

HERE

Silvia bends her head towards the dry and dusty bike trail at her feet. Late afternoon sun, strong and unwavering heat, clings to the back of her neck. A nylon backpack presses into the base of her spine, filled to the brim with tortillas, cheese and peanut butter, a sleeping bag, mat and tarp. The fluorescent yellow and bright blue taffeta are something of a solace. They are the same materials she observed, packed in bundles, on other hikers' backs, and with them she gains grounding to stand up to the nerves on her mind, the ones that squish and fray with the stress of inexperience.

I know I'm not a camper, she thinks, as a wide shot of herself unfolds in her brain. She sees her body, small and dark, olive shades emerging from the pores of her skin from the strength of the sun. Green and deep yellow leafed trees are all around, her nose like a compass pointed at the path she climbs ahead. I know I haven't done this before, she thinks, but continues taking steps one foot shiftily falling in front of the other, on a path she hopes will lead her to something fresh and beautiful.

With each step forward up the steep path to the higher lands of Mount Hood National Forest, the bag pulls her back like a protest. The trail is sheathed in layers of pale brown dust, and printed with tracks of mountain bike trails like a railroad. It's one of the more traveled areas of the national forest, and runs parallel to the cars that roll in a steady flow along Welches Road, the main highway in the small mountain town in Oregon, that runs north to Washington State, an outdoorsy county called Skamania, with a rundown bridge and a heaven-bent name, the Bridge of the Gods.

It is the main highway in Welches, a town small enough to miss if you blink. She tries to imagine the dirtscape changing into streams and creaks, as she knows it will from the map folded in her back pocket of her jeans. I've marked where the path will turn for Pegleg falls, she thinks to herself, and recalls the park ranger's fluorescent green highlighter sliding across the skinny lines of topography two hours earlier.

Before she set out for the trail, Silvia stood in the ranger's office in the main part of town. It was a building reminiscent of a rest stop off the highway, located in a smattering of other scattered structures. A Dairy Queen across the road. A pancake and waffle diner, a lodge with a sign for fruit pie, and a motel up ahead. She traced her finger along a paper map route on the counter. Pegleg Falls stood out to her. It didn't sound too mysterious or enigmatic. It wasn't Lost Creek or Angels Falls or Mirror Lake. She thought of Miss Piggy when she read it. It was silly and off beat and she decided it might make a good destination for her first night solo camping.

That was before she bought the map for a dollar twenty five and before she spoke to the park ranger about her plans.

— Just you out here, he asked, with his wrinkled blue eyes staring down at the top of her head.

— Just me, she replied.

She didn't look up from his neon orange button up shirt.

— Alright, I'd just avoid this trail here, he said.

He illuminated the black and white map with a lime green highlighter, and followed the trail to Pegleg Falls only for a moment before swirling down and away from the falls and the river, along a trail called Hunchback.

— A cougar killed a woman there last year and you, my dear, might just be a snack before lunch, he concluded.

Now as she walks, Silvia shifts her eyes to the green rows of trees surrounding the path and clutches a little silver whistle that hangs on a lanyard around her neck. It thumps against her chest with each step.

The hike is a result of being called to work in a resort hotel in Welches. It took two hours, three trains and a bus, to reach from Portland. She signed up with Corporate Care early in the summer to make extra cash on her off-days from the Vietnamese restaurant she cooks at. The company works with big firms, insurance companies like Edward Jones, to provide childcare for parents while they attend meetings arranged in luxury hotels like this one built 10 miles out from Mount Hood.

When she arrived she slipped on the neon, bright yellow t-shirt the Corporate Care team gave her as she left her interview. A few concierges directed her to different corners of the long hallways. She crossed the lobby, a dim-lit room with a large chandelier that sparkled with gems and dangling crystals in its center. A wall of windows that extended to the ceiling revealed the huge, slate-colored rock faces of the surrounding mountains. Spacious maroon sofas striped the edges of the room and she felt the urge to linger but felt a stare on her. A woman asked, are you one of the nannies. She responded dry, yes.

When Silvia saw the job would be in a hotel in Welches, she wanted to take the opportunity to see the mountains. She was living in Portland only for the summer and had not yet seen the mountain which, although only fifty miles from her rented apartment in North Portland, proved difficult to reach without a car. She saw its icy peaks, a huge and shimmering glacier, almost every day from Portland. Until then she had never seen a mountain bigger than four thousand feet and this one, stretching far up into the sky at over twelve thousand feet, felt to her like being in the presence of a frosted and omnipotent god.

The morning with the kids was a mixed bag. Her body felt strained from the early morning traveling, for which she needed a five a.m. alarm to arrive at the resort by 8 a.m. She had to pee and wanted a stronger coffee than the first cup she got at the gas station, which did not shake her grogginess, and where the worker refused her the bathroom.

She felt unprepared for the kids' energy, and though it embarrassed her to acknowledge, she was also concerned that the kids would find a way to bully her. These thoughts swirled in her mind with an edge that irritated her as she set up the room with decorations her supervisor was distributing in boxes to all the 'nannies.' Paper kites and rainbow streamers to tape on the walls, superman vinyl tablecloths for the round tables in the big hall, boxes of beads, plastic jewels, glue sticks and crafts at the centers.

The result was an odd hodgepodge of luxury, the walls painted a soft yellow color, pale like an egg, royal red carpet in the halls and a patio garden with ceramic tiles and sliding glass door, mingled with snacks like cheese sticks, gushers and goldfish crackers.

When the kids began rolling into the hall that she and the other counselors set up, her anxieties shifted like water.

She danced and froze to a nonsense song she made up until the kids caught her drift and joined, their small bodies and arms swinging in the air, moving with her raspy voice and halting when she became silent. Their laughter and shouts rose like steam. When she sat down, a girl who said her name is Lucy, with big blue eyes and long brown hair, thin like a feather, wanted to glue two red jewels on Silvia's cheeks. She said, of course. When you leave, Lucy said, I might cry.

The fog of skepticism lifted from the kids, and pulled away from her mind like the ocean retreating from sand, coming again when she remembered her plans to venture into the rock faces that looked cold and dark like steel, leaving again when Lucy looked up at her and smiled.

Silvia had not hiked as a child. She didn't take backpacking trips with her mother or father, who usually warned against the unknown dangers of wilderness. But she felt drawn to the itchy grass parks where she grew up in Queens, the small bits of wind, smelling sweet and different from the concrete roads, the white plastic bags rolling along and the cigarette ends sliding in streams in the rain. And she loved a large boulder in her backyard, set in short and bright grass. It was sizable enough for her body to lay on the length of its gray-blue flinted surface, radiant with bright chips of indigo, and seemed to her like scales left by a mermaid. She could still close her eyes and remember her tan skin glowing in the sunlight, a lazy afternoon unfolding in the sky as the planet made its slow lap around the warmest thing near, the closest she feels to peace.

It is a fire she does not know how to feed. She wants to gush about the beauty of the Hudson when it flashes like iron in the daylight, vast, rippling and bright like a canon. The softness of the snow when it falls slowly for hours, the sky dark in shades of purple and

magenta, the clouds twisted above like anger and releasing the tension in delicate fluffs of nipping ice. The words do not come to her. She mourns very quietly, by herself, the chocolate and green whirls that curl in the creeks near her home in Portland, the cigarettes flung in rusted sewers and the pigeons that are kicked and fed french fries. And even now, she regrets the numbness she has developed to the black trash bags that leave the Vietnamese restaurant each night, filled with disposable plates and utensils, in a mass that once repulsed her.

As she was leaving the morning shift with the kids she saw the mountain, still far away in distance but much closer than she had ever seen it, with monstrous twists and ridges that lead up to the peak. Mount Hood seemed an integral, irreplaceable structure in this corner of the country, immovable and permanent and dismissive of anyone who comes near it.

It seemed to Silvia the most perfect picture of power. She squinted her eyes in the sunlight and felt the hard edges of the two red jewels Lucy pasted under her eyes. She scrunched her nose and they pinched into her cheeks. She reached into her nylon bag to pull a wool flannel around her shoulders, and the warm fabric caught the hairs on her arms, raised and lifted by the cool mountain air.

Now, she continues taking steps as dirt shuffles beneath her. She places the tips of the silver whistle in her mouth and holds it lightly between her teeth. She takes a deep breath and exhales without sounding it. I'm walking in fear, she thinks to herself. I'm used to walking in fear, but this is a different one. A more primal and tangible one. A more reasonable one. It's not unusual to me, she thinks. How can I explain this, and a cloud of mysterious darkness vibrates against the walls of her skull.

She imagines a dim red haze expanding within the bones. I've been so confused as a little child, trying to take what I can get, but there were screams and there were tears and there was anger and none of it mine. I'm walking now alone, she thinks, looking for something that could be mine. Misplaced sounds come to her like echos that are far away. Thunder of doors slamming, the walls shaking in tremors, and then silence. Splintered wood at the hinges creaking, a rat squeal that sounds an alarm in her body, and the rest she refuses to recall long enough to give the words. The noise submerges back into the red darkness that she knows by her throat, a tight and constricted vessel, her voice dry, and her eyes wide and searching.

As she walks, her eyes now move quickly between the mountain bike tracks below her feet and the dense row of trees that line both sides of the trail. She tells herself that if there are two golden and icy green gemstone eyes lurking behind the strings of tan trees, she will see them before they see her. She tells herself this lie over and over.

Each rustle behind the trees makes her heart fall somewhere deep in her body until she can hardly listen to the soft thud of her own footsteps without clutching at the silver whistle. She got it for free from a boy who was working at a hiking supplies store between the ranger station and the trail.

She had seen him standing against a bridge, taking puffs from a joint, as she walked up the long hill to the trail.

He was seated at the counter, wearing a striped button up shirt and blue jeans, and was flipping through a *Family Handyman* magazine.

— I sure wouldn't be on Mount Hood without one, he told her with a grave and detached look in his eyes.

— You ever hear a little cat creep up on ya? No? Well, a cougar's just one big cat, he exclaimed with a roaring laugh.

Just one big cat, Silvia repeats to herself now, and the smoke of anger burns hot in her head, her nostrils flare. It's not like I have a car or a bus I can just climb onto and go back home, she thinks. My house is hours away, the last bus already left at 2 p.m. and a cab would be a hundred dollars easy. It's not funny to me, she thinks.

Earlier today, after an hour and a half on the trail, she was lost for a brief moment. The trail had been two skinny stripes of grass surrounded by trees along the edges like a wide tunnel. Short and dry shrubs were all around. They were Oregon versions of hazel and hawthorn shrubs, she learned from the sign posted at the entrance, and they looked weak and unusual compared to the bushy, broccoli-topped trees she was used to on the East coast.

She found herself in an area more brown and sand colored than green, with some large cabin-like houses spread far apart. Tall and colored like ochre and dark red. Unmarked roads extended like a grid, pockmarked by short trees.

I shouldn't have found a neighborhood if I stuck to the map, she thought then, and began tracing the path on the paper map with her finger. It is a straight line without any turns. Damn, she thought, and began a debate of whether she should continue taking steps forward, however hesitant they had become, or retracing back to where the main road was closer, and the world was greener.

She continued forward and hoped to hear the whir of a mountain bike speeding. She didn't hear much, but soon saw a couple ahead, on the yellow road that stretched ahead of her.

A small toddler was straddled on the shoulders of a woman, who walked alongside a tall, blonde man. The toddler's arm was outstretched to a low branch that hung from a tree above.

Silvia was nervous to approach them, but the unknown path in front of her proved a stronger enemy. She shuffled and quickened her steps, I don't want to scare them she thought, and when she said, hi, excuse me, she felt the hard edges of the jewels press into the space under her eyes. They turned.

— Oh, hi honey, the woman said, her eyes falling on the red jewels on her face for a moment.

— Hello, sorry to interrupt you, I'm hiking to this trail and I might be lost, do you know it, she asked while extending the paper map in her hands.

— Yeah, you're going right, it just doesn't look it, with all of these houses, she responded with a little laugh.

— We're heading back from a walk and our house is on your way. That's my husband, we're used to the through-hikers. You can walk with us some ways if you like, she added.

Silvia nodded. A wave of relief came over her and she wanted to ask them about the cougars.

— This is my husband Tommy, and up here is my little one, she said and shrugged her shoulders. The baby, too small to speak, looked down at Silvia and turned its mouth into an O-shape. Tommy gave her a reserved smile and a firm handshake.

— Thank you, Silvia said. I'm glad I'm on the right path, I was getting nervous, and added, you know people have been telling me about the cougars, I wonder what you think if you live here.

The woman nodded, Tommy agreed, the baby kept its surprised expression.

— The cougars, yeah we have them. But they're not usually just out and about, you know, she said with a quick grimace, flashing the bottom row of her teeth, straight and frosty.

— I'll tell you this, though. I always have a can of bear spray in my purse, just in case.

And actually, there was one time, Tommy, you must remember. We were out with the dog, the baby wasn't here yet. Tommy had the leash way out, our dog was maybe twenty yards ahead. I can't say what it was, but something inside me could, I don't know, feel something. I kept telling Tommy, bring the dog back, pull the leash in, bring the dog in. And he did, and then, we didn't see anything except for a shadow, you know, kind of moving inside the trees. But all of a sudden there was that shadow coming from the rows over there, it was moving fast, and I just jumped on my dog. Like hurled myself on him. And the shadow went away. But that was, what Tommy, five or six years back? I think that *might* have been our only encounter.

— You know, I love what you're doing, Tommy added, we used to do that when we were younger, just kind of head into the woods for a beautiful evening. I think you're not only brave, but strong to rough it alone. But I'd like to give you a can of bear spray if you would take it, we have so many. Just use it on another person if they're bothering you, he added with a laugh.

— And I like your gems, the woman chimed in. It's important to have some fun.

Now, Silvia continues climbing the trail with steps that create a steady burn in her thighs. Up as the trail twists around skinny trees, up past short bushes with flat leaves and long spikes. Up with her ears red hot from the sun, up with the taste of tin on her teeth and the bear spray canister tapping against her hip.

The clearing to Pegleg Falls is unmarked. It's not a wide open fall like she expected, but rather a collection of swimming holes each about the size of a kitchen table. The falls are partially visible between a jumble of ashy, blanched rocks. Clear water pours down in a thick stream and leaves ripples of frothy waves in one of the pools. She squats next to one of them, and pushes one of her hands into a patch of the soft green plants. Musty smells of moss and dirt rises, and crescents of the black soil lodge under her nails.

Silvia sets her bag down on a flat rock and removes her sneakers and socks. Brown dust cakes each toe nail. She removes her shirt, sports bra and shorts and folds them in a small pile next to her bag. The tang of sweat floats from the clothes in the breeze. The summer evening warmth surrounds her body, the sky a smooth shade of pale blue as the earth turns away from the sun. Silvia glances down at her lean body, scattered with black and brown splotches of dirt. Cougar snack.

She takes steps into the pool as chills spread goosebumps over her chest. Her breasts seem to glow in the late sun, like two pale fish with pointed freckles in the cold water. Her chest begins to feel empty as the cold shock spreads over her skin, the nerves beneath firing back as if in protest, while her brain sinks into relief from the heat, sweat and labor of resisting gravity.

She leans her head back into the water and slides her hands through her hair. Dirt that had been dried in the roots now becomes slick and slippery between her fingers. The falls create a hum under the surface that reminds her of a fire burning at night. Looking away from the treeline this long makes her nervous, and so she emerges to the surface to glance around every few moments.

Silvia turns her head to see the surrounding swimming holes, the pale rocks and the buzzing falls, the slender trees with curved arcs, and verdure that extends for hundreds of miles from this spot called Pegleg Falls.

Chills overcome the nape of her neck, stinging a little in the breeze, as she returns her gaze to the treeline. I am looking for fear, she thinks, as the ripples on the water roll slowly away from her body. Her outline is clear below its transparent surface. I am alone and afraid, but I'm here.