

Appalachia

Volume 68
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2017: Stories from the
Albums*

Article 8

2017

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Recommended Citation

Berry, Erica (2017) "Lady and the Camp: A Lost Uncle and the Found Wilderness," *Appalachia*: Vol. 68: No. 2, Article 8.

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Lady and the Camp

A lost uncle and the found wilderness

Erica Berry



ANNA'S BRACES FELL OFF AFTER BREAKFAST ON THE FIFTH DAY. I WAS rolling my rain jacket into my backpack when she came up to me, clutching them in her rosy palm—tiny metal pieces that had once been on her tiny ivory teeth. "Cricket," she said, "they've been loose for a while. I think we need to go to an orthodontist." Part of the chain was still in her mouth, and she cocked her head at me, smiling through wire and chapped lips, her cheeks a sunburned topography of mosquito bites.

I was leading a backpacking trip for middle-school girls through the alpine streams, granite outcroppings, and Indian paintbrush meadows of the Centennial Mountains of Montana.

At around 4 o'clock that morning, my co-guide had left on horseback to evacuate the ever-vomiting Mary. When I awoke, sweat-drenched, a few hours later, I was clutching my bear spray like a talisman in the mesh cave of my tent.

Now a pair of alien hands rummaged through my pack: dirty fingernails, swollen knuckles, bug-bitten palms, branch-scratched wrists, a rainbow of friendship bracelets. I put Anna's braces in a Ziploc bag, telling her we would call for advice when we got back to the van.

I told her I had once accidentally thrown my retainer away with a paper plate, and finding it had required a dive through a dumpster full of pizza crusts and used napkins. She laughed behind wet eyes.

Propping my hulking backpack against a tree, I wiggled into the straps. I had just finished my freshman year of college in Maine, where I considered myself a comfortable outdoorswoman. I had learned how to dig a shelf for a tent in a steep snowbank. I trusted the rope when rappelling backward off cliffs. I swam through rock-choked rapids when pitched out of a canoe. I felt my torso scrape gravel as a flipped kayak dragged me downstream. Now, being responsible for the girls had let me relearn my fears. Nausea swelled when I ran through the mental checklists of daily to-dos and to-avoids. When I thought of grizzlies and lightning and rattlesnakes and rockfall and bee stings causing anaphylactic shock, I thought immediately of the girls: their gap-toothed smiles, their miniature hiking boots, their laughter at learning to poop in the woods. I also thought of their parents, sitting on sunporches around the country, gripping their smartphones, and waiting for camp blog updates.

Girl campers explore Montana on horseback. ERICA BERRY

Ahead of me, twelve faces peered through pine needles and sunlight. The girls were grinning, kicking their feet like ponies in the trail. Behind them, above the horizon, a knot of black clouds shadowed a row of snowy summits. I wondered if I was living up to my camp name: Cricket, stolen in a crunch of indecision from our family's miniature Australian shepherd. After two sessions, I could almost forgive myself for answering to it. We had named her the first day we got her, after watching her hop through a meadow of thick grass that towered above her head. Her inability to know where she was going did not stop her from vaulting forward. She was an ankle-nudger, a gentle herder. She perpetually wagged the tail that she did not have.

"All ready, crew?" said a strange, strong voice beneath my ribs.

"Come on, Cricket," Astrid said. "We're following you!"

A FEW WEEKS AFTER CHRISTMAS 1985, MY MOTHER'S YOUNGER BROTHER shot himself in the head. He was not yet my uncle—20 years old, while my mother, at 22, was just younger than I am now. He exists only as a photograph for me: a silent, floppy-haired Brady Bunch boy, flannel-shirted, outdoorsy. A year before his death, Ladd had cut many of the ties to his parents and flown to Alaska, where winter meant a weak, bleak five hours of light a day. Some weeks after his death, my mother received a package from his friends in the mail. Among the odds and ends were two postcards with her name on them. They were not dated, and his handwriting fell across the body of the cards leaving no room for an address. "I'm doing very well," he wrote. It seems clear that he did not intend to send them. His friends arranged his funeral, and neither my grandparents nor my mother ever saw that town of Dillingham, Alaska, where Ladd had spent the last eighteen months of his life.

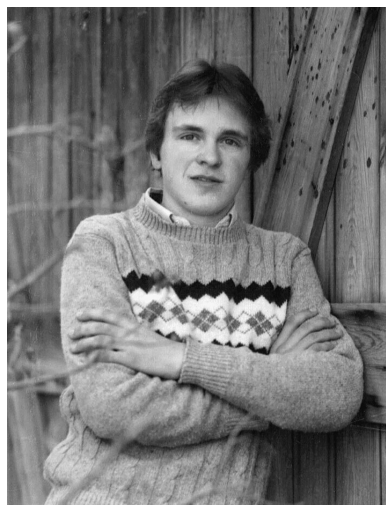
Growing up, Alaska was almost a non-word in my house. When Sarah Palin came along, I secretly thanked her for giving us a new way to talk about the state. It was easier to say the name with a caricatured drawl. It was easier to marvel at the escapades of her Wasilla family than to think about our own links to that frozen appendage of the continent. The outdoor camp for girls that I worked for ran one session each summer in Alaska, and the description used words like *rugged*, *truly competent*, *rip-roarin'*, and *adventuress*. When I learned I had been assigned the Montana sessions instead, I couldn't decide if I felt relief or disappointment.

In high school, on a backpacking trip with friends, I read Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (Anchor Books, 1997), the narrative of college graduate Chris McCandless, who donated his life savings to charity, hitchhiked the country,

and was found dead in a rusted blue school bus in Denali National Park. The weed-snarled vehicle has become a sort of shrine in Alaska, and at least one person has drowned in the roar of a snowmelt river trying to tag it. Among my guy friends, the book circulated like a dog-eared bible, tucked in backpacks next to Jack Kerouac and John Steinbeck. It is impossible to separate the story of McCandless's adventures from the story of his death, but the line between reverence and repulsion is blurry. He followed his dreams. He found salvation in the wilderness, and then it killed him.

The McCandless fantasy is especially easy for young men. Perhaps this is because, unfortunately, solo travel is harder for women. It is tempting to fantasize about burning your credit card, hitchhiking through the desert, reading Edward Abbey, letting facial hair sprawl across your boy-man face. The difference, of course, is that, unlike McCandless, you could do it right. Call your parents from truck-stop pay phones every few weeks, weather the winter with large supplies of lentils and oats, know how to carve and cure the animals that come across your path. You would not die. You would become a legend, not a parable.

Returning from the backpacking trip, I struggled to tell my mother that I, too, had found myself absorbed in McCandless's story. "I just have no desire to read it," she told me. "It's too sad." McCandless died a different death than Ladd. He was sick, starving, and solo, though the controversy over his cause of death lives on. His story was part Jack London and part Greek tragedy—McCandless's hubris, his unfounded confidence in his primitive survival skills, betrayed him. And yet, there are some similarities between him and my uncle. They were born within four years of each other, and they both died, alone, in the cold darkness of an Alaskan winter twenty-some years later. Both left their families, and neither wrote nor called. "Some people feel like they don't deserve love. They walk away quietly into empty spaces, trying to close the gaps of the past," McCandless wrote in his journal. In photos I have



Ladd Carlson, who would have been the author's uncle, but who committed suicide before she was born. COURTESY

OF BERRY FAMILY

seen of Ladd and McCandless, they are each wearing green-and-black-check flannel shirts.

There is something masculine about going off the map, a desire for Thoreauvian self-reliance best discovered beneath the pines, within the proud drum of your own heartbeat. After McCandless's death, Chris Medred wrote in the *Anchorage Daily News*, "The Alaska wilderness is a good place to test yourself. The Alaska wilderness is a bad place to find yourself."

Our society loves narratives of wilderness redemption. The stories go like this: Run away from something that scares you, and you will run into something better. There is a brutal, literal logic in this. When I applied for the summer wilderness guide job, I did it because I, too, wanted to escape from zippers of red-light traffic and the blur of mindless social interactions. I wanted to breathe sage and cedar, see the West, and trust the sinews of my legs. But if I went into the wild to uncover something just as primal as McCandless, it was not about being alone. I did not want to disappear, and I did not think I would find myself. I just wanted people to rely on me, and I wanted to show them they were right to do so. I wanted to practice being a mother.

ON FAMILY BACKPACKING TRIPS, MY FATHER USED TO CRAWL FROM the tent to boil water for us in the predawn birdsong. When the water was hot, he would unzip the tent flap and hand my mother, sister, and me coffee or hot cocoa in blue-and-white-speckled tin cups, singing his good mornings. He is not a man who talks very much about what spins through his head—he is slow to share both frustration and praise—and this particular action stands out to me as particularly character defining. It reveals a tenderness that, while far from dormant in the city, swelled in the mountains.

Later, when my sister's and my feet would slow under the weight of our packs, he would slither a lemon drop out of its plastic wrapper, coaxing us on. This was not a gendered caring—it was not because we were girls—but it was a parent's caring. I don't know if I knew it at the time, but it made me want to be a better person. It did not take long for my appreciation of the wilderness to blur with my appreciation for those glimmering versions of ourselves it offered back to us.

We refer to "human progress" as that trajectory of inventions to make life easier. We want to eat, drink, travel, and sleep better. We also want to love and communicate and die better. Capitalism assures us that these two aims

are tied: Buy this new potato peeler, and you will become a better mother. The mountains do not promise this. They ask a lot: competence, reverence, humbleness, and curiosity. In return, they blister and bruise and burn us, and somewhere—in that economy of dry oatmeal and the Milky Way, thunder, and a hawk's solemn flight—they thrill us.

We talk about “re-wilding” our landscape: digging up fields, planting trees, bringing back wolves and owls. We also talk about re-wilding our diet: Paleolithic posturing, forgoing tortillas and oranges. But re-wilding our lives: What does that look like? I am wary of romanticizing the prehistoric, preindustrial, pre-Apple eras because life is better now, for many more than me.

But each time you embark on a new adventure outside, you are given a chance to recalibrate yourself. There is something quietly invigorating about finding your bodily limits—wet feet, gnaw of hunger, a no-see-um bite. You pinpoint discomfort, and then you decide whether or not you will ignore it. Outdoors, you do this over and over again.

IN HIGH SCHOOL, ARMED WITH AN ICE AX IN AN OUTDOOR GROUP full of adolescent boys, I learned to ignore more than just physical pain. I recalibrated myself socially, trying to compartmentalize gender. I was pale and scrawny, with fears of heights and snakes and hypothermia, so I picked my battles. As the male majority jostled to out-hike and out-joke one another, I joined in. I had never had brothers, and I liked this new sort of companionship. If I was lonely, I convinced myself I was not. I perfected a five-second pee behind bushes and rocks and in wetsuits. Once, after contributing to a post-curry burping contest, a friend remarked that I had “really let myself go.”

He said it with mock horror and an appraising grin. What he meant, of course, was that after our time in the mountains, I had let the “feminine” go. My hair was twisted into week-old braids, and my face was wind-chapped and makeup-free. I remember feeling unsure about whether I should feel proud or insulted. In letting myself go—in leaving the performance of conventional girlhood back in the city—I wondered if I had lost something.

The camp I guided for in Montana embraced girlhood at 5,000 feet above sea level. Each night before bed, we gathered in a circle with a rainbow of nail polishes, awarding various “nails” to different girls: accolades for extra help, extra toughness, extra-good jokes. We had impromptu dance parties on dirt roads, stopping the car and putting on tutus and crowns to dance to Taylor Swift on a barbed-wire stage. We howled at the top of summits, and we sat



Erica Berry on the trail. COURTESY OF ERICA BERRY

in daisy meadows fielding the girls' questions about boyfriends in the "real world." I was surprised how little I missed the low-voiced chuckles of my male hiker friends from college and high school.

Before this, I had camped with an all-female group only once—when I was 11 years old, at a weeklong "empowerment" camp on a plot of forest and meadow in western Oregon. One morning, we stared at a tampon dissolving in a bucket, and then we bird-watched while the counselors shared livid descriptions of ob-gyn examinations. The director—a woman who walked in a halo of patchouli and wild gray hair—warned us to carry pepper spray whenever we were with men and sent us into the forest to glean wisdom from nature's goddess. I remember crouching against thick bursts of ferns, nested beneath a blue sky cut from the pine branches, waiting for my spirit animal while I tried not to cry. Needless to say, I did not leave with a deeper love for the trees, the eagles, or myself.

During one of my last days guiding in Montana, Jill, who was just a few years younger, broke down. She had attended the camp once before and had been slotted to become an intern the following summer, but she

was ready to go home. She missed her boyfriend. The hiking hurt. The guides were not allowed to be one-on-one with a camper unless we were in sight of the rest of the group—a lawsuit-preventative measure that I always heeded with another paranoid twist of fear—and I remember the two of us, sitting in soft pine needles by the side of a stream, watching as the other girls screeched and bucket-washed their hair in winter snowmelt. We joked, and we compared bug bites, and then we talked about our hike the day before: big summit, big views. She admitted she had been pleased with herself.

“But I could never do what you’re doing,” she said. I had laughed. I could only make sense of my summer in superlatives: It was the most rewarding thing to watch teenage girls learn to love the mountains, and learn to love themselves. But I was a teenager too then. It was the hardest thing to worry about whether I trusted myself shepherding them. I told some watered-down version of this to Jill, and she laughed at me.

“Oh, Cricket, that’s not even what I mean,” she said. “Really, it’s just your feet! They’re disgusting. A whole summer! I could never do it.” I followed her eyes down my bug-bitten legs all the way to my feet: zig-zagged with Chaco tans, the heels raw with shrunken blisters, toes wrinkled from sweat-soaked hiking socks, nails broken and purpling from boot pressure, echoes of chipped nail polish. They hadn’t even registered with me. Suddenly we were laughing, both of us, doubled over in the late-afternoon sun, until our eyes pooled and our bellies ached.

That night, I would sit cross-legged with the girls and coat my toenails in a garish shade of glitter polish. The next morning, I would pull on wool socks, easing my feet into leather boots. We would put our lives on our backs and hit the trail, telling jokes extra loudly to warn the bears. Afternoon clouds would form, and they would thicken or disperse. And if the path got steep, and I heard the first whines of doubt, I would reach into my pocket, searching for the hard, slippery plastic of a lemon drop.

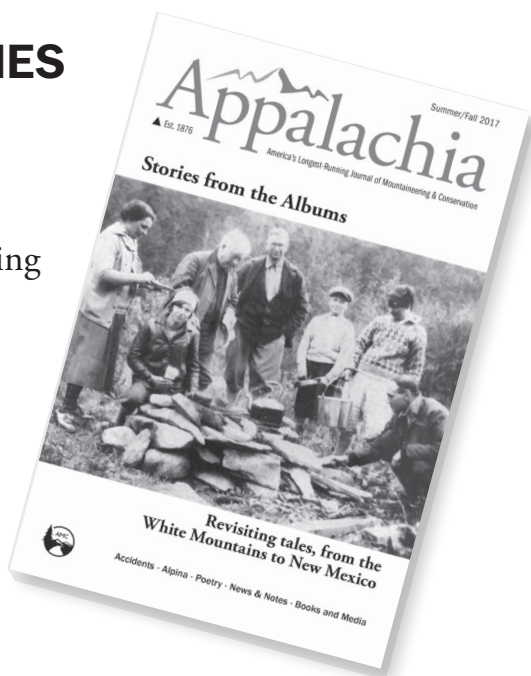
ERICA BERRY lives in Minneapolis, where she writes essays and reports for the Food and Environmental Reporting Network.

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