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In Search of Solace

What marks the beginning of your year? Is it New Year's Day? The first day back to work after the holidays? The first day of the spring semester? For the past four years, my year has started the day I get back from Big Bend National Park. I spend this day unpacking my gear, catching up on the news, and checking and double checking my class schedule. Within a week the spring semester starts and I'm back in my usual routine. A month goes by and the first round of tests flood the campus. The lines at the coffee shops grow longer and all of my favorite library spots are taken. I don't mind though, I secretly love tests. I suppose I'm a bit of an outcast in that I not so secretly love learning. Earth sciences fascinate me and at one point I would have been content to make studying my career. Lately though I see less of the projector screen and more of the walls. There are eight of them. Four walls of a classroom enclosed within four walls of the building. Twelve if you count the ceiling, floor, roof and ground. Twelve walls separate learning science from experiencing it. I say that my year starts the day I get back because that's when the longing starts. An incessant nagging builds in me from the moment I get back until it peaks and by the end of the year I have to escape again. I cannot say what this longing is, only that the wilderness of Big Bend holds the key. This year I was determined to find the answer.

Day 1:

"The mountains are calling, and I must go." – John Muir

As soon as I woke I knew that Old Yeller had survived the night. I knew this because of the distinct lack of tent across my face. Our yellow, someone-forgot-the-tent-so-we-picked-one-up-at-Walmart, tent, made it through the windy first night. After I assured the nosy camp host that yes, I was aware of how loud my truck is and yes, it *was* only 15 minutes after the end of quiet hours, we drove the 7/10ths of a mile to the trailhead. The irony of driving less than a mile to embark on a 15-mile hike is not lost on me, but we were in a hurry, we had a mountain to climb.

As the four of us stepped from the parking lot I was struck by how worn the trail was, almost as if it was paved for commercial use. "Here we are", I thought, "130 miles from the nearest major city, 100 miles into the arid, inhospitable desert, 3000 ft into the mountains, on a chill winter morning of 35 degrees". And the trail is so worn by foot traffic as to make the markers obsolete. I shrugged off the silly outrage I felt. Nothing I can do about too many people in *my* Big Bend. As with all journeys, our hike began with a single step. After that we took several more steps. We continued taking steps and before long my gait shifted from an enthusiastic saunter to a slow and dreadful trudge. It dawned on me that I was the least fit of our foursome. My brother is a skilled road cyclist and mountain biker, my buddy Walker is a trail runner with a 30k race under his belt, and my friend Kendall has the stride of a giant. I was in for a long day. What kept me moving was the thought of satisfying the incessant nag I felt urging me to get away, to *be,* away. Perhaps, I reasoned, maybe what I needed was to take a page out of John Muir's book and climb myself a mountain.

The Chisos mountains are a testament to the wonders of geology. While it's true that there is some soil on these mountains and some very robust shrubs and even trees clinging to the steep slopes, most of the peaks are made of beautiful, barren rock. And not just any rock. The rock of the Chisos is rhyolite, a volcanic rock that erupted 32 million years ago with enough mass to form mountains that tower 3000 ft above the desert (Gray and Page 9). Due to a trick of chemistry, the surface of the rhyolite has slowly turned from a dull grey to a rosy pink like that of a Texas sunset. The scientist in me was frantic to share my knowledge, but I held my tongue. The only downside I've found to being so passionate about science is that I rarely find an audience with the curiosity to match. This too had been plaguing my mind. Maybe part of the emptiness I felt was caused by never having anyone around that could truly appreciate the natural world as I could. The desert is wonderful, and I needed them to understand. But I know too well that my habitual teaching can be wearisome, if not downright irritating.

Several times on the way up I had to remind the guys to stop and smell the roses. Or in this case take your eyes of the ground in front of your feet for 5 damn seconds and at least appreciate the beauty. There's a story about leading a horse to water that fits here. With every switchback the campground became more of a distorted mismatch of colors until finally we couldn't make out individual tents. Near the halfway mark we crested a ridge and found several groups of hikers in different stages of preparation. Some were eating lunch, some were donning windbreakers and some were simply checking straps and laces. The four of us took seat on a slab that looked slightly softer than the surrounding rock. We greedily exchanged snacks and I took a moment to survey our new-found friends. I focused on an odd middle-aged man that appeared to be alone. What made him odd was that while others were peering out over the ridge, he had his back turned to the postcard-worthy scene. Here was a man, with enough lens on his binoculars to read the license plates below, fixated on a bird perched not 30 feet away. 30 feet! With binoculars that looked more like two telescopes strapped together. I was baffled. With a grin on his face he lowered his binoculars, took out a notepad and scribbled some notes. It became obvious to me later that his birds were the equivalent of my rock. Had he figured it out? Was the key to answering that demanding call as simple as going it alone with no expectations but your own? Surely, I could never enjoy such a trip without my friends. Or could I?

After our break, we started the last leg of the climb, a side trail that would take us to the highest peak in the park. Walker's singlemindedness about reaching the peak led him to outpace me, and the others followed. Devoid of conversation and on the eve of my last semester, it seemed natural to reminisce about past classes. Maybe I was mad about being left behind, but I seemed fixated on a frustrating day. It was a classroom in the geography building, my second home. After an agonizing two weeks, we were finally getting our test grades back. This was a particularly wordy professor of a difficult subject. Walker and I seemed to spend most of our class time joking about the futility of keeping up with our auctioneer of a professor. The tests came. The average was a high C, Walker a high B. I had a

perfect 100, again. We fell into our routine, Walker congratulating me, me thanking him and trying not to notice the tinge of jealousy in his voice. I did my best to mimic the elation that a normal person would have felt, but at that point it had become too commonplace. And then came the awkward glances from around the room. Our professor had announced there was no curve, which told the class someone had ruined it. I recognized enough faces to know that I had done this to them before. I invented disdain in their looks. How could I enjoy my efforts knowing I had robbed them of precious points? I was angry, I wanted to tell them it was their fault for being stupid. Instead I directed my anger towards the professor. If she had made the test harder I wouldn't be in this position. I recognized then, and not for the first time, that something was wrong. A normal person would have been ecstatic or at least relieved. It felt trivial, useless.

My thoughts carried me quickly up the trail, but I reached the base of the final scramble too late to see my friends make the ascent. I surveyed my options and picked what seemed the easiest route. The climb was not difficult and I reached the top with ease. What do you do when you reach the top of a mountain? You eat lunch of course. Between bites, we slowly turned our gaze to take in the view. People speak of a view as being breathtaking, but it's not like that at all. There's too much to take in. You choose a vantage and spend a moment, a minute, as long as it takes to pick out all the details your eyes can make out. Then you rotate in your seat and start all over again with a thousand new details. It's not the view you remember, that's what pictures are for. It's the feeling that the view invokes that you take with you. I felt accomplished. I had been planning this moment for months. Finally, I had climbed a mountain with my closest friends by my side (well, mostly by my side, except for that last bit). But I also felt lost. It was like I had followed a treasure map through all the turns and traps only to find that the X didn't exist. Apparently, the call of the mountains was not what I was searching for.

Day 2:

"You can't see anything from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamn contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbrush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail, you'll see something, maybe.

—Edward Abbey

As we veered onto the dirt road that would take us to the abandoned copper mine, Walker started playing John Denver's *Country Road.* He explained to us that he wanted our trip to have a song. A song that for years to come would bring him back to this time and this place, and our adventures together. It didn't matter to him that that sort of thing is supposed to happen organically, he was determined to make it stick. As the song started to play for the fourth time (consecutively), I was certain that his plan was going to backfire. But the further we traveled from the paved road, the more I started to appreciate the lyrics (Denver):

> Country roads, take me home
> To the place I belong
> West Virginia, Mountain mamma
> Take me home, country roads

Home. Maybe that was what I was searching for. Not for a particular location, but to a setting that I felt I belonged. Big Bend is 1200 square miles, and I was determined to find my place in it.

After a car drive long enough to make Abbey turn over in his grave, we finally reached our destination. Mariscal mine is an abandoned mercury mine nestled into the foot of Mariscal mountain. The mine saw its last use in the 1940's, when the end of the war caused the price of mercury to plummet. What makes the mine fascinating is the sense of surrealism that comes from walking through the past, history beneath your feet. The structures are remarkably well preserved for having been abandoned in a desert for 70 years. A vigorous walk up the hill, after an hour in an air-conditioned truck, makes you wonder about the folk that made this their living. What possessed these men to travel by mule train for a day across the desert to then drop hundreds of feet into the mountain to collect a

poisonous rock? And why did I think it sounded like fun? Great as it was, the mine was not the treasure of the day.

I knew the lay of the land. That is to say that I knew we were standing at the foot of a geologic anticline that is known as Mariscal mountain. But what I wasn't prepared for was the textbook geology I was experiencing. I climbed to the top of the ridge in a daze. As I climbed higher the pieces of the puzzle started to fit together. Here I was, standing on top of a structure referenced in textbooks almost as a mythological creature. You study anticlines and fold belts, and you look at graphics depicting them. But no one actually goes out and sees them. I was climbing one! And there was more. To my east, a remarkably flat plane extended for miles to the base of a vertical wall 1500 ft high. San Vicente mountain, the next anticline in the fold structure. Until that moment I hadn't realized I'd lost my sense of wonder. How had I become so content to simply read about these marvels? I resolved then and there that I would never again let the mundane of textbooks and classrooms dull my sense of curiosity. Abbey was right, you can't see anything from a car. Or a classroom.

Day 3:

"In every walk with Nature one receives far more than he seeks" – John Muir

The final day and our final hike. I can't speak for the others, but I was in a strange mood. I wanted to be excited about a new hike, but it would be our last, and I wasn't ready to go home. I still hadn't found what I came for. I had one semester left before I graduated. 120 days before I would be handed a slip of paper that signified it was time I find a real job and join the masses who have voluntarily succumb to the dreary existence of the 'real world', as it's known. Scariest of all is that I found myself unable to answer what should have been a rhetorical question. "Will I ever find the time to come back?" It was our last day, and I wasn't leaving until I figured out what it was that I so desperately needed. Or why this wilderness always seemed to hold the answer.

By the time we reached the trailhead, the guys had dragged me out of my bleak mood. Walker was back at it with his music and my brother had discovered he could climb out of his window and into the bed of the truck to the beer. There was no need for this, we were on a dirt road with no other vehicles for miles and I easily could have stopped. But, as always seems to be the case with us, an elaborate and dangerous task (climbing around a truck that's barreling down a minefield of a dirt road) seemed better than a minor inconvenience (stopping for 30 seconds). After one last round of, *who can sing the loudest* (Kendall won), we came to the trailhead. The Grapevine Hills look like they belong on Mars. About the same time that the Chisos mountains erupted, a large mass of magma rose to just beneath the surface and stopped. Slowly the magma cooled and after several million years, the less resistant dirt around the rock washed away. This left the pillars and mounds and boulders of solidified magma standing as a series of alien hills and peaks. The attraction of the hills to the casual visitor is a balance rock, a car sized rock that fell from a higher peak, rolled downhill and landed perfectly balanced between two others. We reached the spot too easily. Barely a mile through the hills we came to the final section of trail that winded it's way up to the balance rock. There was nothing to it, hardly any climbing at all. We felt robbed. We wanted one last challenge and one last view before we had to head back to our tents for the final time. It made for good pictures but it was otherwise boring. And that's not a word to be tossed around lightly inside a national park.

Being bored, we did what any young naturalist would do. We turned our heads upwards, nodded our agreement, and began a mad dash for the highest point we could see. Walker and my brother forged ahead. I followed Kendal for a time but soon broke off onto my own path. There were no trails. We had no map and no way of knowing what we'd find on the other side of the next ridge. We could see our reward above us, a large pillar rising from the top of one of the hills, begging to be climbed. I threw caution to the wind. I jumped from boulder to outcrop and outcrop to boulder. I climbed up rockfaces I knew I'd have no chance of climbing down.

Reckless as it was, it felt right. “This is how Big Bend is supposed to be enjoyed”, I thought to myself. “Let the footpath highways wrought by the masses be used by the masses”. “From now on if I see something worth seeing, I turn my boots and go”. “If I find a climb that looks fun, I put my skills to the test”. Officially, Big Bend is 1,252 square miles, and even though this was my 4th trip in as many years, I felt like I had been given 1,251 square miles of new land to discover. Adventure is what I had been missing. The allure of the unknown. We regrouped atop our pillar to find that it was not *our* pillar. A rock cairn told us that someone had been here before. Well, this simply wouldn’t do. We turned our eyes upward to the next hill and the next peak and began our race again.

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