and rocks purple and pink. It was the summer solstice. The moon played coy at first, taking its time to make an appearance, but once risen, lit up the entire forest. Back in our tent, my hulking son asleep next to me, I watched that outlandishly bright moon through the bug-netting, the pine trees swaying above. A sound like horses galloping made my chest tighten until two deer passed a hair's breadth from where we lay. The next day, sore and achy, we hiked homeward, and when tiredness overtook us, we shouted lines from "The Jaberwocky," Jarrod's favorite poem. "O frabjous day!" we sang to the trees as our legs protested against each further step. "Callooh! Callay!" And then we quieted down and hiked in silence, passing the trail mix back and forth.

That trip had taken us along the High Sierra Trail on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, Whitney still some 70 miles further on. Every hour during that trip, and monthly since then, Jarrod's refrain has been the same. "I really want to do Whitney."

So do I.

The truth is, I don't know if I'm able. Even if we were to attempt the summit from the eastern side—the route most people take—the hike

would cover 22 miles roundtrip with an elevation gain of 6,135 feet.

Every year, there are fatalities and horrific scenarios along the Whitney trail—people slip on the ice in June, are struck by lightning, or are held hostage by rogue storms. Known as the highest "walk-up" peak in North America–you don't need technical equipment or special know-how to climb it —Whitney is far from a stroll in the park. And yet, what I fear most is not death or injury but embarrassment. I don't want to be the one the group is stuck waiting for, the person they wish they'd left behind —the one who causes the summit to be abandoned.

But that's the thing about the human condition: it cries out for revelation. There's something that drives us to test our limits and risk exposure even as we try to inoculate ourselves from the very exposure we seek.

I contact my friend's husband, Rich Toyon, a Boy Scout leader who's climbed Whitney seven times. If I'm going to risk making a fool of myself (not to mention risking my life) it would be good to have an old-hand along.

It's decided: our little group will include Jarrod, who's now 20, Zane, who at 14 is in tip-top shape from Scouting adventures, his dad Rich, who's been leading the Scouts on all those adventures, and me, the middle–aged lone female whose exercise regime is centered on dog walking and occasional yoga classes.

In the lottery for Whitney hiking permits, we are given an early October date.

"Won't it be too cold?" I ask Rich.

"We'll have to carry some serious cold-weather gear, but we'll be fine," he explains.

More weight? You expect me to carry even more?

I get serious about training. Instead of simply hiking local mountains, I carry ever-increasing weight in my backpack as I climb, inching toward the 30-pound mark. Slowly, the pack stops being an enemy and becomes simply part of me.

Less than a month before we're to leave, the largest fire to occur in Los Angeles County in a century explodes in the mountains a mile above my house. The fire will burn for more than a month, charring some 53 square miles. Smoke fills the valley I inhabit, seeps into the bedrooms. Despite a powerful air filter, the inside of my house smells of campfire. My asthma is triggered. Doctors put me on steroids. I can hardly walk across the street without heaving in distress. Only three and a half weeks

until our permitted dates. This may not be possible.

I start slowly. A walk with the dog. A stroll with my daughter. The air quality just about kills me.

I call Rich. "I'm getting better, but I don't know if I have enough time."

He suggests the treadmill in his house; it can be adjusted for an incline and I can hike it in an air-conditioned space.

I look ridiculous, wearing hiking boots and backpack, trudging on a machine in his house, but I begin to get stronger. Rich tells me his Boy Scouts (many of whom are classmates of my 14-year-old daughter) are pulling for me. I hike with more gusto, thinking of them.

Jarrod comes home from college and we pick up Rich and Zane, my heart wild with adrenaline. I'm scared and exhilarated; I can't wait and am scared silly.

We camp two nights at Whitney Portal, enjoying the stream, the nippy weather, the quiet, and acclimate to the elevation. At the Ranger Station in Lone Pine, we rent bear canisters to store our food, and pick up our Whitney permit and WAG (Waste Alleviation Gelling) bags—there are no toilets on Whitney. Our final night camping at the Portal, the weather gets even colder. We put on all the clothes we have and buy more firewood.

"Was that an earthquake?" Zane asks, suddenly alert, sitting by the fire. We'd read about the rash of earthquakes that had been plaguing this part of the Owens Valley before coming. We wait, attentive. Another one hits. It's not huge, but big enough to cause swaying. The largest is 5.2 –good sized. But everything stays calm in the forest. No rocks tumble down, no alarms go off. It's just part of the risk of being alive, I remind myself. We turn into bed early. Another earthquake hits while we sleep.

Packing the next morning to begin our ascent, I note the clouds over the saw-toothed peak that is our destination. They race across the sky, sporting huge black underbellies. The day is the coldest so far. I'd planned to leave my down jacket behind, relying instead on multiple layers and a down vest, but now pack every piece of clothing I can.

We pass a group of male hikers in their 30s. They look outfitted well, if a bit out of shape. They pass us when we stop to rest. Then it's our turn to pass them when they stop. After a mile or so, we see them for the final time. Did they give up? From what I read, two out of three hikers who attempt Whitney will fail to make the summit.

"You guys headed up?" A group of descending hikers stops to chat.

"The weather's changing fast. I hear they're expecting winds up to 90 miles tonight," they warn.

I try to dismiss the talk as so much gossip. There will be hardship involved. This is part of the game. The only things I can control are my effort and attitude. Weather is beyond my ken.

"How was it?" I ask. "Did you make it?"

"Ah, man," a look of ecstasy crosses the young man's face. "It was amazing."

We hike on. All along, I've told myself that hiking the six miles to Trail Camp where we'll camp tonight, the easy part of the journey. But everything is so much more difficult than I'd imagined. The huge step-ups are like climbing a massive set of stairs while balancing on a precarious dirt ledge and carrying way too much weight for a body this size. I am a human, I want to cry out, not a mule.

But I take one step at a time. I don't have to set any speed records. I keep humming the song from *Finding Nemo: Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming.*

We pass Lemonheads back and forth. Young Zane's pack towers over him. "I knew this would be work," he says as he drops his pack when we stop for lunch, "but this is harder than I thought." It's both shocking and a comfort to know that even Zane, the youngest and most energetic among us, is finding the trek difficult.

We fill up on water from the spring; it's ice cold but delicious. We don wind gear and gloves. The weather is turning.

"When this is done, I'll have buns of steel," I announce once we hit the trail again.

"Forget steel," Zane counters. "Buns of titanium!"

We pass the treeline and altitude takes over. There is nothing but rock and rock and rock as far as the eye can see; an occasional wind-twisted tenacious tree seems to grow right out of the granite. All four of us are having trouble breathing. At every brief stop we take, I'm huffing like I've just run two laps. Rich still leads the way, but stops more frequently now. Then a lot more frequently.

He leans over his walking stick to give his shoulders a rest from the weight of the pack. "Oxygen break," he calls. Though he's climbed Whitney seven times, I learn only now that his last time here was more than 20 years ago.

The day has gotten progressively colder and as we've gained elevation, the winds have picked up.

"Why don't I sprint ahead and grab a campsite before it gets dark?" Jarrod suggests. He's the freshest among us. He hands me his jacket and down vest so he'll be lighter. The day is beginning to lose its color; everything is the color of the granite surrounding us. We pass a hiker who's walking down the mountain as if he's burned the soles of both feet, looking almost drunk. He's wearing a red permit on his pack—a day hiker. He probably began his adventure at 2 or 3 this morning and has been at it for 12 or so hours already.

"Have you been hiking long from the Portal?" he asks.

"Hours."

"Oh…" His whole body collapses. " I thought I was almost there."

I worry after he passes. It's miles to the bottom and he looks terrible. Plus, he's hiking alone. Why would anyone hike this alone? As soon as I ask the question, I know the answer. It's the same reason I almost didn't attempt the outing. No one wants to embarrass himself in front of others. One way to ensure that won't happen is to leave all the others at home.

After the next switchback, we run into another troubled hiker on his way down. He's carrying what looks to be a sleeping bag in a huge muslin storage bag—not its stuff sack—like he's carrying Santa's bag of toys. He's by himself, too. As we move ahead of him, I look down and see him below us on the switchback. He's stopped now, sitting on a rock. He's talking to himself.

A few paces later, I note a packed tent and sleeping bag tucked alongside the trail with a large rock resting on top to keep them from blowing away. Why would someone leave this expensive gear here? Were they too tired to carry it down?

I keep thinking we must be almost there, but we never are. *Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming.* The final mile lasts forever. The wind picks up. We're wearing wind shirts and down vests and wooly caps and gloves on top of a number of hiking layers. I wish the wind would stop. *Just keep swimming*. Maybe by the time we get to the campground it will stop. *Just keep swimming*.

The only way I know we've reached the campground is the sight of a few backpacking tents staked there, looking almost as if they were planted by mistake. Everything is rocks. Big rocks on top of more big rocks.

There's a small lake to one side and a handful of tents among the rocks to the other. It's like a campground on the moon. The wind is really thrashing now. Jarrod signals to me from up on a ledge. When I reach him, he's trying to put up the tent and is in a surly mood. Bent tent stakes litter the area, but the tent's almost up. He asks me to do the rain fly.

"I can't do this alone," I protest. "I need your help."

"I've killed myself trying to get this tent up so you'd have a place to rest," he barks. "I'm freezing and tired and don't feel well." I realize I still have his down vest and jacket. He's been freezing. I give him his clothes and let him warm up. He pitches in, sheepish over his outburst, and places rocks inside the tent to keep it from blowing away.

As soon as it's up, we climb into our sleeping bags for warmth and shelter. The sound of the wind is giving me a headache.

Rich and Zane are next to us, trying to get their own tent up. Rich, who's been nothing but gentle with Zane, speaks sharply. "I can't do this by myself, Zane. You have to help." I'm surprised by his tone; he's been so tolerant. It won't make sense until later, when Rich will tell me that hiking that last mile felt like the hardest thing he'd ever done. Like the lone hikers—like all of us—he didn't want anyone to see his vulnerability.

Why do we do this? What am I out to prove? I no longer know for certain. I simply know that pushing myself to the extremes wakes up a part of me that otherwise remains dormant. I live a cushy life: enough food, enough heat, enough rest on a regular basis. This experience wakes up the part of me that needs to remember how fragile and precious life is. I want to be reminded in a visceral way that I only have so much time here and that I best be careful how I spend it. For as much as we think we have mastered nature, when all is said and done, we are but puny specks in the face of nature's awesome power.

The cold, wind, exhaustion, and altitude have taken a toll. Laying in the sleeping bag, freezing, I think of how eventually we'll make dinner. Eventually, we'll call Rich and Zane over to share our stove to boil water to pour over freeze-dried packets of backpacking food. Eventually, we'll each wolf down a hot meal with a spork. Eventually, we'll venture forth to fill up on water from that lake since we'll need it for the ascent tomorrow morning.

But for now, we're too tired to move.

The late afternoon turns into serious night. The sound of the wind

whipping the nylon tent is as loud as an airplane on take-off. Jarrod and I try to sleep.

"Do you want to eat?" I ask.

"No."

I pop my head out every now and again to look for Zane or Rich, and to see what our neighboring hikers are doing. Everyone is enveloped in their tents, their hatches battened down. It's only 7 p.m.

We can't sleep more than 10 minutes at a time. The wind is too strong, making the tent undulate and lash about. I'm wearing eight layers on the top, three on the bottom and three pairs of socks. I am nestled in a 10-degree down bag with a wooly cap and gloves on. I am still cold.

I need to go to the bathroom and don't want to get out of the tent. Finally, I do, crouching over the WAG bag, my behind bare to the whipping wind, hoping I won't pee on my clothing. The full moon illuminates the stark landscape. The WAG bag instructions say to add either water or urine to make the gelling powder work. I pee for all I'm worth, not realizing that the more I pee into the solution, the heavier the bag becomes. Now I have to lug this thing in my pack, too.

I'm back in my sleeping bag when I remember the leftover food in my backpack that needs to be moved to the bear canister. I nudge Jarrod and tell him. He groans and rolls over. "Since it's in your pack, you should get it," he says.

"But the canister's in *your* pack."

We both get up, grouchy. The wind and cold have intensified. I dig out the food and Jarrod shoves it in the canister, which, in order to lock, requires the twist of a round silver disc with a coin or similar object. We pat our pockets. We left all our money back in the car. I try my thumbnail. That will never work. The wind is ripping at our faces and stinging our eyes. Jarrod searches frantically for a skinny rock. We're freezing and being blown away, but can't leave an open bear canister. *Why don't they make skinny rocks!*

"Go see if Rich has a coin," I command. Then I remember. "Jarrod, your Swiss army knife!" Altitude stupidity has clearly hit. He locks the canister and we climb back into bed.

(Later, Rich will tell me that he, too, remembered his and Zane's bear canister. He went outside, tired and not thinking, trying to shove food into the mouth of the canister. "When I couldn't get it all in, I started to use my foot to shove it in," he'll explain. During the night, the rain fly for

their tent will fly off and their tent will collapse two times.)

I keep waiting for morning to come. The night goes on and on. There's a sound the wind makes, like a train in the distance, before it hits. And then, bam, it lets you have it. Sometimes the sound comes and you brace yourself and not much happens. Other times, it's horrible—like the train is about to run you over.

The alarm goes off at 4:30 a.m. According to our plan, it's time to summit.

"Go check with Rich and tell me what he says."

"Dubious," Jarrod reports. We decide to check again later.

5:30 a.m. Still dubious.

6 a.m. Other hikers are bustling about. I call down to one group. "What do you think? Are you guys continuing?"

They shake their heads no.

"Let's rest and see what it looks like when the sun's fully up," Rich suggests.

As the time ticks away, I know my chances to summit are going with it. I can only control my effort and attitude, I remind myself. I'm here for some reason and if I don't get to summit, I'm still here to learn something—though I have no idea what.

When the sun rises, we see the lake where we'd planned to get water last night. It's frozen solid now with wave patterns inscribed across its surface. Serious looking mountaineers are gathering equipment on the ledge below us, adjusting goggles.

"You summiting?" I ask.

Of their group, two have decided to go back down, two are planning to go on.

"If it's this cold and windy here, will it get worse up the trail?" I ask.

"Oh, it's going to get worse. Much worse."

The four of us confer. "I didn't come on this trip to pursue misery," I tell them. The adventure had called to me, not bagging the peak. Rich is in agreement. Zane and Jarrod are bummed, but no one argues to go forward. We've all had enough. We're hungry, exhausted, thirsty, and more tired than we ever imagined.

"Let's get some sleep and then, when it warms up a bit, we'll head down."

For weeks I have been picturing myself at the little shelter on the top of Whitney, raising my arms in exaltation, shouting to the world "I did

it!" I imagine I can see for miles in every direction, view almost the entire lower 48 in one fell swoop. I'm on the top of the world and I feel glorious.

As I drift off to sleep, I let go of that dream.

We doze; the wind begins to die down. All other hikers staying at this base camp have either gone down or up. We're alone. I assess the tent. The items I'd placed in the hanging mesh bag for storage are all missing. My glasses have been tossed about and are askew. The bag of ibuprofen not only went flying during the night, but the pills came out of the Ziploc baggie and are now scattered around the tent. The watch I'd brought has stopped working. The headlamp has ejected its batteries. I look for the water I'd brought inside the tent last night to keep it from freezing. A thick scrim of ice prevents access.

We try to make some kind of breakfast, holding Nalgene bottles and Camelbak reservoirs over the steaming kettle to melt the liquids. All Zane and Rich can handle is a taste of instant soup. I make Jarrod a small serving of oatmeal but he vomits instead of eating. "I told you I wasn't feeling well." All he wants is what's left of his Gatorade from yesterday; it's a slushee. I melt it for him and offer to pack up his things to allow him to rest. Rich tries to break through the ice on the lake to get more water but yields no more than half a liter —and a thoroughly frozen hand.

I pack Jarrod's sleeping bag. Each shove of the down bag into its stuff sack requires as much energy as running a block. I'm sitting on the tent floor, wondering why this simple task is so amazingly difficult, when Rich calls out.

"Hey, do we have hot chocolate? We have a guy in bad shape here."

A youngish man, probably in his early 30s, is sitting on a rock talking with Rich who's covering the man in a down sleeping bag and a silver emergency blanket. I rummage through the bear canister. No hot chocolate, no soup.

"What about the Gatorade?" Rich asks. I dig out the single-serving instant packets. I melt water and boil it to fix a mug of hot Gatorade and electrolyte mix. The man can't stop shivering. After a mug-full, he's able to talk.

His name is John and he's from Glendora. He's in excellent shape and carrying all the right equipment—along with a serious case of hypothermia. He attempted a one-day summit, leaving at 2:30 a.m. last night. For hours, he hiked in horrible conditions, joining a group of hikers he met

on the trail. When he got to within a mile or two of the summit, though, he became disoriented and lost the others he'd banded with. He knew he was in trouble and turned back. Coming down the trail, though, he passed out repeatedly and prayed he'd find someone still in Trail Camp to help him.

We are the only people left.

"Would you be able to take more Gatorade?" I ask. We're now using what little ice water Rich was able to get from the lake, the last of our water. John slowly drinks the second mug. By now, the wind has finally calmed and the sun has come out. The high at Trail Camp today will not break the freezing mark, but the sun feels like a benediction. After about an hour, John says he better head down the mountain.

"If you wait for us to finishing packing," I offer, "we'll walk with you."

"I want to start moving now that I'm a little warmer." He's still shivering, but standing and walking around. He hands back the sleeping bag but takes the emergency blanket with him, wrapped around his shoulders.

I watch him fade down the trail. A flash of silver and then he's gone.

Finally we start down. We're dehydrated and have no water. We pass waterfalls that only yesterday afternoon were flowing; they're nearly solid ice now. We run into a ranger and tell him about John.

"Man, that guy's lucky he found you," the ranger says. "If not, he probably would have perished."

Really?

"This is a really dangerous time to be doing this hike," the ranger explains. "The weather turns so quickly. Tonight, it's going to be even 10 degrees colder."

We mention the helicopter we heard during the night.

"We had to rescue a hiker on the Mountaineer Route," the ranger says. "A lot of rescues this time of year."

I think about his words as we hike on. Was this a foolish endeavor? We planned well, we trained hard, carried all we needed. And we got unlucky with the weather. Bottom line: life will hand us what it hands us. It's up to us to decide what to do with it. We could have pursued the peak, but we might have ended up like John—or worse. Then again, we could have decided not make the attempt at all and stayed back home in our soft, warm beds, but what fun is that?

Not that this is exactly fun.

This is about something more than fun. And, I realize now, more than about making the summit. It's about becoming more awake to my life as it's unfolding, being alive in the moment and feeling it all.

We stop for water and lunch at the spring. Jarrod can only eat small amounts. It's funny: I was sure he would be the one giving me a hard time for being a slow poke. And here he is, curled up, barely able to eat, asking me to get him some water. Rich was wrecked last night. And the lone hiker, John? Out of the lot of us, he's the one who should have made it. He was young, fit, outfitted, and ready to go. And yet he ended up in the worst shape of all.

We never know what's in store. While we can prepare as best as possible for what we *hope* will unfold, we can never make the unpredictable go away, nor insure that things will work out the way we'd have them. Even when we've given the best effort we can muster, sometimes things don't work out. And then it just comes down to attitude, and accepting what is.

The final leg down takes forever. When we reach the Portal in the late afternoon, we chat with two hikers. They stayed at Trail Camp last night, too, but unlike us, had left at 4:30 a.m. to summit.

"How was it?"

"Let's see: our equipment registered wind chill temps of -17 degrees. The wind was blowing at nearly 90 mph," one answers.

"It was interesting," the other one adds. "Not many people around."

I think about it. If we'd pushed through, we might have made it. Maybe I would have discovered I'm stronger than I think I am. But when I'm honest with myself, I'm glad we didn't.

We inch our way to the car, disposing of used WAG bags and rejoicing in access to solar toilets. Every step hurts. I can't wait to pull off my boots.

We ride home in our stocking feet. Jarrod, who's feeling better now, plays disc jockey, introducing the rest of us to new music.

At a rest stop, we stand to get gas and go to the bathroom. Choruses of "ouch, ouch, ouch" erupt from all four of us. Every body part hurts.

"So, next year?" I ask as we get closer to home. "One-day summit, or reservations earlier in the season?"

Jarrod proffers the idea of the 71-mile ten-day hike from Sequoia National Park, which Zane likes.

"Let's decide in February when the permit lottery applications are due," Rich answers.

As Jarrod drives, the rest of us doze. We hurt. We are tired and cold

and hungry. But we're on our way home. And we received from this journey exactly what we'd come looking for: over the past four days and counting, we have been magnificently, gloriously alive.