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# The Big One

*After altitude sickness thwarts her mother,  
a hiker forges on alone up Mount Whitney*

**Jia H. Jung**



ON THURSDAY, AUGUST 4, 2011, I SPENT 21 HOURS AND 38 MINUTES on Mount Whitney and discovered the meaning of life.

People are known to have existential revelations when confronting their own mortalities, and Mount Whitney, in California's Sequoia National Park, offers the necessary setting for such confrontations. At 14,494 feet, its summit marks the highest point in the lower 48 states. The most popular route is the Mount Whitney Trail, opened in 1904 along the path of a functional packing trail engineered by Gustave Marsh. Climbers must ascend only 6,400 feet of elevation on this path because it begins at 8,365 feet, but that's high enough to trigger altitude sickness at the outset. They face almost no risk of getting lost in the bare landscape, but they trudge the 22-mile round-trip mostly exposed to harsh sun, wind, and sudden storms as they wind up and down the famous 98 switchbacks. Every year, even experienced and fit hikers die or require air rescue because of some combination of fault and misfortune.

At age 29, I was one of roughly 25,000 attempting the climb that year. From April through October, the National Park Service allows 100 day climbers and 60 overnight visitors daily onto the mountainside. Aspiring climbers submit their names in January for the Mount Whitney trail pass lottery to secure permits to climb in July and August. My mother and I had missed this lottery, so our only recourse was to call in hopes of cancellations. We rang the reservation hotline until the rangers knew us by our voices. So occupied was I with the task of scoring permits that I scarcely researched the mountain itself. When I did peruse alternative routes to the summit, my browsing led only to stock online images of Sierran grandeur devoid of descriptions or instructions as to how best to approach these routes. The only campsite and trail maps I could find looked as if they had been scrawled by Sharpie with children's hands—returned hikers uploading scans of their used maps procured from god-knows-where as a visual boast of their victories. So, as our adventure became imminent, my only preconceived notion of the mountain was an iconic National Park Service image of the trail crest floating like a crown in the blue sky, flanked by laurels of pine.

I called the permit office one last time while sitting in a San Francisco laundromat with doors open to swirls of fog. Amazingly, the ranger said that two last-minute cancellations for day passes—just one day; no camping—were available for that Thursday. That was three days away.

*The writer on the rooftop of the contiguous United States, standing by the Summit House among a landscape of giant flat boulders.* COURTESY OF JIA H. JUNG

We swooped down on the slots without hesitation. The next morning, on Tuesday August 2, we wrested ourselves free of city traffic on Octavia, the boulevard that leads to the highway. We ripped past the industrial wasteland by I-580, then wound through forgotten towns on US 120. We drove up to the majestic and cold oasis of Yosemite National Park. Eventually, the distant, silvery Mono Lake sliced the horizon, stratifying the dry, flat ground below from the icy, vertical mountains above. As we zoomed toward Inyo National Forest, we peeled through tiny towns with wild Western names like Independence and stared at the Sierra Nevada, the very embodiment of their literal translation, “snowed-on saws.” The harshly angled, snow-dusted stone mountains formed blades layered upon blades, knifing at a hazy sky. Their geological construction was so imposing as to appear downright extraterrestrial.

We stopped at a hostel in Lone Pine, the closest township to the Whitney Portal. The layout of the town was like that of a Western stage set, minus the heroes and horses and even people. The backdrops of the Sierras on one side and the red Alabama Hills on the other contrasted outlandishly with one another. In the hostel office, which doubled as a gift shop, nobody was there to guard the 30-cent postcards or emergency packets of altitude sickness pills. I shuffled past the display of commemorative T-shirts, sweatshirts, and tank tops, admiring a selective collection of apparel boasting “The Big One in One Day.”

I got a strange flutter in my stomach. So the day climb was a distinction after all. Now and then, people—mostly men—walked into the shop. We could tell they had been up there because they were sunburnt, without exception, and had a wild and distant look in their eyes—an alpine version of the thousand-yard stare. We were afraid to talk to them.

After finally being shown to our room and putting our things down, we set out to pick up our permits from the Eastern Sierra InterAgency Visitor Center. The surprisingly modern glass structure was in the middle of absolutely nowhere. We claimed our golden tickets to the mountain, plus, finally, a set of exhaustively detailed U.S. Park Service trail maps of the area.

Two things bothered me even more than the young, uniformed ranger’s briefings about bears on the mountainside did. First, he told us that a recent rainstorm had washed away a water crossing early on in the trail, and that we should not waste our time trying to cross it with shoes. He said, “You *will* be knee deep in water, so you should just take your shoes off and prepare for that.” This crossing would come early on. We knew we had to set out at

midnight to get back in one day, so we understood that we would be knee deep in frigid mountain whitewater in the dark. Next, he equipped us each with a tawny plastic bag, informing us that we would have to carry *all* our own waste. A powder in the bottom of the resealable packet would congeal into an odor-neutralizing jelly when mixed with liquid. He said that spit would also catalyze the reaction, but that urine would do the job in one step. I couldn't tell if he was joking. Either way, the idea of the task of voiding into a collapsing plastic bag filled me with immeasurable terror.

The next day, Wednesday, we went on a practice trek to acclimate to the altitude. The air rushed out of our lungs at the same rate that world-class scenery overwhelmed our fields of vision. At around 2 P.M., we began to encounter people coming back from climbs that had started at midnight. Several groups had turned back because one person had gotten sick within sight of the summit and they hadn't wanted to leave the ailing behind.

One woman gabbed about how your brain could explode if you pushed through an altitude-induced headache, but that plenty of people stupidly did so. Even so, having never experienced altitude sickness, we were hard-pressed to imagine any pain that would make us turn away from a goal that lay right in front of us. Unnerved by the accounts, we turned back after a mere half-mile of walking. We should have gone much farther, but sleep was of the essence now that we realized we were inadequately acclimated anyway and wouldn't get used to the altitude within less than 24 hours by staying awake and driving ourselves further up the hill just hours before attempting the real thing. If we went to bed promptly at 4 P.M., we could wake up at 11 P.M. and hit the trail by midnight. A roadrunner dashed in front of our car on the way down to the hostel. I half expected to see Yosemite Sam running after the flat-headed bird, then realized with a shock that the Looney Tunes of yore must have been based right here, that that extreme cartoonish landscape had been based in actuality. And we were now a part of the show, every bit the fool as those beloved cartoon characters with bugged-out eyes, liable to drive into a tunnel painted on a rock.

The hostel had no stove, so my choice of sustenance included microwaveable mac and cheese, cans of tuna, and a huge Vidalia onion. My mother ate microwaveable rice, overripe seeded grapes, and cold, hard-boiled eggs. For dinner, I found a rusty beer opener and leveraged a ragged triangular hole in the top of a can of tuna, forcing out the fish with weak plastic utensils. All the oil came out along with the fish, but made an ingestible stew when mixed with nuked cheese and pasta. After eating, we packed our hiking provisions

with the gravity of soldiers suiting up for war. My mother prepared more instant rice, while cutting slice after slice from a huge chunk of salty Italian salami. I built four sandwiches of raw onion, sprouts, and cheese between dense squares of ciabatta bread. We lined up our gear by the door. It was 7 P.M. and still sunny when we lay down. When the alarm shrilled at 11 P.M. we had just begun to feel drowsy but had not slept at all.

WE DROVE TO THE PORTAL IN BLACKNESS AND PUSHED OFF THE WELL-marked, deceptively unassuming trailhead at 11:57. I stared at the inviting and tourist-friendly informational plaques and historical photographs at the trail's beginning, knowing that it would be a long time before we saw this gateway again. I let Mom lead. Her legs already looked like rubber, but I told myself she was just tired. We passed two creeks and entered the John Muir Wilderness.

Abruptly, Mom said she didn't feel well, and she leaned against a rock. An elderly fellow and a younger man stopped next to us. The elder told us to just take it slow. When Mom persisted in describing her feeling of weakness, he cautioned, "This is your body telling you to go back. The mountain will always be here." His tranquil conservatism irritated me. My feeling was that this time would never return, and that it was now or never. I was surprised by my own bullishness, fanned by my sudden notion that altitude sickness was all in the head. Arrogance like this forecasted doom, but I couldn't reverse the conviction that the secret to this climb was mind over matter. I began berating my mother in a twisted attempt to rally her. But when I saw that her lips were as pale as her ghostlike face, I knew her hike was over at 9,000 feet. In an out-of-body moment, I told her that I had to keep on going. The decision was more a sensation than it was an intention. Looking back, I was already entering the world of physicality and leaving behind the one of emotional attachment and rational analysis. I *felt* in my body that I had to go on. So much for mind over matter. I walked her back to the creek, where she pressed two nutrition bars into my hands before crossing the water. "Good luck!" she called from the other side, with forced jolliness. She waved once, and the light of her headlamp soon disappeared. I stared at the ground, where two pinecones nestled against a rock. These objects somehow symbolized my mother and me, making our separation even more wrenching. But I was on my own, now.

As if destined, I had my first call of nature right when I got back to the spot where Mom had called it quits. I was horrified but thought of how my

mother would have urged me to go. I became incredibly sad at the sight of a paper packet that had accidentally dropped out of her waste kit. Sucking in some water from my CamelBak, I spit a stream of liquid toward the powder at the bottom of the green bag to activate the deodorizing gel. Then, I did it. In no uncertain terms, I crapped into the bag—feeling denuded by the feral action and fearing bears all the while. But the worst part of the ordeal was how obscenely heavy the bag felt afterward.

I was already hungry and found this extremely disturbing, as not even an hour had passed. I was resisting the urge to eat and scanning the woods for predators when I saw two electric blue orbs in the bushes. My heart stopped, expecting the worst. The eyes moved, and I realized that they belonged to a proud but gentle stag. He leapt lightly up the path and looked back once, his face framed by antlers.

Then, I saw the light of a headlamp zigzagging rapidly up the trail, just shy of the pace of some motorized entity. Soon, a guy appeared, pretty much running up the mountain. His name was Darby. His casual amicability heartened me; we might as well have been meeting at a bar or bookstore. When I told him my name, he exclaimed that he'd heard my mother talking about me. Now I knew that she'd made it down to the parking lot. He munched on some snack I couldn't see in the dark so I took the opportunity to demolish a nutrition bar. A little way later, he asked, "You do realize that you have to take off your shoes soon, right?" My soul sank. I'd come to believe that we'd already passed that crossing and that the water had not been as high as expected. I was wrong. Lone Pine Creek was a still, wide, pool of frigid water. Gritting my teeth, I sludged through all kinds of creepy textures, with the ice cold of the knee-deep water shooting up from the soles of my feet to the hairs in my head. I hobbled over sharp pebbles on the other side and collapsed onto the nearest log. "You'll be stoked you did that," Darby said, tossing me his beanie so I could use it to whip the dirt and waterweed off my feet. Thanks to the loan of his hat, I was able to get my dry feet quickly back into socks and boots. He said the good news was that we'd done two miles already. I said, "That's it?" He let out a booming laugh, and bounded off into the heights. Alone again, I crept along at a glacial pace and paused frequently, paranoid that I'd get sick. I was sure that slowness was the only way now to outwit altitude sickness.

As the sun just began to paint the sky with light, I found myself in a gigantic bowl with sides made of sheer rock. The promise of morning and the expansiveness that was revealed in the light awed me but intensified



my sorrow over Mom's absence. I had never missed her more acutely and considered the separation to be a litmus test for how I would feel when she was gone for good. An hour later, the sun was rising in earnest, unveiling the white crown of Mount Whitney and her neighbors, their stony faces pink and gold in the dawn light. It was so beautiful that it hurt, and I felt greedy for seeing it alone. Morning broke as I reached Trailside Meadow, a mere 5.3 miles into the journey but a world away from the dark before the dawn. A stream ran down through snowfields. The running water was bordered by lush greens speckled with patches of purple and fuchsia blooms. I rubbed my eyes, sure that I'd died and woken up in an afterlife I didn't deserve. A chubby marmot, brown eyes sparkling and fur shining, trundled out to a rock and began breakfasting on the verdant leaves growing all around it. Our eyes met, and its mischievous glance said that it knew something I didn't.

The devastatingly beautiful scenery suddenly recalled the program for my father's funeral back in 1998. My sister's picture showed him as a young boy, free of pain and his lifetime of disability, sitting calmly by a mountain stream in the company of small alpine creatures. My father had believed that death is a recycling of matter and energy back to nature. I realized that I was looking at heaven, and that he had made it there.

Just above the meadow by an icy lake, a young couple approached me, calling my name. The woman took something out of her pocket, saying that my mother had sent it along. It was a handkerchief, flapping like a white flag in the mountain wind. I suppressed tears. Of course she would send such a useless and sentimental item. I gave the soft cloth a squeeze before tucking it far into my backpack.

At 8:20 A.M., I reached Trail Camp, only halfway to the summit from which my mother and I had planned to watch the sunrise. By now, my appetite had mysteriously fled, but I decided to force myself to eat anyway. I whipped out my stack of sandwiches, damp and bloated from condensation. A man sitting outside his tent warned that bread and cheese were poor choices at 12,000 feet. He handed me an oatmeal bar. I gobbled it down and comfortably drained my CamelBak, knowing I had two more liters of water in bottles. I asked how far away we were from the trail crest. "Hikers don't go by miles, we go by time," the man said. When I asked how long, he said it depended on my pace, but three hours max. Had he said 8.2 miles from the trailhead, hence only 2.2 miles from where we were standing, the switchbacks looming overhead might have felt less daunting, but I was quickly learning the significance of making calculations by time. People came and went on





*At the trail crest, eleven and a half hours after the start of the hike.*

COURTESY OF JIA H. JUNG

the switchbacks, but I withdrew into my body, shutting my eyes whenever I wrapped around a switchback because the path would sometimes seem to rush by like a conveyor belt under my feet. A man resting at one of the hairpin turns began a conversation with me. As I spoke, I couldn't appraise the content of what I was saying. I could only feel the vibrations of sound moving through my throat and ballooning out into the open air, and feel the loss of oxygen expelled with each word. The man, Frank, was the kind of guy who seemed like he could understand all my thoughts and non-thoughts without discussion. Quietly, he offered me some trail mix. I took a handful, feeling the curvature of each peanut and temperature of each chocolate chip before placing the morsels into my mouth. A little farther along, Darby rejoiced to see me. He told me that he was rooting for me, but that I should turn back if I didn't see the top by 2 P.M. or so. I hadn't prepared for my pace to be *this* slow and was lucky to receive his optimistic but firm recalculation.

At 11:35 A.M., I was on top of the trail crest. The difference in scenery was astonishing. I was now poised over a hostile, bare landscape of cliffs along the back side of the mountain. Guitar Lake twinkled down in the distance, bewitching with its hourglass shape, filling me with inexpressible glee. I had

never expected to find it. The shape of the lake took on a supernatural quality and stirred a sense of primordial familiarity with the area. I felt more at home than ever, which was strange considering that the path had become steeper and strewn with rolling rubble. At one point, I passed the young couple who'd given me my mother's handkerchief, and asked them how it was at the top. "We didn't go," the husband said, his disappointment tangible. "She got scared of the rubble, so we're turning back." I pitied him, but could hardly blame her. Some parts of the path had nothing on either side but mile-deep canyons. At one point, we had to cross a half-melted snowfield perched on the edge of a concave bowl of jagged rock. One false step could mean rapid death, but no one discussed this as they put one foot in front of the other. Surprisingly, my body seemed attuned to each risk, and my feet sentient to each bit of slippery, squeaky snow. I made it, and as the last ridge came into view,



*Jung rejoicing at the summit, feeling a fortuitous transcendence from worry, ambition, and desire rather than pride.* COURTESY OF JIA H. JUNG

I passed a new wave of hikers on their way down. These were the ones who had made it, and they had different attitudes to match their achievements. “Even if you get sick, you *have* to keep going now,” said one man. I knew he was right, but still proceeded with reverent and ludicrous slowness—ever slower—just as a galactic body at the event horizon before inevitably submitting to a black hole. It was a certainty now that I would physically bring myself to the peak. But I didn’t want to get there sick.

BUT FINALLY, I DID ARRIVE. THE ROOFTOP of the lower contiguous United States was flat and bleached like the surface of the moon. I felt no rush of prideful victory, only transcendence from worries, ambition, premeditation, desire, and even thought. I suppose I was in a state of pure existence that I’d previously only heard described by spacey yoga instructors in Manhattan gyms or written in ancient texts of religions to which I did not subscribe. A pure existence, an animal existence, not in the derogatory way in which it is applied by humans to reference baseness, but in the sense of existing spontaneously, miraculously, and without a need for justification other than being and surviving. I curled up next to the plaque marking the peak for a photo and signed the guestbook, placing my mother’s name next to mine, as she’d been with me in spirit the whole time. Now, all that was left was to savor the unusual sensation of just existing, without guilt, without question. The sun was changing directions, but I refused to rush, until at 2:45 P.M. I reluctantly turned back, my water supply low and my energy waning.

All the rocks I’d scrambled up and down before were now serious obstacles to overcome. When I permitted myself a swig of water, I could feel the moisture seep only so far into my cells and propel me for only the next couple feet. I kept looking over my shoulder for signs of life but now saw no one. The barren rocks were turning red in the slanted sun, and I sensed that darkness would fall while I was on the exposed ridge. Instinct kept my legs going. I was running on empty on autopilot with only sights, sounds, pains, smells, and



*The dreaded cable rails on a steep and high section of trail reinforce hikers making their way up the rock face in an area where snow is slow to melt.*

COURTESY OF JIA H. JUNG

tastes powering my movements. The prolonged exertion drove out thoughts and replaced them with the ability to see colors in excellent relief, hear small sounds miles away, feel grains of sand through my feet, smell the sweetness of hidden vegetation, and taste the poisonous level of sodium in a Slim Jim that I'd found in my pocket and devoured as a last resort. The snack I'd eaten so many times at sea level without flinching now made my mouth shrivel and my body weep for water. I went onward, onward, and onward. If I had any thoughts at all during this stretch, they were self-flagellating ones for filling my pack with four heavy uneaten sandwiches rather than extra vessels of water. I simply hadn't considered that I would take longer than the longest estimated times, thereby requiring far more water, especially on a dry and sunny day such as this. At 4:17 P.M., I was looking down at the 98 switchbacks. The valley below had sunlight to spare. The relief of leaving the trail crest injected fresh fuel into my legs. Quickly, I was past the cables, then at the end of the switchbacks, then looking down at the campsite. I heard voices mixed with the babbling of water and found three men perched like angels at the side of a small waterfall. They were purifying the water with equipment that I did not possess. They refilled my CamelBak for me, equipping me with more than enough water for the rest of my hike.

A couple hours later at the dreaded water crossing at Lone Pine Creek, I was amazed to find that the bridge of logs had been restored by a trail crew during that very day. I changed my socks and continued on new feet. Proportional to the increase in physical comfort, my visit to the physical realm began to dissolve like an icicle thawing in the sun as thoughts again began to flood my mind. I began to fantasize over what goodies I'd eat and what tales I would tell my mother, my friends, and my co-workers who shared the New York City basement offices from which I had made so many secret phone calls just for a chance to walk the path I was walking now. The sun finally began to set, but I'd begun in the dark and had no fear about finishing in it. With a blasé flourish, I switched on my headlamp and made haste. I hit the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek at 9:05 P.M., and Carillon Creek five minutes after that. A girl just setting out with a frame pack loaded with provisions told me my mother was still waiting for me just a mile ahead. I laughed, and thanked her. The home stretch was soft with pine needles, devoid of rocks, and practically flat. Simultaneously bored and impatient, I wondered why it was taking so, so long to get to the final water crossing. Five eternal minutes later, the water appeared and I flew over it. Car lights popped up between the trees, illuminating the wooden gates that marked the entrance—and the

exit—of the Whitney Trail. I tried to slow down to savor the moment, but couldn't keep from running and letting out a feral hoot. Immediately, I heard a response from my mother. Our reunion was as intense as one that might be enjoyed by family members that have been separated for years or believed one another to be dead. She related the details of her day in the parking lot, interviewing everyone coming down from the mountain or beginning their journey up. She'd known where I was at every step of the way based on the accounts of the numerous people who had passed me on the way down.

AT THE HOSTEL, I ATE A LEFTOVER BURGER AND FRIES OUT OF A Styrofoam box. I showered with commercial shower gel and used the flushing toilet, wide-eyed at the novelty of not squatting over the plastic bag. I got into fresh pajamas, and, barely able to stretch out, collapsed onto a mattress on the floor and passed out. After losing six pounds, the hard-earned tank top proclaiming that I'd done "The Big One in One Day" hung on me like a bell sounding the news. As we descended to lower altitudes, my nose bled profusely in a kind of reverse altitude sickness. Back in San Francisco, then in New York, my sun-charred calves (where I'd neglected to apply SPF 100 sunblock) oozed, sowing fields for psoriasis blooms that would remain as living scars years later. For weeks more, I had night terrors. I dreamt of falling off the more treacherous parts of the trail or of my mother dying.

I had gone into the climb underresearched, underacclimated, underexperienced, and underequipped. But though I depended heavily on the kindness of strangers to avoid disaster or demise, I also became acutely aware that any human kindness or intelligence was effective only as long as the elements cooperated. Ultimately, it was just my day. While doing the most physically difficult thing I had ever done, thoughts dropped away to expose a palette of sensations, visualizations, and primordial memories washing across and through my consciousness. In this state, physical existence and survival presented themselves as sufficient reasons for living, a profound relief and singular answer to so many questions about the meaning of life.

On the mountainside, the conclusion that I might have the same existential worth as an animal seemed perfectly normal and even noble. And the fact that Mount Whitney was a mass of molecular construction that was indifferent to my realizations only made the mountain more heartbreakingly endearing and unforgettable. That something so imposing, gorgeous, and inspiring might exist without intelligent design struck me as the ultimate miracle, and that



I—also just a mass of molecules—was able to experience this miracle was a landmark occasion.

I HAVE SINCE DEVELOPED A LONGING FOR MOUNT WHITNEY THAT verges on melancholy because nothing else has provided a more acceptable answer for what it means to be alive: to both participate in and witness an eternal conservation of energy recycled in an intractable flurry of causes and effects. Needless to say, the daily grind away from Mount Whitney is full of distractions, but no matter how far I am from the immediacy of the truth, I remain forever changed by it.

There was ultimate comfort in encountering the power of a physical system stronger than human thought. During that 24-hour-long moment in elemental beauty, nothing that came before had to be solved. Nothing that came afterward had to be feared. Looking around me at the otherworldly scenery, I knew all at once that I, too, would be upcycled into this wonder, and could think of no greater heaven for those deserving reward, or stancher justice for those deserving of hell. It was just a day on one mountain, but where I traveled and what I saw was heaven, hell, Earth, and my own past, present, and future shimmering in the continuous procession of time and space. It was all there, and so was I.

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JIA H. JUNG is a writer and storyteller who works in the business and membership affairs department of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers in New York City. She grew up in Andover, Massachusetts, and is slowly chipping away at the 48 4,000-footers of the White Mountains. Her favorite hiking partner is still her mother, who might not have made it up Mount Whitney yet, but who recently returned from a successful trek to the Annapurna Base Camp with a small group of Appalachian Mountain Club members.

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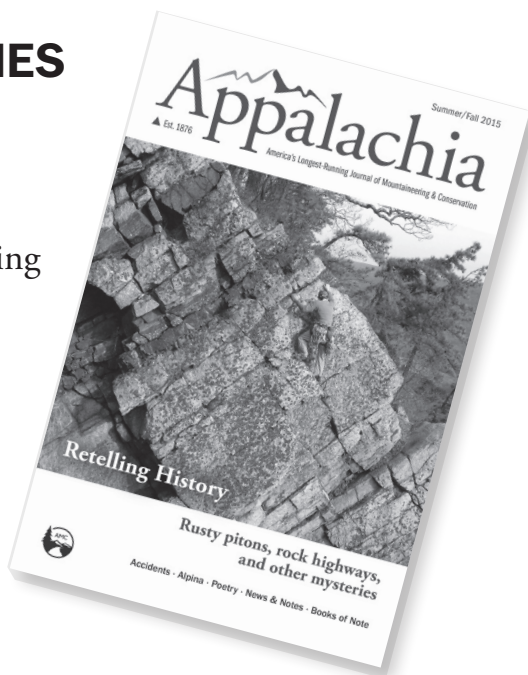
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