

Wild



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHERYL STRAYED

Born in Pennsylvania and raised largely in a house without plumbing or electricity in rural Minnesota, Cheryl Strayed's love of nature and desire to conquer the wilderness dates back to her childhood and teen years. When her mother Bobbi died in 1991, during the 22-year-old Cheryl's senior year of college, Cheryl's life suffered a major blow. Her marriage dissolved as a result of her serial cheating and burgeoning addiction to heroin, leading her to adopt the surname "Strayed" as a reflection of her wandering from the once-traditional path of her life. Desperate to save herself, confront her shortcomings, and find a route to healing, Cheryl embarked on an 1,100-mile hike along the Pacific Crest Trail, a journey that would become the basis for her critically-acclaimed 2012 memoir *Wild*. After hiking the PCT, Cheryl settled in Portland, Oregon, where she has lived ever since. The author of the novel *Torch* and the once-anonymous voice behind the popular *Dear Sugar* advice column, Cheryl Strayed is an inquisitive and empathetic writer and one of the literary community's most steadfast members. Her collected advice letters, *Tiny Beautiful Things*, was adapted for the stage in 2016, and her memoir *Wild* is now a major motion picture directed by Jean-Mark Vallée and starring Reese Witherspoon.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Set in the early and mid-1990s, *Wild* touches on several important cultural touchstones from the era of grunge music, Gen X, and the dawn of the internet. Cheryl Strayed's journey is one free of credit cards or cell phones—as she makes her way along the PCT she relies only on guidebooks and the help of other hikers, though she writes that had she undertaken the journey just a few years later, the internet might have provided her with more copious, up-to-date information about the trail's ever-changing water sources and blockades, as well as snowfall and melt patterns. As Cheryl walks along the trail, she often sings to herself, frequently bursting into songs by Nirvana—one of the most popular bands of the grunge movement whose origins are rooted in the Pacific Northwest and tangential to the underground feminist punk "riot grrrl" movement which began there. When Cheryl arrives in Ashland on August 9th, 1995, she is greeted by locals and hippies alike turned out in droves to both celebrate and mourn the death of Jerry Garcia, lead guitarist of The Grateful Dead.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Wild has drawn comparisons to other major works of contemporary literature which exist at the intersection of nonfiction, memoir, and inspiration. Elizabeth Gilbert's wildly popular *Eat, Pray, Love*—based on Gilbert's travels to Italy, India, and Indonesia in the wake of her marriage's dissolution—is also centered around its narrator's desire for healing, understanding, and redemption (and was also adapted into a major motion picture). Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, a 1996 nonfiction book, follows Christopher McCandless's ambitious but ultimately failed adventure into the Alaskan wilds in 1992. McCandless perished in the wilderness either due to starvation or poisoning, and yet his simplistic desire to live in harmony with nature, taking only what he needed from the land around him, has been hailed as an act of bravery, and the bus where McCandless camped and died on the Stampede Trail has become a tourist destination.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*
- **When Written:** 2000s
- **Where Written:** Portland, Oregon
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir, inspiration
- **Setting:** The Pacific Crest Trail, a hiking route that stretches from the Mojave Desert all the way up to Canada. Cheryl's journey takes her from Mojave, California to Cascade Locks, Oregon.
- **Climax:** After having sex on the beach with a man named Jonathan, Cheryl begins to realize that perhaps she is already redeemed—or never needed to be redeemed in the first place—for all the mistakes she's made in her life.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

"My Wild Story". As a result of *Wild*'s profound, widespread success as both a memoir and a movie, the Pacific Crest Trail Association's website now even has a section called "WILD," complete with a video message from Cheryl Strayed herself and guides to replicating Cheryl's exact hikes. Hikers can share their own "Wild" stories, adding text and images to a database full of stories of people who took to the trail after being inspired by Cheryl's own journey.

Reese's Pieces. Reese Witherspoon is the star of *Wild* (2014), a film based on Cheryl Strayed's memoir. Witherspoon, however, also served as a producer on the film. After reading Strayed's

book in less than a day shortly after its release, Witherspoon called the writer out of the blue to immediately discuss bringing it to the big screen. Witherspoon has credited the film as being the hardest thing she's ever done, and has expressed her gratitude to the role for forcing Hollywood to accept a woman over thirty in an unglamorous but important role.



PLOT SUMMARY

In March of 1991, Cheryl Strayed's life is forever fractured when her beloved mother Bobbi is diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer at only forty-five years old. A nature-loving non-smoker who has raised her children in the rural Northwoods of Minnesota, Cheryl's mother's illness is a sharp blow to the rest of her family. Cheryl and her stepfather Eddie stay by Bobbi's side through her illness—though her doctor has given her a year to live, she makes it only thirty-four days after her diagnosis. Throughout Bobbi's decline, Cheryl tries time and time again to get her siblings Karen and Leif to come visit the hospital. Though they love their mother, they cannot bear to see her in such a state. Karen visits only once, but Leif remains difficult to get a hold of. One night, as Bobbi's condition worsens steeply, Cheryl leaves the hospital to track Leif down and bring him in to say goodbye. By the time they return to the hospital in the morning, Bobbi is gone, and Cheryl feels an animalistic grief take over her.

Over the next several years, Cheryl struggles to keep her life together in the face of her overwhelming grief, her ever-distant family's apathy towards the prospect of staying united, and her crumbling marriage to her loving husband Paul. Cheryl pinballs around the country with Paul after he drops out of a graduate program in New York, eventually deciding to stay in Portland while Paul returns to Minnesota for a job. There, Cheryl falls in with a man named Joe—a heroin addict who soon gets Cheryl hooked, too. Cheryl's best friend Lisa and Paul try desperately to intervene, but it isn't until Cheryl realizes she is pregnant with Joe's child that she is able to shake herself from the depths of her self-destructive new life. After finalizing her divorce from Paul, Cheryl decides to do something dangerous, new, and unthinkable: she wants to hike the Pacific Crest Trail from the Mojave desert to Oregon, hoping to confront the mistakes and transgressions of the past several years and achieve some measure of peace, healing, and redemption along the way.

Cheryl prepacks several care packages herself containing money, supplies, and guidebooks for different parts of the trail and leaves them with her friend Lisa in Portland, asking her to mail them out as Cheryl makes her way along the trail. Cheryl purchases a huge backpack for herself, which she soon nicknames **Monster** after realizing how insanely heavy and difficult it is to carry once filled with all the supplies she will need for her three-month, 1,100-mile hike from Mojave, California to Portland, Oregon. In a pair of uncomfortable, too-

small hiking **boots** and with only a few dollars in her wallet, Cheryl hitchhikes to the start of the trail and begins her odyssey.

The first leg of the trail is miserable and rough—Cheryl sustains many injuries, realizes she has filled her camp stove with the wrong kind of gas, and struggles under the weight of **Monster** as she climbs through the unforgiving desert landscape. She decides to detour from the path and flag down some help. A miner named Frank lets Cheryl stay with him and his wife for the night. After eating her first real meal in days and stopping at a camping supply store to get her stove fixed, Cheryl is ready to get back on the trail—but becomes chagrined when she hears about unprecedented snowfall in the Sierra Nevada and realizes her path is going to have to change. Cheryl continues pressing on, contending with bears, bulls, and black ants—but also forging connections with the hikers she begins to meet along the trail, including the fearless Greg, the adventurous hiking partners Doug and Tom, and the knowledgeable father-son duo of Albert and Matt.

Soon enough, Cheryl arrives at her first official resupply stop on the trail: Kennedy Meadows. There, she enjoys meeting other hikers, bathing in a rushing river, and eating her favorite snacks, and gets some help from Albert with winnowing the overstuffed "**Monster**" on her back shortly before he and his son succumb to diarrhea from drinking contaminated water and are forced to leave the trail for medical help. Doug gives Cheryl a beautiful raven feather for safekeeping, while Greg teaches Cheryl how to use an ice axe in preparation for facing down the Sierras up ahead. Back on the trail, however, Cheryl struggles to make her way across even a small ice patch. At a rendezvous with Doug and Tom, she decides to get off the trail and bypass the Sierras—the next day on her way to the main road, she runs into Greg, who is bypassing as well. Together they ride a Greyhound to Reno, then transfer to Truckee and hitch to Sierra City where they spend the night in adjoining rooms at a small lodge. Cheryl takes her first bath in ages, and is surprised when one of her toenails comes off in the water. She considers knocking on Greg's door, but knows that in order to heal herself, she must find a way to stop compulsively searching for a warm body to distract herself when she's feeling alone.

Back on the trail, Cheryl finds herself through the worst of the ice pack but still surrounded by snow—snow that obscures the trail, forcing her to wander uncertainly through the countryside. Cheryl encounters a beautiful fox, and when it runs away from her, she finds herself calling out "MOM." Cheryl realizes that her mother will never return to her—but also realizes she's beginning, slowly, to accept this fact deep in her core. After a stop at a wilderness lodge and an encounter with a greedy, elderly couple who refuse to let the flat-broke Cheryl camp on the edge of the site without paying, Cheryl is deflated and finds herself obsessing over traumatic memories from her past. Her spirit is bolstered, however, when back on the trail

she meets a group of gregarious men who treat her to a night of drinking and conversation.

Cheryl makes it through the Sierra Nevadas at last, down two toenails but in higher spirits than ever. At Belden Town, Cheryl meets more friendly hikers, including the warm, welcoming Stacy and Trina and an experienced trekker named Brent who warns Cheryl that her boots are too small—and tells her that Greg has quiet the trail. Cheryl sets out with Stacy and Trina, but they get separated while hitchhiking back to the trail. Cheryl fields a strange interaction with a man who may or may not be named Jimmy Carter who tries to interview her for a publication called the *Hobo Times*, which may or may not exist, in spite of her protestations that she's a hiker, not a hobo. Cheryl eventually gets a ride with a couple named Spider and Lou, and learns that Lou suffered the loss of her son five years ago. The women commiserate over the pain of losing a loved one, and after parting ways tenderly, Cheryl meets up with Stacy and Trina on the trail.

Cheryl hangs behind Stacy and Trina at the start of a section of the trail marked by a desolate plateau. In spite of the rough terrain coming up, Cheryl feels stronger than ever. She has come to see Monster as an extension of herself, and though her feet are still battered, blistered, and bruised, her body feels more capable every day. On the plateau, Cheryl nearly runs out of water when the source mentioned in the guidebook—a water tank—is dry. Cheryl pumps muddy water from a nearby pond through her purifier and further cleans it using iodine tablets. After such a close call and her most dangerous moment on the trail yet, Cheryl is exhausted, and seeks rest at a small town off the trail.

There, she meets a gay and gregarious hiker named Rex who, upon seeing Cheryl's ruined feet, tells her that she can get new boots from REI free of charge with simply a phone call. Cheryl reunites with Trina and Stacy, but Trina announces she's quitting the trail. Cheryl loses two more toenails while waiting for her boots to arrive—only to learn that REI will need five days to get them to her. Knowing she must stay on-schedule, Cheryl reluctantly sets off to her next stop, Castle Crags, wearing only her camp sandals. As Cheryl moves onwards, the terrain is unforgiving and often obscures the path ahead, but Cheryl is confident enough in her navigational skills to pick up “record speed” as she approaches Castle Crags. There, she finally obtains her new boots, and reads sentimental letters that have arrived for her from Paul, Joe, and Karen. Cheryl drinks heavily with some other hikers and gets terribly sick, but fights through her hangover in the morning to get back on the trail—she has only one more stop before reaching Oregon.

Even with her new boots, Cheryl's feet remain painful and the terrain remains difficult. She begins to have strange, upsetting dreams about a man in a Bigfoot costume, and she endures disappointment when she, Rex, and Stacy head off-course to attend a hippie meetup called the Rainbow Gathering only to

find it is a sparsely-populated bust of a time. Back on the trail by herself after the failed Gathering, Cheryl's mood lightens as she has some charming encounters with a pair of llama owners and a wild deer and takes in the splendor of the vistas all around her. Cheryl, confronted with the beauty of nature and the kindness of all the strangers she's met, cries for the first time on the trail—not out of grief or pain, but out of sheer overwhelm. As Cheryl approaches Oregon, she finds herself contending with heavy rain day in and day out. She meets up with Stacy, who tells Cheryl she's bypassing the trail and getting a ride to Ashland, and informs her that Rex has decided to get off, too. Cheryl arrives in Ashland, Oregon for a stopover to find that the town is full of hippie mourners—Jerry Garcia has died, and celebrations of his life are taking place all throughout town. Cheryl receives a resupply box full of extra cash and some “normal” clothes.

She enjoys a night out on the town and meets an attractive man named Jonathan, and agrees to go on a date with him the following night. After listening to Jonathan's band play a set at a local club the next night, Cheryl accompanies Jonathan out to the cooperative farm where he lives, and the two of them spend the night talking, stargazing, and kissing. The next morning, the two of them go for a picnic on the beach. While walking down the rocky shore, Cheryl debates whether or not to sleep with Jonathan—she has come on this journey to be redeemed and washed clean of her old habits, but she is beginning to wonder whether she never needed redemption at all, and whether all the choices she made were the right ones all along. She and Jonathan have sex, and then he drives her back into town, where she excitedly gets back on the trail.

Cheryl arrives at Crater Lake on her mother's birthday—August 18th. She feels angry with her mother for dying and leaving her, but after a visit to the sacred, beautiful lake, which was formed out of a barren hole in the top of a mountain called Mazama after a volcanic eruption some 7,000 years ago, Cheryl begins to understand the healing process and longs to let go of her grief. With only 334 miles to go to the Bridge of the Gods—the landmark Cheryl has chosen to mark the end of her hike—Cheryl feels renewed, capable, and a little bit melancholy at the thought of leaving the trail behind. At her next stop, Cheryl meets a band of charming hikers in their early twenties called the Three Young Bucks. She hikes with them on and off for several days, bolstered by their company—but during a night alone, she has a fearsome encounter with two bow hunters who make lewd comments about Cheryl's body and keep pointing out how profoundly alone she is out in the wild. The men don't harm Cheryl, but the incident shakes her, and she breaks camp in spite of the darkness around her to run in the opposite direction from them. The next day, Cheryl reunites with the Three Young Bucks at a rustic “resort” on a beautiful lake. They excitedly tell her that she's officially been given a trail nickname: The Queen of the PCT, chosen because

of her remarkable, innate ability to get perfect strangers to go out of their way to do nice things for her. Lisa and her boyfriend surprise Cheryl at the resort and drive her and the Bucks to a hot spring for a day. Cheryl revels in how lucky she is to have such great friends, new and old.

After meeting up with Doug, Tom, and a couple other hikers on the trail and hiking with them, Cheryl decides that she is determined to reach the end of her journey alone. Cheryl continues losing toenails even as she “floats” the final few miles to Cascade Locks and the Bridge of the Gods. At the landmark bridge, Cheryl stands at the halfway point and looks down into the river below. She at last understands that her journey was never about one single destination or one cohesive healing process, and unceremoniously she leaves the bridge to get some ice cream. From the future, Cheryl writes that, years later, she would return to that very ice cream shop with her husband and later, their two children. Cheryl looks back on the end of her hike with reverence for her younger self, who had the strength to undertake something enormous in spite of not being sure of what it would give her. “How wild it was,” the older Cheryl reflects, “to let it be.”

human spirit. Through the support of her ex-husband Paul, her best friend Lisa, and the many generous and exuberant characters she meets along the PCT—from the sensitive Doug to the adventurous Trina and Stacy to the indomitable Three Young Bucks—Cheryl begins to realize that all the mistakes she’s made have made her into the person she is and that, perhaps, she was never in need of redemption at all—what she needed all along was to see “how wild it was [just] to let it be.”

Cheryl’s Mother/Bobbi – Cheryl’s mother—whose name is revealed very late in the book to be Bobbi—is a “forty-five-year-old vegetarian-ish [...] natural-remedy-using nonsmoker” when she is diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer. Cheryl is devastated and perplexed by the news—and further destabilized when doctors give Bobbi only a year to live. Bobbi declines very quickly, however, and only lives for thirty-four days from the time of her diagnosis. Cheryl is not by Bobbi’s side when she dies (as she is off trying to coax her recalcitrant brother Leif to come say goodbye), and the fact that Cheryl was not with her mother in her final moments multiplies and exacerbates her grief, and is part of what sends Cheryl down a path of self-destruction in the years that follow. Cheryl’s memories of her mother as she sets out on the PCT in pursuit of a journey of healing and redemption vacillate between idyllic and angry. Cheryl is furious with her mother for dying—and though she tries to remember her mother’s optimism, her love of nature, her devotion to her family, and the “magical” way she kept everyone connected, she finds herself wrestling with how the decisions her mother made affected her throughout her own life. Though Bobbi is alive only in Cheryl’s memories, she is in many ways a main character in the book. Her presence is with Cheryl every step of the way along the PCT, and Cheryl’s potent memories of her mother planting marigolds, riding her beloved horse Lady, pursuing her bachelor’s degree alongside Cheryl herself, and trying to instill in her children a love of the natural world are some of the book’s most haunting, spellbinding sections.

Paul – Cheryl’s ex-husband and best friend. Though Cheryl and Paul are divorced by the time she sets out on the PCT, they still have a deep affection for one another. Their marriage—full of love and seemingly perfect from the outside—suffered a terrible blow when Cheryl’s mother died, leaving Cheryl feeling like a part of her was “dead” to Paul, whose happy, cohesive family made her jealous and angry. Cheryl began cheating on Paul serially and indiscriminately, hiding her infidelities from him for over a year before at last confessing the truth and embarking on a separation. Though Cheryl and Paul still loved one another, Cheryl knew she had to move on from the scorched earth she’d created in their relationship. Hiking the PCT is motivated by Cheryl’s desire to heal her grief in the wake of her mother’s death—but it’s also born of a need to understand why she did the things she did to Paul and to atone for them. Paul is glimpsed mostly through flashbacks and phone



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Cheryl Strayed – Cheryl Strayed is a writer, advice columnist, and memoirist whose 1995 summer-long trek along the Pacific Coast Trail—or the PCT—became the basis for her breakout memoir *Wild*. In the wake of her mother Bobbi’s death, Cheryl spent years pinballing around the country from place to place, both with and without her husband at the time, a man named Paul. Her grief was uncontainable and enormous, and in attempting to dull the pain—and punish herself for not being at her mother’s side at the moment of her death—Cheryl began experimenting with reckless sex and heroin use. At the start of *Wild*, Cheryl is in her mid-twenties, freshly-divorced, and embarking on the PCT out of a desire to spend time alone in nature and reckon with the many mistakes of her young life. With an oversized, burdensome pack nicknamed **Monster** on her back and a too-small pair of hiking **boots** on her feet, Cheryl sets out from the Mojave desert to hike over 1,100 miles over nine interconnected mountain ranges all the way to the Bridge of the Gods in Cascade Locks, Oregon. As Cheryl’s journey unspools, she must face down danger, solitude, and the ravages of her own mind, but she also finds solace and inspiration in the kindness of the strangers she meets along the way, the beauty of the wilderness, and the realization that she is allowed to feel at home in the world—even if her mother isn’t there any longer. Cheryl’s journey begins as one in search of redemption—but soon, Cheryl begins having epiphanies about the nature of healing and redemption, the value of perseverance in the face of uncertainty, and the daunting but tamable wilderness of the

conversations, but it is evident that he is a large-hearted man who loves and understands Cheryl, and who doesn't fault her for the depths of her grief or her actions in the wake of it.

Lisa – Cheryl's best female friend. Lisa lives in Portland and is the one to organize and send Cheryl's care packages to the various stops Cheryl is making along the PCT. Though Lisa is only glimpsed in flashbacks for most of the book, it becomes evident that she is a kind, thoughtful, devoted friend—one who has seen Cheryl through her darkest moments and has remained loyal and committed to her in spite of her struggles with self-destructive behavior. Cheryl was always told growing up that blood was thicker than water, but Lisa is one of the people in her life who challenges that axiom through her sisterly devotion and love.

Eddie – Cheryl's stepfather. A kind, hardworking carpenter several years Bobbi's junior, Eddie was the one to instill in Cheryl and her siblings a love of nature and the outdoors when they were still young children by taking them on camping trips and building them a rural home in the Minnesota Northwoods. Though Eddie nurses his wife Bobbi through her illness and serves as a source of support to Cheryl, after Bobbi dies, Cheryl is unable to stop Eddie from drifting away. Soon, he marries a new woman with children of her own and remains emotionally closed-off from Cheryl and her other siblings in spite of their shared inability to cope with the loss of their beloved mother. Together, Eddie, Leif, and Karen represent one of the novel's most potent themes: loss, grief, and distance.

Leif – Cheryl's younger brother. Something of a ne'er-do-well, Leif is in his late teens at the start of the story and deeply emotional. He's unable to reckon with the fact that his mother is dying, and avoids the hospital during her entire struggle with cancer. Cheryl eventually coaxes him to come to the hospital, but by the time they arrive, it is too late—their mother is dead. Cheryl has a clear soft spot for Leif in spite of his emotional distance.

Karen – Cheryl's older sister. A well-meaning but sensitive woman who is unable to confront or deal with their mother's illness and death, and only visits Bobbi once in the hospital during her struggle with cancer. By the time Cheryl sets out on the PCT, she and Karen, once-close, have drifted far apart both emotionally and physically.

Joe – Cheryl's ex-boyfriend. A Portlander and heroin addict, the charismatic Joe talks Cheryl into snorting and smoking—then later on, shooting—his drug of choice. Joe is a bad influence on Cheryl, but she spends nearly a year mired in a relationship with him partly out of a desire to dull the pain of her mother's loss and partly as a way of inflicting her own self-loathing upon herself and those she loves. Joe is not an inherently bad person, and he seems to actually love Cheryl—while she's hiking the PCT, he sends her postcards and letters, though it's often too difficult for her to reply to them.

Greg – A hiker on the PCT who is a friend and source of inspiration and motivation to Cheryl. The two of them journey together to bypass the Sierras after Kennedy Meadows, but lose track of one another after getting back on the trail. Cheryl later learns from other hikers that Greg has quit hiking the PCT halfway through—a fact which saddens her.

Albert – A man hiking the PCT with his younger son Matt. Albert and Matt cross paths with Cheryl for a while along the trail until they contract giardia around Kennedy Meadows and are forced to stop hiking to get medical help. Albert is the one who helps Cheryl winnow the supplies she's carrying around on her back inside of **Monster**, lightening her load a little before she heads back out on the trail.

Doug – A hiker on the PCT. He and Cheryl become fast friends, and he gives her a raven feather as a symbol of their friendship—the symbol serves as a touchstone for Cheryl throughout her travels, and every time she and Doug encounter one another on the trail or at a resupply outpost, they are happy, excited, and grateful for each other's company.

Stacy and Trina – Two close friends hiking the PCT together. Kind, funny, friendly, and helpful, the two women stick together throughout their travels until Trina leaves the trail before reaching Oregon. Stacy later gets off the trail just before Ashland. Though the two women often cross paths with Cheryl and even do some day hikes with her, they respect Cheryl's desire to undertake most of her journey on her own, and are there for her when she needs them.

Jonathan – A musician whom Cheryl meets while on a detour in Ashland, Oregon. There is an instant attraction between them, and they go on a date and eventually have sex during Cheryl's layover. Jonathan is an important part of Cheryl's healing process: he teaches her that she can have healthy, jubilant sexual experiences that don't need to be mired in guilt, revenge, or addiction.

The Three Young Bucks – A group of three young men named Rick, Josh, and Richie who are hiking the entire length of the PCT together. Cheryl loves their youthful energy and harbors tiny crushes on each of them—and is admiring and jealous of how they plow through the wilderness like "hiking machines," averaging twenty miles a day.

The Sandy-Haired Man – A creepy bow hunter whom Cheryl meets in the woods. While Cheryl helps him and his friend purify water from a lake, he begins hitting on her—and even after they part ways, he returns to her campground to harass her some more. The sandy-haired man's friend talks him into leaving Cheryl alone, but Cheryl is spooked, for the first time, at the idea of being a woman alone in the woods after her interaction with this man.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aimee – One of Cheryl's friends in Minneapolis.

Frank – A kindly miner who lets Cheryl spend the night at his and his wife’s home after she struggles with her stove and food supply on an early stretch of the PCT down in the Mojave.

Matt – Albert’s son.

Tom – Doug’s hiking partner on the PCT.

Christine and Jeff – A couple staying at the Packer Lake Lodge who offer Cheryl some hospitality and some food and express their admiration for her bravery in taking on the PCT. Avid readers, Christine and Jeff trade books with Cheryl so that she’ll have some new reading material on her journey.

Brent – A kindly hiker whom Cheryl meets and bonds with during her stopover at Belden Town at the foot of the Sierra Nevada.

Jimmy Carter – A bizarre man who claims to be a writer for a publication called the *Hobo Times*. He tries to interview Cheryl about her “hobo” lifestyle in spite of her repeated protestations that she’s a hiker, not a bum.

Spider – A tough-looking, sweet-talking biker who, along with his partner Lou, offers Cheryl a ride while she’s hitching on a detour from the PCT.

Lou – Spider’s fiancée. She and Cheryl bond over their shared losses, brief though their meeting is.

Rex – A hiker on the PCT who becomes one of Cheryl’s on-and-off companions. Gregarious, gay, and adventurous, Rex is an experienced hiker and the person to inform Cheryl about REI’s free **boot** exchange program—saving her feet and her spirit at a crucial point in her journey.

Susanna – A Swedish hippie in Ashland, Oregon who offers Cheryl a foot massage. Rather than being disgusted or upset by Cheryl’s battered feet, she commends Cheryl on her “animal” spirit and her hard-won bumps and bruises.

Clyde – A hippie who lives a rambling existence, spending a few months out of the year in a tent on the PCT and the rest of his time living out of a milk truck in Ashland, Oregon.

Guy – A ranger at the Olallie Lake Resort.

Sarah A woman whom Cheryl meets while hiking the Pacific Coast Trail.



LOSS AND GRIEF

In the wake of her mother’s untimely death at the age of forty-five, Cheryl Strayed loses more than just a parent and a best friend—slowly, little by little, she begins to lose her family too. As Cheryl’s nuclear family grows more and more distant in the wake of their shared loss, Cheryl begins to believe that that’s simply what loss does: it divides and estranges people at the moment when they should be coming together in mutual grief. Over the course of *Wild*, Cheryl learns that loss has the potential to pull people apart, but can also, amazingly, do the opposite. Ultimately, Strayed suggests that grief and loss are extreme, unpredictable forces that have the power to either send people scattering in disparate directions—or bring them together in shared, collective mourning and healing.

At the start of the book, it seems as if grief creates only one outcome: a breakdown in connection. After her mother Bobbi dies, Cheryl struggles to keep the disparate threads of her family together. Though she and Eddie sat at Bobbi’s side every day she was in the hospital, in Bobbi’s final days, the family had already begun to break apart. Cheryl’s siblings Karen and Leif barely visited the hospital during the duration of their mother’s illness—and Leif never even got to say goodbye, as he arrived at the hospital to visit Bobbi for the first time after she’d already died. After Bobbi’s death, Cheryl is forced to realize that in spite of all her best efforts, she is not able to keep her family together singlehandedly. Her mother, she realizes was “the apparently magical force at the center of [the] family who’d kept [them] all spinning in the powerful orbit around her.” Eddie, in the wake of Bobbi’s passing, becomes a “stranger” to his stepchildren, and swiftly marries another woman with children of her own. Leif and Karen and Cheryl, all grown, drift into the daily demands of their own lives. Soon, Cheryl recognizes that no matter how hard she tries, she cannot keep her family tethered together—they are “floating separately among the flotsam of [their] grief,” barely connected at all anymore. Cheryl’s loss cleaves her from people other than her family, too. Her marriage to her husband Paul begins to suffer almost immediately after Bobbi’s passing. Cheryl and Paul become veritable strangers as a divide opens between them. Cheryl is envious and resentful of her husband, whose family is happy and intact. In spite of Paul’s attempts to comfort Cheryl and thus keep their marriage together, Cheryl feels that something inside her is “dead” to Paul, and she begins having affairs, one-night stands, and dabbling in drug use. Cheryl, doubly traumatized by her mother’s loss and her family’s disintegration, has begun to believe that loss only serves to estrange people from one another, and she acts in accordance with that learned belief as she leans headfirst into the destruction of her marriage.

As the book progresses and Cheryl meets new people along the Pacific Crest Trail, she understands that loss and grief don’t



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

always have to estrange people from one another—they can also bring people together. Cheryl begins to recognize that loss and grief are dynamic forces whose arrival in any given life can have unpredictable effects. Cheryl embarks on the PCT feeling like “the woman with the hole in her heart.” She is hyperconscious of how broken she has become—and worried that the people she meets will be able to intuitively sense that she is damaged goods. However, when Cheryl at last has an encounter with someone who has known and suffered true loss—Lou, a woman who picks up Cheryl while she’s hitchhiking—she realizes that grief doesn’t have to be an alienating thing. Cheryl can’t imagine the magnitude of Lou losing her five year old son—but she sees that in the wake of her grief, Lou has moved forward in her life and found love and community. Lou carries her son’s picture with her always and admits that her grief has fundamentally changed her, but she isn’t closed off to new people, new experiences, and new chances for joy.

Cheryl struggles to maintain even a semblance of a connection with some of the people who were closest to both her and her mother, such as her stepfather Eddie. At the same time, she finds that her experience of loss and grief binds her deeply and instantly to people she barely knows, like Lou. Over the course of her hike, Cheryl understands the instability and volatility loss and grief leave in their wake, and she is able to accept and respect the varying ways in which those often cataclysmic forces act upon different people.



HEALING VS. REDEMPTION

When Cheryl sets out to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, she is at the lowest point of her young life. Ravaged by grief in the wake of losing her mother and ending her marriage, she has succumbed to a barely-manageable heroin addiction, a toxic new relationship, and a cycle of self-destructive behavior that threatens to end her bright future. She embarks on the PCT in an attempt to redeem herself and change her life—but as she travels deeper and deeper into the mountains, Cheryl begins to realize that what she needed all along was healing, not redemption. Through *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed suggests that the ways people fail and the bad choices they make don’t require redemption—rather, these beautiful mistakes are the foundations upon which lives are forged and the healing process, however difficult, is found.

“I was trying [...] to get the bad out of my system so I could be good again. To cure me of myself,” Cheryl writes of the period just before her journey along the Pacific Crest Trail, when she was dabbling in one-night-stands and heroin use in the wake of her mother’s death. Even before conceiving of the PCT hike as a way to restore herself to the whole, normal person she’d once been, Cheryl was desperate to “cure” herself—even if it meant going deeper into cruel, dangerous, or self-destructive behavior before finding her way out. It is from this place that

Cheryl decides that what she needs is to be redeemed or changed—turned from “bad” to good again. As Cheryl sets out on the trail, she is obsessed with the idea that the PCT could have the power to remake her into the person she once was: “strong and responsible, clear-eyed and driven, ethical and good.” She makes a plan to think about her “entire life” as she hikes the trail—to go over her sins, missteps, and mistakes like prayers on a rosary until she has been able to understand them, atone for them, and move on from them. This mindset shows that Cheryl feels guilt over the things she’s done and the person she’s become: she doesn’t yet understand that she is playing into a false idea of redemption that doesn’t actually exist.

In the midst of her hike, Cheryl realizes that she hasn’t spent any time at all “weep[ing] tears of cathartic sorrow and restorative joy” or thinking deeply about the choices she’s made and why. She’s too busy thinking about where to find water, where to make camp, which way is north, and the constant pain she suffers as a result of her blistering **boots** and her monstrous **pack**. Cheryl, then, begins the healing process—what she still conceives of as redemption—without even knowing it. By learning lessons about resilience, preparedness, and the equal but different joys of solitude and community, Cheryl is healing herself with each step she takes, even if her healing process doesn’t look as cathartic as she imagined it would. As Cheryl continues on through the PCT, she encounters people, vistas, and animals that fill her with joy, peace, and an appreciation for the world around her and her place inside of it. She makes friends, pushes her mind and body to their limits, and overcomes every challenge that nature and circumstance place in her path. Cheryl’s healing is not about atoning for her perceived sins or reverting to an earlier, cleaner, purer state of being—it is about accepting who she is, the path she’s on, and the choices she’s making in a productive, nonjudgmental way.

“What if I’d actually wanted to fuck every one of those men? What if heroin taught me something? [...] What if what made me do all those things [...] was also what had got me here? What if I was never redeemed? What if I already was?” As Cheryl asks herself these major questions at a crucial point in her journey—after she’s had sex with a man named Jonathan during a stopover in Ashland, Oregon—the central idea of *Wild* becomes clear. Healing is different from redemption, Strayed suggests, and a traditional path to redemption—or redemption in and of itself—may not exist at all. Cheryl’s journey teaches her that she was never in need of redemption: she needed to accept her past mistakes, stop judging herself for them, and begin to see herself in a new light. In other words, she needed not to repent to or to be saved by some external force or power: her healing had to come from within.



THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

As Cheryl embarks on the Pacific Crest Trail, she believes her journey will be a contemplative one of almost monastic solitude. Instead, what she finds is a thriving, exuberant community of hikers who spur one another on, lift each other up, and offer help, advice, money, and companionship in the toughest moments on the trail. With the exception of a few rare cranks and bad eggs, everyone Cheryl meets along her journey is warm, empathetic, and excited to extend a helping hand to a fellow person in need. *Strayed* ultimately suggests that people are innately and overwhelmingly good, and that one can find faith in the human spirit through the kindness of strangers.

When Cheryl begins planning for her journey along the PCT, she conceives of it as an entirely solo endeavor—something she will have to do entirely on her own as a kind of cleansing ritual to atone for her past sins and mistakes. She quickly learns, however, that the lesson of her journey will not be to confine herself to penitent solitude, but rather to draw strength from those she meets along the way. Early on in Cheryl's journey, she nearly runs out of food when her stove, filled with the wrong kind of lighter fluid, refuses to start. Cheryl decides to get off the trail and head back towards civilization, hoping to be able to catch a ride into town and fix her stove. A miner named Frank and his wife take Cheryl in for the night and drive her to a camping supply store in the morning. Their kindness saves her life and enables her to start out on the PCT in earnest with everything she needs.

As Cheryl continues along the PCT, the people she meets help her in myriad ways, both practical and emotional. She receives advice on winnowing the supplies she's carrying inside of her **backpack** from a man named Albert. She makes the difficult decision to bypass the Sierras due to heavy snowfall—and has a friend, Greg, who journeys by bus along the complicated Greyhound route north alongside her. She receives small gifts from her new friends, like when Doug gives her a raven feather, and receives emotional support from hikers like Brent. Stacy offers to spot Cheryl money when she realizes she's packed one of her care packages wrong and forgotten to include cash for herself, while Rex gives Cheryl practical advice about REI's return policy, helping her secure new **boots** to replace her too-small ones. Even off the trail, Cheryl meets strangers who demonstrate profound kindness, such as the hippie-ish Susanna, a woman who offers to massage Cheryl's battered feet during a stopover in Ashland, and Lou, a tough-as-nails biker chick who tells Cheryl about the death of her son and helps Cheryl feel less alone in her grief over her mother.

All of these interactions with strangers—no matter how small or significant, profound or fleeting—teach Cheryl that there is goodness in the people of the world, and that she need only trust in order to find it. Cheryl's closed-off, cynical demeanor in the early pages of the book melts as she encounters more and

more simple acts of pure goodness along the trail. Soon, Cheryl is even dubbed “The Queen of the PCT” by her fellow hikers, a trail nickname which speaks to her ineffable ability to inspire goodwill, joy, and empathy in everyone she meets. Cheryl quickly realizes that her journey along the PCT doesn't have to be a lonely one—in opening herself up to strangers, they open themselves to her in return, and at each and every stop along the trail, Cheryl finds at least one person who reaffirms her newfound, fledgling faith in the good of humanity.

At the end of Cheryl's journey, she decides to hike the final few miles to Cascade Locks alone in order to reach the Bridge of the Gods by herself. She wants to be able to have the moment of her trek's completion to herself. Standing in the middle of the bridge, however, looking down at the river, Cheryl doesn't feel alone. She feels the weight of the history of the spot she's standing in, and, after looking into the river for a moment, she begins thinking about something she heard “on the trail grapevine” about a great ice cream place in town. Cheryl's moment of triumph isn't one of solitude—it's one in which all the people who have helped her reach it are, in a way, present alongside her. Cheryl feels and appreciates the moment as her own—but understands intimately that the kindness of strangers is what has gotten her to Cascade Locks.



NATURE AND HUMANITY

When Cheryl sets off on an 1,100-mile hike through the wilderness, she is an amateur camper and an inexperienced hiker. Along the Pacific Crest Trail, she encounters fallen trees, snowfall, bears, deer, foxes, armies of frogs and black ants, and inhospitable weather. Cheryl is full of uncertainty at the beginning of her journey, but by the end, she feels strong and empowered. *Wild* uses one woman's journey of taming—or at least existing within—nature and wilderness as a metaphor for the laborious, uncharted journey that is learning to tame and inhabit one's own personal, inner wilderness. Ultimately, *Strayed* suggests that while conquering one's “wild” soul is a daunting task, it can be done.

At the start of her hike, Cheryl is overwhelmed by the arid, hostile terrain of the Mojave desert. Plunged onto the PCT at one of the most unforgiving points on the entire trail, Cheryl must start her journey at maximum difficulty with a decided dearth of experience. This harsh entry into the physical landscape of her hike mirrors her sudden, swift entry into the psychological landscape of grief—and Cheryl has been unprepared for both. Just as Cheryl powers through the Mojave too tired to do much reading or thinking and too focused on the task of staying in motion to feel hungry, she is too close to her experiences to reckon with them yet. The unforgiving desert landscape mirrors Cheryl's raw, desolate emotional state. In terms of the physical and psychological, there's nowhere for Cheryl to go but up.

Another significant point in the book where the physical

challenge before Cheryl reflects the deeper challenge within herself is when she decides to bypass the Sierra Nevada due to heavy snowfall. Cheryl is loath to go around a part of the PCT—especially such a beautiful section—but once she decides to bypass the treacherous mountain range, she feels more capable of conquering what lies ahead. This physical decision reflects an emotional decision that is going on below the surface within Cheryl’s healing process. She hasn’t yet had any of the “cathartic” emotional experiences she thought would define her trip—no cleansing tears, no deep soul-searching, no penitent regret over her checkered recent past. To delve into these moments of catharsis at this point in the trip would be to sideline not just her physical progress, but her emotional progress as well. Cheryl is learning, growing, and healing in other ways—and indeed, when she gets to the other side of the Sierras, she has an emotional moment with an elusive fox which allows her to begin to delve into the feelings of loss and loneliness created by her mother’s death. Cheryl “bypasses” a reckoning she isn’t ready with, and slowly starts to get to the emotional part of her journey in other ways that are less emotionally violent and demanding.

When Cheryl stops at Crater Lake in Oregon, she uses the history of the landmark to turn the place into a potent metaphor for the process of healing one’s own inner turmoil and wildness. Crater Lake is a gorgeous and brilliant blue lake situated in a basin formed out of a large, bowl-shaped crater—the result of a cataclysmic volcanic eruption some 7,000 years ago. Cheryl writes that, in the wake of the eruption, there was only devastation and barrenness—but as the site of the eruption cooled and the scars of the earth healed, the basin filled with rainwater and became the stunning landmark it is today. Crater Lake is a metaphor for the ways in which people heal—not always in the ways they expect to, and often in ways that make evident the cratering losses they’ve suffered. Nevertheless, as the metaphor of Crater Lake teaches, beauty, bounty, and healing can come of great suffering. Cheryl’s encounter with this particular natural wonder reflects her inner emotional state and suggests that, just as Crater Lake formed out of devastation, so too will something wonderful within Cheryl come of all the pain she’s suffered.

By weaving a metaphor in which the unpredictability and hostility of nature gives way to beauty and peace—just as a journey into the interior of the human spirit can—Strayed illustrates how within each individual there is a vast wilderness waiting to be explored. Cheryl sets out on her hike determined to become the master of both the Pacific Crest Trail and the woman within. By the end of her physically and emotionally intense journey along the PCT, Cheryl is stronger in both body and soul—she has a new sense of understanding and trust when it comes to the once-unfamiliar terrain within herself. She has confronted the “wild” parts of both the world around her and her inner nature, and has found freedom and beauty along

the way. Hiking the Pacific Crest Trail doesn’t ever really become easy, Cheryl notes at one point—but it does get easier, and the same can be said of her reckoning with the mountains within.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



MONSTER

Cheryl’s backpack, which she nicknames Monster, is one of *Wild*’s central symbols. When Cheryl first packs Monster, she stuffs it to the gills with everything she thinks she could possibly need to survive a summer on the Pacific Crest Trail—but once it’s full, she struggles beneath its weight and curses the burden it creates for her with every step. Monster is a symbol of all the emotional baggage Cheryl is bringing with her to the PCT: the pain of losing her mother, the destabilization of her brief addiction to heroin, the shame of her broken marriage to her ex-husband Paul, and the serial cheating that destroyed it. As Cheryl makes her way along the PCT, however, she begins to literally—and metaphorically—lighten her load. She receives help from a hiker named Albert, who winnows Cheryl’s excessive possessions when she’s stopped at Kennedy Meadows, and after that, Monster becomes physically lighter. The things she sees and the people she meets along the trail lessen her baggage in other ways, too: as Cheryl gets deeper and deeper into her journey, she begins to have new revelations about her suffering, her choices, and, most poignantly, her resilience in the face of so much pain. Soon, Monster is still a burden to bear each day—but also an extension of Cheryl herself, a friendly, almost animate object that has shaped her body and been shaped by her in return. Monster symbolizes Cheryl’s slow but certain adjustment to the “baggage” she has accumulated throughout her life. Just as hiking the PCT gets easier—but remains far from something that could be categorized as “easy”—shouldering Monster becomes less and less painful and laborious, even as it remains a task that threatens to topple Cheryl each day.



CHERYL’S BOOTS

Over the course of her hike along the PCT, Cheryl transitions from a rugged, arid desert climate to the lush greenery of the Pacific Northwest. She goes from being someone who once compulsively shot heroin to someone who hankers, at the end of each day, only for a Snapple lemonade. She makes new friends, learns new things, and revolutionizes her life: each day on the PCT is as wild and unpredictable as the

one before. The single constant, however, is Cheryl's misery when it comes to her feet. With each day she hikes, Cheryl accrues blisters, bruises, and scrapes—most of which blossom beneath her heavy hiking boots from REI. Tending to her battered feet becomes a grotesque but necessary part of the journey, and with each day that goes by, Cheryl develops more and more of a love-hate relationship with her boots. Cheryl's boots hurt and constrain her, but she doesn't learn until nearly halfway through her hike that there's another way: that she can call REI and have them send her a new pair of boots, free of charge. Once the new boots arrive, they're not much better than the old ones—but Cheryl knows she's got to make do with what she has. Cheryl's boots are a symbol for the way she's moved through life so far—and the way life has moved through her. Life has battered Cheryl just as intensely as her boots have, and yet, until setting foot on the PCT, she's never really considered how to make healthy choices, how to help herself grow, and how to focus on learning, growing, and simply existing on her own. Cheryl's new boots are like the version of being in the world she discovers while on the PCT. Life is still going to be difficult and painful, even now that Cheryl has decided to take her fate, her health, and her capacity for self-love into her own hands—but there's nothing to do but keep marching forward, even in the face of more blisters and bruises.

nine interconnected mountain ranges stretching across California, Oregon, and Washington. In this passage, Cheryl describes the missteps she'd made in her life and how desperate, rootless, and worthless she was feeling in the years before her hike. With nothing left to lose, Cheryl says, she decided to embark on the trail as a way of saving her life by radically altering her circumstances. This passage demonstrates the deadening forces of loss and grief acting upon Cheryl in the time before her hike, as well as her desire (even in the face of that numbness) for redemption and healing. Though Cheryl sets out to traverse a forbidding and arguably dangerous natural landscape, she knows it is no more dangerous than the terrain within—the psychological mountains and valleys that have led her to such self-destructive behavior.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ Each night the black sky and the bright stars were my stunning companions; occasionally I'd see their beauty and solemnity so plainly that I'd realize in a piercing way that my mother was right. That someday I *would* be grateful and that in fact I was grateful now. [...] It was the thing that had grown in me that I'd remember years later, when my life became unmoored by sorrow. The thing that would make me believe that hiking the Pacific Crest Trail was my way back to the person I used to be.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker), Cheryl's Mother/Bobbi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of *Wild*, as Cheryl Strayed reflects on her childhood in the rural Minnesota Northwoods—a childhood largely spent in a house with no electricity or running water—she realizes that the forces at work in her childhood directly influenced her decision to hike the PCT, even through the haze of grief and recklessness she was experiencing at the time. Cheryl's mother, a nature-loving, hippie-ish woman, insisted that her children would one day find gratitude within themselves for the way they'd grown up, and Cheryl remembers, even at a young age, realizing that this would be true. In the wake of losing her mother, unexpectedly, to lung cancer, Cheryl's grief is so enormous that she makes a series of destructive decisions which upend her life. Cheryl finds herself longing both for her



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Wild* published in 2013.

Prologue Quotes

☝ I'd been so many things already. A loving wife and an adulteress. A beloved daughter who now spent holidays alone. An ambitious overachiever and aspiring writer who hopped from one meaningless job to the next while dabbling dangerously with drugs and sleeping with too many men. [...] But a woman who walks alone in the wilderness for eleven hundred miles? I'd never been anything like that before. I had nothing to lose by giving it a whirl.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening section of her memoir *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed begins to offer an explanation for why, in the summer of 1995, she chose to travel across the country in order to walk 1,100 miles through the Pacific Coast Trail—a series of

mother and her mother's way of life as well as for a way back to the person she "used to be"—the person her mother once loved and doted upon. Cheryl's mother is intimately connected with nature in Cheryl's mind, and thus Cheryl's decision to hike the PCT is connected to her desire to feel closer to her deceased mother once again.

☝ It took me years [...] to be the woman my mother raised. [...] I would suffer. [...] I would want things to be different than they were. The wanting was a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the woods.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker), Cheryl's Mother/Bobbi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

"The wanting was a wilderness," Cheryl writes in this passage, revealing, in essence, the metaphorical thesis of her memoir *Wild*. Throughout the book, Cheryl will use her journey along the Pacific Crest Trail and the rugged, rapidly-changing landscape she encounters there as a metaphor for the stages of working through the demanding, ever-shifting psychological landscape of loss and grief. The real "wilderness" Cheryl conquers in the end is not necessarily the mountains and valleys of the PCT—rather, she is ultimately able to tame the wilderness within herself and learn to live with rather than fight, ignore, or succumb to her expansive grief. Cheryl compares her grief to a "woods" she must navigate herself out of, and over the course of the book, she repeatedly recognizes that when it comes to getting out of a thick, dangerous forest, the only choices are to move forward or to double back. As Cheryl hikes the PCT, she reminds herself continually that she must keep moving forward if she wants to find her way out of the wilderness of her own wanting, her own grief, and her own torment.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ [Monster] looked so cute, so *ready* to be lifted—and yet it was impossible to do. I sat down on the floor beside it and pondered my situation. How could I carry a backpack more than a thousand miles [...] if I couldn't even budge it an inch? [...] The notion was preposterous and yet I *had* to lift that pack.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

After Cheryl finishes packing up her backpack—which she has not yet nicknamed "Monster" for its unbelievable heft—she realizes that she can barely lift the thing. As Monster is a potent symbol throughout the memoir for the ways in which Cheryl struggles—and often fails—to carry the burden of her grief over her mother's loss, the language in this particular passage about her intimidating pack takes on a new metaphorical essence. Cheryl doesn't know how she is going to lift her backpack, but at the same time she realizes she must. This speaks to the ways in which she has come to realize that while her grief has burdened her life and made it seem "preposterous" and impossible, she must soldier forward anyway if she wants to make anything at all of herself and her life.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ My new existence was beyond analogy, I realized on that second day on the trail. I was in entirely new terrain.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Early on in her journey along the Pacific Crest Trail, Cheryl realizes that she is in "entirely new terrain." It is not, however, the first time she's found herself facing down a foreign, unknown, potentially dangerous place. Throughout *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed uses the landscape of the Pacific Crest Trail as a metaphor for the landscape of her own grief and suffering. The "new terrain" she is facing down as she sets off on her trek represents the unknown journey she is about to make not just into the mountains, but into her own psyche. Over the years since her mother's loss, Cheryl has dulled herself to the world around her as well as to her own wants, needs, and desire for happiness, engaging in a series of increasingly self-destructive behaviors that threaten to derail her life forever. The "new terrain" of healing, redemption, and self-discovery Cheryl is about to embark

on, then, is as much psychological as it is literal.

☛ The thing about hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, the thing that was so profound to me that summer [...] was how few choices I had. [...] How there was no escape or denial. No numbing it down with a martini or covering it up with a roll in the hay. There were only two [options] and they were essentially the same. I could go back in the direction I had come from, or I could go forward in the direction I intended to go. [...] And so I walked on.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

The Pacific Crest Trail teaches Cheryl a number of important lessons early on. The things she begins to learn from the trail aren't just wilderness preparedness—they are life lessons which can be applied to any situation on or off the trail. For so long, since her mother's death, Cheryl has been avoiding being a real participant in her own life. She has sabotaged relationships, jeopardized her health, and essentially stopped caring about what happens to her. The past several years have been one huge non-decision. Here on the trail, however, Cheryl is constantly forced into the same decision over and over: she must continually decide whether to continue forward, or go back from where she came. This choice comes to take on a much larger significance, through repetition, than whether Cheryl is simply moving in one direction or another: it comes to represent whether she will continue to take the easy way out and forgo facing what's hardest, or whether she will actually work to move forward in the world, reform herself, and take control of her own circumstances once again.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ I'd imagined endless meditations upon sunsets or while staring out across pristine mountain lakes. I thought I'd weep tears of cathartic sorrow and restorative joy each day of my journey. Instead, I only moaned, and not because my heart ached. It was because my feet did and my back did and so did the still-open wounds all around my hips.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Though Cheryl set off on her journey in hopes of excavating the darker parts of her heart and psyche, confronting the mistakes of her life, and finding a way back to the person she used to be, in this passage, she reflects upon how she's been unable to have any “cathartic” or meditative moments—she's been too busy, moment-to-moment, simply focusing on how to keep going forward in the face of tremendous physical pain. This passage reflects the one of the novel's major themes: healing versus redemption. Though Cheryl imagined that her “redemption” would be characterized by intense feeling and self-flagellation followed by stunning emotional breakthroughs, in reality, there is no such thing as redemption the way she imagines it. The thing Cheryl needs is healing—and healing is not a straightforward or easily imaginable path. Cheryl's healing process along the PCT will be slower and more roundabout than she envisioned it—and a lot of it will involve the act of actually tuning out her emotional inner monologue and focusing on learning the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other.

☛ I stopped in my tracks when that thought came into my mind, that hiking the PCT was the hardest thing I'd ever done. [...] Watching my mother die and having to live without her, that was the hardest thing I'd ever done. [...] But hiking the PCT was hard in a different way. In a way that made the other hardest things the tiniest bit less hard. It was strange but true. And perhaps I'd known it in some way from the very beginning.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker), Cheryl's Mother/Bobbi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

As Cheryl is walking along the Pacific Crest Trail one day, the thought that it is the hardest thing she's ever done comes into her head. Cheryl balks at this idea, as it goes so entirely against the narrative around which she's constructed the last several years of her life. Not only must Cheryl confront the fact that one of the major tenets of her recent years is wrong, but she must find a way to reorganize how she conceives of the gulf between the emotional and

the physical, as well as the doable and the impossible. Even as Cheryl absorbs this reckoning, it occurs to her that she has known it to be true, on some level, “from the very beginning” of her hike. This passage thematically reflects both the experience of loss and grief as well as the idea of healing versus redemption. Cheryl imagined that grief was the biggest thing in her life for so long that she sabotaged and derailed her life almost out of exhaustion. As the healing process has gotten underway, however, it has worked its way slyly into Cheryl’s consciousness. She has begun to heal slowly, without even realizing it—and now she must allow herself to accept that there will be harder thing she will face than the mountain of her own grief.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ [My pack] was still the biggest pack of the bunch—hiking solo, I had to carry things that those who hiked in pairs could divvy up, and I didn’t have the ultralight confidence or skills that Greg did—but in comparison to how my pack had been before Albert helped me purge it, it was so light I felt I could leap into the air.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker), Albert, Greg

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a kindly hiker named Albert—a former Eagle Scout and experienced backpacker—has just helped Cheryl to go through her enormous pack, Monster, and winnow her belongings in order to make shouldering the burden of her pack more manageable. Monster is a symbol which, throughout the book, represents Cheryl’s physical and emotional baggage (and demonstrates how she learns to handle and shoulder her grief over her mother’s loss). This passage, then, shows how Cheryl is slowly realizing that in order to bear her grief, she must share it with others and learn to accept help from strangers. Cheryl thought her hike along the PCT would be a cathartic and restorative solo trek, in which she’d learn to bear her grief and change her life on her own. As she is progressing along the trail, she is learning that she cannot fight the battles in front of her without the help of the strangers she meets along the way—strangers who become friends.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ “Come back,” I called lightly, and then suddenly shouted, “MOM! MOM! MOM! MOM!” I didn’t know the word was going to come out of my mouth until it did.

And then, just as suddenly, I went silent, spent.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker), Cheryl’s Mother/Bobbi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cheryl encounters a lone fox while hiking a stretch of the California wilderness entirely blanketed in a thick but soft snowfall. When Cheryl sees the fox, she calls out to it gently. Rather than coming to her, however, the fox slowly and disinterestedly ambles away. The fox is not quite a symbol, though its presence, its indifference, and its departure all remind Cheryl of how helpless she was to stop her mother from leaving the world—and how she is never going to get her back. Cheryl’s grief over her mother’s loss has been quieted while she’s been on the trail—she’s been too busy focusing on surviving and moving ahead to linger on her own sorrows. The appearance of the fox, however, reminds Cheryl just how little of the world around her she controls—and how deeply all creatures are at the mercy of nature’s often-cruel whims.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ “You could wish for a horse,” Brent said. “Then you wouldn’t have to worry about your feet.”

I looked at him in the dark. [...] “I used to have a horse,” I said, turning my gaze back to the sky. [...]

“Well then, you’re lucky.” He said. “Not everyone gets a horse.”

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed, Brent (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout this chapter, Cheryl has been having intrusive and upsetting memories of a traumatic event from her past in which she, her husband Paul, and her brother Leif were

tasked with putting their mother's prize horse, Lady, out of her misery after she suffered years of neglect in the wake of Bobbi's death. Cheryl has been so perturbed by the horrific experience of putting Lady down that she's forgotten to feel "lucky" about the fact that she had a horse at all. Through the kindness of Brent, a fellow hiker she meets while camping just off the Pacific Crest Trail, Cheryl begins to realize that part of her healing process must involve gratitude. She lost her mother, just as she lost Lady and just as she lost her husband Paul when they divorced—but Cheryl has neglected to consider how fortunate she was to have known such loving relationships in the first place. Cheryl's whole worldview is changing as she navigates the Pacific Crest Trail, encounters the kindness of a multitude of strangers, and slowly begins to heal in unexpected ways—and focusing on thankfulness rather than self-pity is just one step on the road to reorganizing her thoughts and reimagining her life.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ "I look the same, but I'm not the same in here. I mean, life goes on and all that crap, but Luke dying took it out of me. I try not to act like it, but it did. It took the Lou out of Lou, and I ain't getting it back. You know what I mean?"

"I do," I said. [...]

"I thought so," she said. "I had that feeling about you."

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed, Lou (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

When Cheryl hitches a ride with a woman named Lou and her husband Spider—tough bikers with rowdy, flirtatious attitudes—she enjoys their uproarious company. When Cheryl asks about a picture of a young boy hanging off their car's rearview mirror, however, Lou reveals that the photograph is one of her son—a young boy who died years ago in a car accident. As Cheryl and Lou, alone at a rest stop, share a quiet moment of conversation, they further discuss Lou's loss—and Cheryl's as well. Lou admits that though her son's loss took "the Lou out of Lou" and forever, irrevocably changed her, Cheryl has seen a side of Lou that knows joy and allows herself to feel love. This passage evokes the duality of grief and loss—it never leaves, and it can overwhelm one's life if one lets it, but it doesn't need to blot out all chances of joy. Cheryl is learning that while the loss

of her mother will never be something she forgets or stops mourning, it doesn't have to become the defining event of her life. She can recognize that the loss changed her without devoting her life to constant mourning—and without closing herself off to joy.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ I could pack up [Monster] in five minutes now. [...] Monster was my world, my inanimate extra limb. Though its weight and size still confounded me, I'd come to accept that it was my burden to bear. I didn't feel myself in contradiction to it the way I had a month before. It wasn't me against it. We two were one.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

At the start of her journey along the Pacific Crest Trail, Cheryl's huge backpack—lovingly nicknamed "Monster"—was a "preposterous" and enormous burden to bear, so large and heavy that Cheryl at first didn't know how she'd even begin to shoulder it, let alone walk under its weight. Over the course of the journey, though, Monster has become an ally and an "extra limb" to Cheryl. Monster, a symbol for the psyche and the soul's slow adjustment to the "baggage" of grief and loss, represents Cheryl's gradual acclimation to the enormous weight of her grief. It remains "confound[ing]," in a sense, a constant presence in her life and in her mind—but it is more manageable now, and travels alongside her rather than pulling against her. Cheryl has learned to shoulder both her physical and emotional baggage with relative ease—her grief, she is learning on her healing journey, is not her enemy, but rather an "inanimate extra limb" she must contend with and a kind of "world" she must learn to live in.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ My new boots had only chawed my feet afresh. I was passing through the beautiful territory I'd come to take for granted, my body finally up to the task of hiking the big miles, but because of my foot troubles, I sank into the grimmest despair. [...] Perhaps my feet would never be okay.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

After Cheryl secures new boots from REI through a satisfaction guarantee, she believes that her endless struggles with her blistered, battered feet will at last be over. However, Cheryl soon realizes that her new boots will not be any easier on her feet than her old ones. Cheryl's boots are a symbol that represent the cyclical and constant nature of grief over a loss. Though Cheryl learns to adjust to the physical and psychological pain her boots inspire, her feet remain caged inside of them. She feels "despair" and exhaustion, on occasion, but eventually resigns herself to the idea that her feet are simply going to take a beating as she goes on—that's the nature of being on the trail. Just as working through grief and loss require a continual emotional battering, albeit one that gets less noticeable and more manageable over time, so too do Cheryl's boots continually "chaw" her vulnerable feet.

☝ There were so many [...] amazing things in this world. They opened up inside of me like a river. Like I didn't know I could take a breath and then I breathed. I laughed with the joy of it, and the next moment I was crying my first tears on the PCT. I cried and I cried and I cried. I wasn't crying because I was happy. I wasn't crying because I was sad. I wasn't crying because of my mother or my father or Paul. I was crying because I was full.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker), Paul, Cheryl's Mother/Bobbi

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

Cheryl wrote earlier on her memoir that as she set out on the Pacific Crest Trail, she was expecting her journey to be full of cathartic moments of sorrow, restorative moments of joy, and constant emotional assaults that would heal and redeem her. In reality, Cheryl hasn't cried once yet on the PCT—until this passage. Just before reaching Oregon, Cheryl finds herself enjoying her final days hiking through

California and already feeling a sense of accomplishment and arrival. She takes in the beautiful and quickly-changing scenery, she runs into hikers, backpackers, and scouts who make her feel supported and accompanied along the trail, and she has several encounters with some amazing animals including a llama, a black bear, and a deer—the first she's seen. As Cheryl, overwhelmed by all the unexpected things her journey has brought her, allows her heart to become full, she at last has the cathartic cry she envisioned all along. Cheryl, though, isn't releasing anger or sadness or poison—she's simply reached a point of fullness and contentment that allows her myriad emotions to spill over and come out. Cheryl's healing process doesn't look the way she imagined it would—but it's happening all the same.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ I reached the border only minutes later, stopping to take it in: California and Oregon, an end and a beginning pressed up against each other. For such a momentous spot, it didn't look all that momentous. There was only a brown metal box that held a trail register and a sign that said WASHINGTON: 498 MILES—no mention of Oregon itself.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 238-239

Explanation and Analysis

For the entirety of her trek along the Pacific Coast Trail through California—over 600 miles of terrain—Cheryl has been dreaming about the moment she would arrive in Oregon. Now, as she crosses the state line and at last arrives in the home stretch of her hike, Cheryl is shocked to realize that the moment isn't "all that momentous." The sign at the border doesn't even mention Oregon—it just begins to signal how far it is to Washington. This moment reflects many things, all of which are thematically significant in terms of Cheryl's journey. First, it speaks to the indifferent nature of the landscape Cheryl has found herself in. Since her first night on the trail, Cheryl has been awed by the ancient indifference of nature. The land doesn't know borders or landmarks—and Cheryl is on this journey to learn from the land. Secondly, the anticlimactic arrival in a new state—only to immediately start signaling the next one—speaks to the cyclical and forward-oriented process of grieving and healing. Being healed is not a destination—it is a journey. Cheryl has thought of so much of her trip in terms

of resupply stops and milestones, but as she enters Oregon, the trail itself urges her to think of her physical and emotional journey in a new way: less in terms of where she's going or how she's getting there, and more in terms of what's happening along the way.

☛ What if I forgave myself? [...] What if I was a liar and a cheat and there was no excuse for what I'd done other than because it was what I wanted and needed to do? [...] What if I'd actually wanted to fuck every one of those men? What if heroin taught me something? [...] What if what made me do all those things everyone thought I shouldn't have done was what also had got me here? What if I was never redeemed? What if I already was?

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

As Cheryl wanders a rocky beach on the Oregon coast, she finds herself lost in thoughts of her bad habits, her cruel betrayals, and her many transgressions against her ex-husband. Cheryl stops the cycle of bad, self-loathing thoughts, however, by going off on a tangent of rapid-fire questioning in which she begins to question the nature of her journey for redemption and healing. Cheryl set off on the Pacific Crest Trail in hopes of getting back to the person she once was—in hopes of becoming pure, clean, and good. However, Cheryl is slowly realizing that this is not possible—and that if it were, she might not want to revert to such a state anyway. Part of the healing process is acceptance, and in this passage, Cheryl at last allows herself the grace of accepting who she once was, who she became, and who she is trying to be now. She doesn't need to be redeemed, she realizes—she needs to be healed, and from this point forward in her trek, she decides to treat herself like a person worthy of love, happiness, generosity, and acceptance rather than a sinner to be remade and reformed.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☛ This was once a mountain that stood nearly 12,000 feet tall and then had its heart removed. This was once a wasteland. [...] This was once an empty bowl that took hundreds of years to fill. But hard as I tried, I couldn't see them in my mind's eye. Not the mountain or the wasteland or the empty bowl. They simply were not there anymore. There was only the stillness and silence of that water: what a mountain and a wasteland and an empty bowl turned into after the healing began.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

In this lyrical passage, Cheryl reflects on the history of Crater Lake in Oregon—once known as Mount Mazama. As Cheryl considers the radical transformation Mazama has undergone over the course of thousands of years, she unravels a potent metaphor for the process of healing from loss and grief. Losing her mother took a veritable crater out of Cheryl, seemingly scooping her heart from her body. She described feeling “dead” to her husband, and turned to drugs and sex to numb the pain she felt: she turned her life into a “wasteland.” Over the course of her hike along the Pacific Crest Trail, however, Cheryl has mellowed and begun to heal—using the lessons she's learned from friends, strangers, and indeed nature itself, she is beginning to feel hope that one day, she, too, will be as still, calm, and clear as Crater Lake has become.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☛ The PCT had gotten easier for me, but that was different from it getting easy.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 275

Explanation and Analysis

Over the course of her hike along the Pacific Crest Trail, Cheryl has struggled with pain both physical and emotional, exhaustion, wild fluctuations in weather, disappointment, danger, wild animals, wild men, and rough terrain. The Pacific Crest Trail has been the biggest and most difficult test of her life—and as she approaches the end of it, she

marvels at how her own perception of those difficulties has changed and morphed. The Pacific Crest Trail is “easier” now, in the cool forests of Oregon, than it was at the beginning, in the stifling heat of the Mojave—but to say it’s “easy” is by no stretch of the imagination true. Cheryl has learned that the same thing is true of loss and grief. Managing her emotions surrounding the loss of her mother has gotten easier—but it is still a trial Cheryl must face every single day. In this quotation, Cheryl Strayed ties the themes of loss and grief as well as healing and redemption together with the theme of nature and the wilderness. Taming the wildness of one’s heart and soul—especially in the wake of profound loss—is never easy, but it does get easier.

Chapter 19 Quotes

💡 It was all unknown to me then, as I sat on that white bench on the day I finished my hike. Everything except the fact that I didn’t have to know. That it was enough to trust that what I’d done was true. [...] How wild it was, to let it be.

Related Characters: Cheryl Strayed (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 311

Explanation and Analysis

In the book’s final lines, as Cheryl Strayed looks back on the final moments of her hike along the Pacific Crest Trail, she expresses awe and gratitude towards her younger self. Though Cheryl asserts that even at the end of her hike, she didn’t fully understand what she’d accomplished—or how it would come to affect her future—she says she is proud of herself for taking the “wild” leap of just “let[ting] it be.” For her entire hike, Cheryl has been obsessed with accomplishing certain goals and reaching certain milestones both psychologically and physically. When she set out, she expected that by the end of her hike, she would have come to terms with her mother’s loss, redeemed herself for her years of casual sex and compulsive drug use, and conquered an unforgiving natural landscape indifferent to her presence. In reality, at the end of her hike, Cheryl was just beginning to do all of these things—even in spite of all the huge strides, literal and emotional, made throughout her hike. Still, Cheryl was able to learn that sometimes, telling oneself to “let it be” and surrendering all judgment, expectations, and preconceived notions of success or enlightenment or healing or redemption is the “wildest” thing of all.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Cheryl Strayed looks over the edge of a steep mountain slope in Northern California. After taking her **hiking boots** off for a moment, she has accidentally dropped her left boot over the edge. She is stunned as she tries to comprehend that her boot is actually gone. Though she clings to the right boot, she realizes that “one boot without the other boot” is useless. Feeling a sudden wave of anger towards the right boot, Cheryl chucks it, too, over the mountainside.

It is the summer of 1995, and Cheryl is alone, barefoot, and twenty-six years old in the middle of the 2,663-mile-long Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). She is effectively an orphan—her father left her family when she was six, and her mother passed away four years ago. Her family has fallen apart under the weight of their shared grief. Cheryl has come to the PCT in hopes of transforming herself “into the woman [she knows she can] become” while simultaneously turning herself back into the girl she once was.

Cheryl first heard about the PCT only seven months earlier, while living in Minneapolis “sad and desperate and on the brink of divorc[e].” She picked up a book about the PCT by chance, and read about how it stretched from the Mexican border in California all the way up into Canada, along the crest of nine different mountain ranges. Though the idea of hiking the trail was “vague and outlandish,” it ignited something within Cheryl. The way Cheryl saw it, she’d been so many things already that being “a woman who walks alone in the wilderness for eleven hundred miles” seemed like a piece of cake. After enduring the loss of her mother, a failed marriage, and a slew of drug-fueled one-night-stands, Cheryl felt she had nothing to lose by setting out on the PCT.

Now, as she stands barefoot on the edge of a mountain, Cheryl realizes just how little her experiences actually prepared her for hiking the PCT. Each day on the trail, she is learning, is “the only possible preparation for the one that follow[s.]” Cheryl is six weeks into the hike, and though over the last month and a half her **boots** have become a kind of extension of herself, she slowly manages to bring herself to feel peace about losing them. Cheryl looks down at her “bare and battered feet”—most of her toenails have come off, and her feet and legs are covered in bruises and scratches. As tired as she is, Cheryl knows there is only one thing to do: keep walking.

Wild begins in medias res, or in the middle of the action. Strayed is giving readers a glimpse of the kind of simultaneously dire and dull struggles that she is going to face along the Pacific Crest Trail—and showcasing her particular brand of stubborn willfulness.



Cheryl gives the entire ethos for her trip up-front, demonstrating how her competing desires to indulge her grief and to move backwards in time are acting upon her over the course of her journey.



Cheryl continues outlining the multiple factors that have driven her to the PCT. She feels she has “nothing to lose,” but at the same time realizes that, at the lowest point in her life so far, she has everything to gain. Cheryl’s PCT hike is a desperate call to action within herself—a radical move meant to completely transform the landscape of both her physical circumstances and her inner world.



This moment is just one of many Cheryl will encounter along the PCT in which she is presented, at the height of her frustration and pain, with only two options: keep walking, or double back. Cheryl’s entire journey is about transforming herself and her life—she knows that although going back is technically an option, for her, going back means failure, calamity, and maybe even death.



CHAPTER 1: THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

Cheryl tracks the origin of her desire to hike the PCT to her mother's hospital room at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. Her mother, a "forty-five-year-old vegetarian-ish [...] natural-remedy-using nonsmoker" was diagnosed suddenly with late-stage lung cancer, and doctors advised Cheryl and her mother that she had less than a year to live. Cheryl was only twenty-two at the time—the same age her mother had been when she'd given birth to Cheryl. After the doctor broke the news, Cheryl and her mother wept in separate stalls in the women's bathroom, then went to the pharmacy to pick up some prescriptions that would ease Cheryl's mother's pain. They waited along with Cheryl's stepfather, Eddie, shell-shocked and disbelieving.

Growing up, Cheryl's mother always told Cheryl and her siblings Karen and Leif that she loved them so much the amount couldn't be "quantified or contained," and she compared the ineffable amount to the "ten thousand things" from the Tao Te Ching—a verbal representation of all the things in the world that cannot be named. Cheryl writes that her mother got pregnant with her first child—Cheryl's older sister Karen—when she was just nineteen, and quickly married. Cheryl's mother stuck with her father through years of intense physical abuse—abuses which Cheryl and her siblings witnessed often until their father walked out of their lives nearly ten years later.

Though Cheryl and her family were poor, Cheryl's mother always insisted they were "rich in love." Cheryl's mother eventually married Eddie, a kindhearted carpenter eight years her junior. Together with Eddie—using the funds from a work compensation settlement he received following an accident—Cheryl's mother purchased a plot of land in rural Minnesota. The entire family pitched in to tame the wild land and build a small house upon it, and eventually, Cheryl's mother, Cheryl, Karen, and Leif moved onto the property full-time while Eddie stayed behind in the city to work.

Even as Cheryl and her siblings complained about roughing it in the wilderness—in a house with no electricity or plumbing—their mother urged them to realize one day they'd be thankful for their rugged, rural upbringing. Cheryl writes that she now realizes her mother's love of nature grew inside of her over the years, and was ultimately the thing that made her believe that "hiking the Pacific Crest Trail was [her] way back" to the person she'd once been.

Cheryl's memoir is not just a record of her trip along the PCT—it's a roadmap, of sorts, of all of the things that brought her there in the first place. From her vantage point in the future, Cheryl can see that, through many different factors pushed her to hike the PCT, the main, driving force behind the adventure was the devastating loss of her mother and the ways in which that loss ripped Cheryl's life apart.



Cheryl introduces her childhood as a volatile mixture of violent abuse and peaceful, loving joy. Cheryl's mother attempted to impress upon her children the vastness of her love for them so often, perhaps, to make up for the dearth of love they got from their abusive father.



Cheryl charts her past, showing how nature has always been a part of her life in one way or another. Though the PCT is brand-new territory for her, she believes she can trek it in part because of the example her mother set: that nature could be tamed, and that to live in harmony with the natural world is one of life's greatest gifts.



Not only does Cheryl enjoy being in nature, but she equates it with purity, wholeness, and redemption because of her fond childhood memories. Cheryl wonders if returning to nature might return her to the person she was in childhood.



When it was time for Cheryl to go off to college, her mother went with her. At forty, her mother was determined to get the college degree she was never able to get as a younger woman, and Cheryl's acceptance letter informed her that parents of students at her small college could take classes for free. The two of them were both in their final year of school when Cheryl's mother got her cancer diagnosis—Cheryl was married to a man named Paul and close to graduating, but after the diagnosis, she “folded [her] life down” and put both school and her marriage on the backburner in order to care for her ailing mother while Eddie continued working to pay the bills.

Though Cheryl's mother was diagnosed on the 12th of February and given a year to live, by the 3rd of March, she was in too much pain to continue living at home. Cheryl helped her mother get dressed and go to the hospital, and as they left the house, Cheryl's mother bid goodbye to all her things, seemingly aware of the fact that she wouldn't return home to see them again. At the hospital, Cheryl's mother was admitted, and Cheryl was stunned to realize that her indomitable mother was in fact dying. Cheryl stayed with her mother night and day, though her siblings all but refused to visit, claiming they were unable to see their mother in such a state. In the end, Cheryl writes, her mother lived for only thirty-four days after her visit to Mayo Clinic.

Though Cheryl's husband Paul tried to provide emotional support and make her feel “less alone,” Cheryl began to realize, as she cared for her dying mother, that “something inside of [her] was dead to Paul.” Cheryl only managed to get Karen to visit once, and could not get Leif to come to the hospital at all. In the last few days of Cheryl's mother's life, her mother was sunk “down under” beneath a steady drip of morphine. Cheryl wanted her mother to tell her that she “had been the best daughter in the world,” but when her mother remained mostly asleep and unresponsive, Cheryl asked the question herself. Her mother replied that she had been—but Cheryl remained “ravenous” for her mother's love.

On the night of Saint Patrick's Day, Cheryl realized her mother had taken a turn for the worse and became determined to bring her brother Leif to the hospital to say goodbye. Cheryl left the hospital, went home, and began calling friends and acquaintances. She at last managed to track Leif down, and the next morning, the two of them drove to the hospital, though Leif kept insisting it would be too hard for him to see their mother in such a state. When they arrived at the hospital, however, their mother had already died. A hysterical Cheryl “howled” at her mother's side, clutching at her corpse and crying.

As Cheryl talks about her early life, it becomes clear that she and her mother were intensely close—they even went to college together. Cheryl is hammering home just how serious and unimaginable losing her mother was—and how unable she was to simply go on with life as usual in the wake of her loss.



Losing her mother hit Cheryl even harder because of how quickly she deteriorated. Cheryl had just gotten accustomed to the idea of only having a year left with her mother—but within a month, she had to reckon anew with the idea that her mother would soon be gone.



As Cheryl's mother slipped further and further away, Cheryl's “ravenous” desire for her mother's love intensified, blotting out all other desires and relationships—even the one with her husband Paul.



In one final twist of cruelty, Cheryl is devastated to find that her mother has died alone, without any of her children by her side. Cheryl was attempting to do something good and right by bringing Leif to her mother's bedside—but as a result, Cheryl has lost her final precious moments in her mother's presence.



In the wake of her mother's death, Cheryl began suffering from night terrors in which she was always killing her mother in increasingly violent ways. Paul tried to comfort her when she awoke from the dreams sweating and screaming, but nothing brought Cheryl comfort. Cheryl writes now that it would take years for her to make peace with her mother's death, and that she would have to suffer intensely on the road to healing. The place Cheryl finally found peace was called the Bridge of the Gods—a landmark along the Pacific Crest Trail.

Cheryl begins to demonstrate how no one, no matter how loving or attentive, could help her through her mother's loss. Though she didn't know it at the time, she would have to find healing on her own, from within.



CHAPTER 2: SPLITTING

In the years after her mother's death, Cheryl ran around the country from place to place—she lived in Texas, New York City, California, Oregon, and Wyoming, among other places. All the while, she was “dooming” her marriage with lies, failing to keep her fractured family together, and harming herself.

Cheryl's downward spiral in the wake of her mother's death is harrowing and nasty to behold—but without sinking to such depths, she never would have pushed herself to such heights.



Four years after her mother's death, in the middle of the first week of June, Cheryl leaves Minnesota behind forever and sets out to hike the PCT. After a final visit to the place where Cheryl laid her mother's ashes to rest, she sets off for Portland in her old pickup truck with only backpacking supplies in tow. After leaving her truck in Portland with her friend Lisa—who is in charge of sending pre-packed care packages to stops along the PCT for Cheryl to collect—Cheryl boards a flight to Los Angeles, then travels to a town on the edge of the Mojave desert.

Cheryl gets on the road with little emotion and a slightly spooky air of detachment. This is a woman who has truly nothing left to lose—at the depths of her sorrow, there is nowhere to go but up.



Cheryl checks into a small motel to spend the night and prepare for the start of her journey the next day. She is flummoxed when the motel owner asks her to fill out a form including the address of her next of kin. Cheryl writes down Eddie's address, though her connection to her stepfather has grown frayed and distant in the years since her mother's death. She rarely sees Leif or Karen and has divorced Paul recently “after a harrowing yearlong separation.”

Cheryl is confronted with how truly alone she is as she sets off on her journey along the PCT—yet another reason why she has chosen to lean into her solitude and isolation.



As Cheryl settles into her room, she feels the urge to go out drinking and bring a man back to her hotel room—or to call Paul, whom she still views as her “best friend.” She resists both temptations, though, and starts focusing on getting ready for the trip ahead. All winter, she saved money waitressing in order to buy necessities for life on the PCT. Cheryl reflects on how many of her friends tried to dissuade her from undertaking such a large journey with such little backpacking experience—and on how bullheaded she was in insisting she was ready for the hike.

Cheryl is clearly enmeshed in patterns of self-destructive behavior—patterns that she must literally run into the wilderness to get away from. Cheryl believes the PCT is her chance at redemption—a last-ditch effort at healing her wounds and putting her dangerous behavior to an end.



As Cheryl considers her bright yellow emergency whistles, a sense of anxiety and aloneness floods her. She remembers one of the last things Paul said to her when she left Minneapolis ten days earlier: that she had finally found a way to get what she wanted. When Cheryl asked Paul what that was, he replied simply, “To be alone.” Cheryl begins reflecting on the breakdown of her marriage to Paul, and wondering whether being “alone” is what she really wants.

A week after Cheryl’s mother died, Paul received an acceptance letter to a PhD program at The New School in New York City. Cheryl was unsure that she could leave her fraying family behind and go to New York with Paul, and she became determined to get him to leave to go to the city without her. Cheryl began kissing other men, determined not to actually have sex with anyone outside the bonds of her marriage but unable to resist doing something that would both push Paul away and numb the pain of her mother’s passing. Though Paul deferred his admission for a year and Cheryl spent the time attempting to keep her family together, she was forced to confront that her mother had been “the apparently magical force at the center of [their] family”—and that without her, they were doomed to drift apart.

Cheryl and Paul moved to New York a year later, but after only a few months of school, he dropped out. Cheryl and Paul took a road trip around the country and eventually stayed in Portland a while. Cheryl, having found a nomadic kind of bliss with Paul, convinced herself that she could settle into the role of a wife again—but when Paul went back to Minnesota for work, Cheryl stayed behind on the West Coast and, within a week of Paul’s departure, had slept with three other men. Looking back, Cheryl realizes that she was trying to cure herself of her grief through serial cheating.

Three years after the death of her mother, Cheryl had returned to Minneapolis to live with Paul—but her affairs had gone on. One day, she finally confessed the truth to Paul and he moved out. They embarked on an official separation, but Cheryl and Paul both struggled to decide whether they should officially divorce or stay together. Cheryl’s friend Lisa called her and urged her to come to Portland for a while, and Cheryl agreed, packing up her life and traveling the same route she’d take exactly a year later, on her way to hike the PCT. As Cheryl drove across the country, she felt as if she was leaving her troubles behind—but now, she reflects, she was only on her way to finding even more.

Both Paul and Cheryl seem to believe that Cheryl’s journey will be a solitary one—but neither of them yet understands that the PCT is not about solitude and loneliness.



Everything begins falling apart in the wake of Cheryl’s loss. Her marriage and her family, once sources of strength, love, and stability, quickly become things that only exacerbate her feelings of loneliness, grief, and helplessness. Cheryl begins pushing Paul away as her connection to her family frays, perhaps believing it is only a matter of time before he too abandons her—and that she can head that loss off on her own.



Even after a period of happiness and stability, Cheryl slides back into self-sabotaging patterns. She longs to stave off her grief or find a way to heal it, but is looking for relief in all the wrong places.



Cheryl’s spiral of grief, rage, and self-destructive behavior continues on and on even as she changes the scenery around her. This passage demonstrates that Cheryl’s desire to hike the PCT as an escape is a misguided impulse—but the vast demands of that place will affect her differently than a simple cross-country move.



CHAPTER 3: HUNCHING IN A REMOTELY UPRIGHT POSITION

Cheryl wakes on the first morning of her journey and stares at herself in the mirror. As she looks at herself, she sees a “woman with [a] hole in her heart.” She brushes her teeth, dresses in her hiking outfit, laces up her **boots**, and begins packing her **bag**. She needs to fit in enough supplies for three months—and she has been dreading the task. As Cheryl looks at all the things she’s taking with her she becomes more and more skeptical of the idea that it will all fit—and increasingly aware of how unprepared she is for the odyssey before her.

Cheryl manages to pack her **backpack**, and then starts filling her water bottles. Altogether, the water she needs to make it through the Mojave weighs 24.5 pounds. Cheryl clips the vessels to the sides of her backpack and then bends to lift it up—only to find it won’t budge. Cheryl considers taking some items out, but fears leaving behind something essential. Cheryl gets into a sitting position on the floor in front of her backpack, puts her arms through the straps, and slowly, strenuously manages to stand. Hunched in a “remotely upright position,” Cheryl adjusts to the tremendous weight on her back—and the realization that she will have to carry it 1,100 miles to Oregon. Cheryl doesn’t know a lot about what’s ahead of her, but she knows one thing—it is “time to go.”

This passage introduces the book’s two central symbols: Cheryl’s boots and her giant pack, which she will soon nickname Monster. Both are physical symbols of the literal and emotional baggage Cheryl must carry along the PCT, as well as the spiritual and physical challenges that await her on the trail. Cheryl’s literal baggage is unmanageable, but so is her emotional baggage: yet she must find a way to wield them.



Again, Cheryl’s internal debate about what to do with her excessive physical baggage mirrors her struggle with how to shoulder her emotional baggage along this journey. Cheryl wants to leave some things behind—both physical and emotional—but isn’t sure how to travel along without all the detritus she’s accrued, both literal and metaphorical.



CHAPTER 4: THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, VOLUME 1: CALIFORNIA

Cheryl is nervous about the prospect of hitchhiking from a gas station near the motel to the entrance to the PCT, but her guidebook—*The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California*—has told her that hitchhiking is often the most “practical solution” for hikers when it comes to getting to the many post office and resupply shops just off the trail. Cheryl summons her courage and asks two kindly-looking men in a van for a ride. They agree to take her, and Cheryl arduously climbs into the van while trying not to let the men see how intensely she’s struggling beneath the weight of her **pack**.

Cheryl removes her **pack** during the car ride, but when the men bring her to her stop, she knows it’s time to put it back on. As Cheryl gets out of the van, her backpack falls to the ground. One of the men tries to help her lift it off the highway shoulder—and is shocked by its heft. Cheryl insists the pack is a cinch to lift, and urges the men to drive onward, insisting she’ll be fine to take things from here. The men drive off, leaving Cheryl standing alone at an elevation of 3,800 feet, surrounded by sagebrush and Joshua trees. The mountain ranges before her—the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade Range—will be her home for the next three months.

Cheryl has been told all her life that hitchhiking is dangerous and people are inherently bad. Her experiences on the PCT, however, are about to shift her way of thinking and give her faith and trust in the kindness of strangers.



Again, in this passage, the physical externalization of Cheryl’s inner emotional baggage—and other people’s shocked reactions to it—serves as a metaphor for the ways in which Cheryl is struggling, visibly and invisibly, with her deep sense of grief and loss.



Cheryl wants to take a photograph of her starting point but knows that digging her camera out of her monstrous backpack will be too much of an ordeal. She struggles to put her backpack back on and begins heading down the trail. She spots a brown metal box on a fencepost near the start and opens it to find a notebook and pen inside: the trail register. Cheryl adds her name and the date to the list of hikers who have been at this point on the trail before her, feeling intensely emotional.

Cheryl is just beginning to realize that her journey along the PCT may be marked by periods of solitude, but that in simply embarking on the trail, she is part of a much larger community.



As Cheryl begins walking, she is exuberant—but within half an hour, straining under the weight of her **backpack**, begins to feel as if she's in "hell." She tries to ignore the "clamor" of her own brain as she wonders what she's gotten herself into. As she pushes herself forward and tries to focus only on putting one foot in front of the other, she begins to reflect on the past December—when she first decided to hike the PCT.

Cheryl is dropped onto the trail at one of its most arid, hostile, unforgiving points—a metaphor which represents how deep she is in the throes of her own grief.



Cheryl spotted a guidebook for the Pacific Crest Trail while waiting in line at REI to buy a shovel. A friend had borrowed her car to drive to Sioux Falls, but the car had broken down. Cheryl and her friend Aimee went to Sioux Falls to retrieve the car from an impound lot—only to find it buried in snow, thus necessitating the shovel. After Cheryl and her friend Aimee dug out Cheryl's car out of the snow and went to dinner at a Mexican restaurant in Sioux Falls, Cheryl commented on an odd feeling in her stomach and wondered aloud if she might be pregnant.

Cheryl's chance encounter with a PCT guidebook now seems, in retrospect, like a moment of fate. Cheryl discovered the PCT, like a beacon, as she was on the verge of one of her lowest moments—realizing that she was pregnant with the child of a man she didn't love.



Cheryl realized she'd had sex a few weeks ago with a man named Joe. Cheryl had first met Joe a year ago while living in Portland—he'd introduced her to heroin three months after her breakup with Paul. Cheryl and Joe spent months together snorting and then later shooting heroin, until Cheryl's friend Lisa intervened and warned Cheryl about the danger she was getting into. Cheryl reminded Lisa that Lisa had been the one to urge her to come to Portland and "escape" her grief. Weeks after Lisa's failed intervention, Paul called Cheryl to tell her he'd driven to Portland to help Cheryl get away from Joe.

Cheryl recounts all the misguided, dangerous ways in which she tried to forget and escape the grief she felt in the wake of losing her mother. Cheryl has done things that have proved destructive not just to her, but also to the people who wanted to love, support, and nurture her in the wake of her loss.



Cheryl met up with Paul to discuss the state of things but ultimately rejected Paul's help, feeling it would be "impossible" to give up heroin. That very afternoon, after her meeting with Paul, a junkie mugged Cheryl at knifepoint, and she swiftly reversed her decision to stay in Portland with Joe. Paul drove her back across the country to Minnesota to help her get clean. Though Cheryl briefly relapsed several weeks later when Joe came to visit—and though she had sex with Joe several times—after he left, she decided she was done with heroin and didn't follow him back to Portland.

Cheryl had to reach a dangerously low point in order to reconsider her actions. The love and support of people who cared about her wasn't enough—only true bodily danger was.



Sitting in the restaurant with Aimee, Cheryl worried that she was indeed pregnant. Aimee helped Cheryl buy and take a pregnancy test after their meal—it was positive. The next day, Aimee accompanied Cheryl back to Minneapolis, though the two women drove in separate cars. Halfway through the drive, Cheryl broke down in tears as she realized what she had done to her own life in the time since her mother’s passing. Cheryl thought of the guidebook she saw in the REI checkout line—and decided that there was something she must do. Cheryl drove to a different REI, purchased the guidebook, and stayed up all night that night reading it.

After clearing her head, securing an abortion, and delving more deeply into the PCT guidebook, Cheryl realized that she had to change into “the person [she] used to be.” She decided that hiking the trail would “make [her] that way” again—that on her walk, she’d be able to think about her entire life, find her strength again, and get back on track. Now, though, as she sets off onto the trail, Cheryl feels nothing but “ridiculous.”

Cheryl stops to rest, taking her **backpack** off and walking freely in circles, happy to be rid of its weight. She scrapes her arm on a nearby Joshua tree, and as she struggles to get her first-aid kit out of her backpack, all of the Band-Aids in her possession fly away on the breeze. Cheryl is more profoundly exhausted than she’s felt in her entire life. She turns to her guidebook for comfort, and as she flips through its pages now, she realizes there are parts she overlooked before—namely, passages about “the despair, the alienation, the anxiety and especially the pain, both physical and mental, which slices to the very heart of the hiker’s volition.”

Cheryl tucks her knees up to her chest and puts her head down in an attempt to calm herself. When she looks up, she notices a sage plant nearby and remembers something her mother once told her and her siblings—that smelling sage gives one a “burst of energy.” Cheryl rips off some sage, inhales the scent of its leaves, and is calmed more by the memory of her mother than by the plant itself. She reminds herself that no matter what happens to her on the trail, the worst thing that has ever happened to her is already over.

Exhausted, Cheryl pitches her tent even though she has only traveled a few miles and it is only four in the afternoon. She gets cozy in her tent and begins reading a favorite book of poetry—*The Dream of a Common Language* by Adrienne Rich, which Cheryl has nearly memorized over the years. She flips her way to a poem called “Power” and recites it over and over to herself.

As Cheryl reaches another low point, she begins to see that not only has she alienated the people she loves—but she has alienated herself from herself, as well. Cheryl has made a mess of her life and she is desperate to find a way to fix it before it gets even worse.



Cheryl equates nature with purity, wholeness, and love due to her rural upbringing, and she decides that if she gets back to nature in an immersive, radical way, she’ll be able to restore herself.



Before setting off on her hike, Cheryl believed that just immersing herself in the PCT would be enough—that she’d feel magically healed by nature. Now, she realizes just how tough the wilderness is and begins to understand what she will have to go through along her journey to redemption and restoration.



Cheryl is alone on the trail, but her memories of her mother are with her. Even in a moment of chaos, confusion, and regret, Cheryl is able to call upon her mother’s wisdom and to realize that not even physical pain and exhaustion can compare with the pain of losing the person she loved most.



Though it’s only the first day of her trek, Cheryl is already finding ways to comfort and reassure herself in times of misery and difficulty.



CHAPTER 5: TRACKS

As Cheryl wakes with the dawn on the second morning of her journey, she reflects on her fitful, restless sleep the night before. The wind whipped her tent all night long, periodically jolting her from rest. Though Cheryl knows that the PCT has only been a single, officially-designated place since 1968—the same year of her own birth—she is overwhelmed by the landscape’s “ancient” indifference. Cheryl forces herself to eat a breakfast of granola and powdered oat milk and drinks some water. She consults her guidebook and sees that she is thirteen whole miles from her next water source—but she is comforted by the remaining amount she has in her bottles.

Cheryl sets off on her second day of hiking. By noon she has reached 6,000 feet. The air is cooler and less oppressive, and when Cheryl stops to rest and eat some lunch, she puts a fleece anorak on against the chill. She rests her eyes after eating—and is surprised when she wakes up nearly two hours later to the feeling of rain on her face. Cheryl hurriedly gets back on the trail, slightly discomfited by how quickly and deeply she fell asleep without even realizing she’d lost consciousness.

As Cheryl hikes the complicated, layered mountains in front of her, she realizes that she is in “entirely new terrain”—nothing has prepared her for the unique experience of climbing an entire mountain. There are many other things about her journey that are unexpected: her shoulders and hips chafe and bleed where her backpack digs into them, and though she planned to average fourteen miles a day on her trip, she finds she can barely cover ten before she is so exhausted that she has to make camp again.

The next day, Cheryl reaches her water source—the Golden Oak Springs—just a few hours into her hike. She uses her purifying pump to draw water into her bottles, and then adds iodine tablets to them to make sure that the water is potable. She refills everything in spite of the weight—her next water source is nineteen whole miles away. Rather than setting off right away, she sits in her camp chair near the cool, shady pond, and takes stock of the bumps, bruises, and blisters she’s incurred so far. One bruise, Cheryl knows, is not from hiking, though—it’s the site where she last injected heroin with Joe just a few days before the start of her journey.

Cheryl spends her day by the pond, relaxing and reading up on a book about navigation. At dinnertime, hungry for the first time in days, she starts to fire up her stove to cook some food—but quickly realizes she’s loaded it with the wrong kind of gas and has clogged the generator. Cheryl eats some dried food and falls asleep shortly after six.

Cheryl is deeply intimidated by the wilderness all around her. The fact that it is indifferent to her presence is what scares her the most—in this place, nothing cares if she lives or dies, heals or flounders. She realizes that her journey is up to her and her alone to survive, complete, and enjoy.



Cheryl is reaching levels of exhaustion she has never known in her “real” life off the trail—and she is shocked and a little scared by how intense her feelings and reactions to being in the wilderness are already.



The “new terrain” Cheryl speaks of in this passage refers to the mountains in front of her, of course—but also to the inner landscape of solitude, reflection, concentration, and communion with nature that she is navigating for the first time ever.



Cheryl’s new scrapes and bruises represent forward action and her intent to participate fully and radically in her own healing—her old wounds, though, represent the ways in which she tried to numb the pain of her life and escape her circumstances in harmful rather than productive ways.



For every beautiful, peaceful, idyllic moment Cheryl has on the trail, there’s at least one more that’s a frustrating setback—and yet all she can do is keep problem-solving and moving forward.



The next morning, Cheryl treats her wounds with 2nd Skin—gel patches meant to treat burns that also work on blisters. She hikes away from the spring feeling refreshed, and realizes for the first time on her hike that she's having fun. Throughout the day, as she continues along, she remains positive even after she skins her shin, encounters mountain lion tracks, and is forced to throw her **pack** over a giant felled tree blocking the trail. The next day, Cheryl even encounters a wild bull—she hurts her finger scrambling up a tree to escape it as it charges in her direction. At the top of the tree, Cheryl considers her options: she knows her only options are to double back or move forward.

Over the next several days, Cheryl uses every ounce of strength she has just to cover a measly nine miles a day. She is running low on food due to the mishap with her stove—she hasn't been able to cook any hot meals and has been subsisting on freeze-dried and nonperishable foods. It is still more than seventy miles to her first rest and resupply stop on the trail, Kennedy Meadows, and Cheryl decides to veer from the trail and try to flag down help—though she hasn't seen a living soul in over a week.

After walking for over four hours, Cheryl at last spots a yellow pickup truck. Three men are sitting inside of it. Cheryl excitedly runs towards them, disregarding the fact that she is a woman alone in the wilderness approaching three men of “unknown intent.” Cheryl introduces herself to the men who explain that they're miners working on a demolition project and introduce themselves as Frank, Carlos, and Walter. Frank offers to bring Cheryl home for the night, where she can rest and eat a meal home-cooked by his wife. As the three of them drive back towards civilization, Cheryl explains her PCT hike, and they all admire her bravery and strength.

Frank drops Carlos and Walter off at their cars, but because he still has some work to do, Cheryl stays in the truck while Frank works on a tractor. Cheryl finds some whiskey in the glove box—and a gun below the driver's seat. When Frank rejoins her in the car, he tells Cheryl that she must be as brave as Tarzan's wife Jane. Feeling nervous about the gun, Cheryl lies and tells Frank that her husband is hiking the PCT, too, and is supposed to meet her at Kennedy Meadows in a few days. As Cheryl lies, she realizes that in reality, there is no one in her life who's expecting so much as a call from her when she gets to Kennedy Meadows. Frank reaches beneath the seat where the gun is—and pulls out a plastic bag filled with red licorice, then offers them to “Miss Jane.”

In spite of the many obstacles and setbacks she's facing, Cheryl is settling into the rhythm of the PCT and learning to take the good with the bad and roll with the punches. At every juncture where moving forward seems impossible, she is forced to confront the fact that the only thing more unthinkable than continuing on is giving up and doubling back. This doesn't mean that the temptation to quit won't keep knocking as she barrels through the wilderness.



Cheryl realizes that the struggles she's facing aren't just annoying—they could soon become dangerous if she doesn't reorient herself and fix some of the problems holding her back. Rather than quitting outright, she resolves to try to fix her situation.



Just as Cheryl took a chance on hitchhiking and found herself surprised by the kindness of strangers, she now must put herself in a similar situation. She is alone and vulnerable, but has decided to place her trust in the goodness of the people she's encountered so far.



In this passage, Cheryl offers herself up to a group of strangers, unsure of what to expect but hoping for the best. Even though she begins to worry that perhaps she's made a mistake, she is once again surprised by how kind, gentle, and well-meaning all the strangers she's encountered so far are. Cheryl is charmed by Frank's goodness—and relieved that she hasn't put herself in harm's way.



CHAPTER 6: A BULL IN BOTH DIRECTIONS

Frank drives Cheryl to his house and goes inside to tell his wife what's going on. The two of them come outside a few moments later and urge Cheryl to come inside and make herself at home. Frank's wife quickly fixes Cheryl a plate of barbeque, corn, and potato salad, and urges Cheryl to eat even though she and Frank haven't sat down yet. Cheryl hungrily digs into the delicious food. The next morning, Frank drives Cheryl to a convenience store and suggests she catch a ride to a nearby town called Ridgecrest. Cheryl catches a ride with a trucker named Troy, and they exchange life stories along the way. He drops her at an outdoor supply store, and the owner helps Cheryl dismantle, clean, and repair her stove. He sells her the right kind of gas and walks her through lighting and extinguishing it before letting her go.

Cheryl decides to stay in town for the night before heading back out on the trail. She stops at a grocery store and stocks up on food, then checks in at a motel where the kind owner offers to wash Cheryl's dirty hiking clothes for her. As they make conversation, the owner tells Cheryl that there's been an excessive amount of snow on the Sierra Nevada this year, and it's "entirely socked in": in hiking lingo, impenetrable. Cheryl's guidebooks warned her there would be snow on the mountains, but the idea that an irregular snowfall might prevent her from hiking them never occurred to her.

The next day, Cheryl receives a ride back to the trail from a woman who works for the Bureau of Land Management. The woman confirms that it has been a record snowfall, but doesn't know the extent of the blockage up in the mountains. In spite of the uncertainty now ahead of her, Cheryl feels confident as she gets back on the trail, leaves civilization, successfully cooks her first hot meal, and pitches camp for the night.

The next day, as Cheryl continues her journey, she tries to ignore the pain coursing through her body with every step. From her blistered feet to her chafed skin to her screaming muscles, she is riddled with agony. Cheryl must climb her way over four rockslides throughout the course of the day, and by the time she makes camp, though she's only traveled eight and a half miles, she is exhausted. The next day is full of "merciless" heat, and Cheryl experiences exhaustion and dehydration as she pushes her way forward along the trail. She stops "every ten minutes to rest for five." She tries to find shade and stay cool and hydrated, but her body uses every ounce of water it has, and she struggles to stay focused and motivated. She even tells herself that once she gets to Kennedy Meadows, she will quit the entire hike.

Frank, his wife, Troy, and the supply shop owner are just a few of the kind and generous strangers Cheryl meets on her journey. They are more than willing to help her, and want only for her to succeed on her amazing journey. Cheryl thought her journey would be a solitary one in which she'd have to shoulder the burden of her undertaking, but she's quickly realizing that without the help of new and old friends—as well as total strangers—she won't be able to get very far at all.



Cheryl encounters the kindness of strangers everywhere she goes—and her journey is just getting started. Cheryl's journey is about discovering things within herself—but it is also beginning to become an odyssey which teaches her about the innate goodness and helpfulness of the majority of people in the world.



Cheryl is back on the trail, and sidelines her worries about what's coming up as she focuses instead on the simple, doable tasks ahead. Again, this is a reflection of the more metaphoric demands of wrangling grief and preparing for the future: everything must be done one small step at a time.



Cheryl's arduous physical exertion during this stretch of the hike reflects the difficult emotional odyssey she's already been through—and in many ways is still working her way past. It's easier to think about quitting entirely than it is to think about pressing forward in the face of even more hardship and struggle—but just as Cheryl couldn't escape her grief out in the "real" world, neither can she so easily give up on the challenges she's facing on the PCT.



Cheryl is frustrated that though she set off on the hike to think about her life, her choices, and her mistakes in order to get back to an earlier, better version of herself, she has barely had any time to consider the great questions of her life—her failed marriage, her grief over her mother, her addictive tendencies. She has been focused only on moving forward and surviving.

After an exhausting day in the heat, Cheryl at last reaches her next water source—Spanish Needle Creek. It is a cold, shallow creek, and Cheryl bathes naked in the water after pumping it into her bottles and purifying it with iodine tablets. The next morning, she decides to stay by the creek for a couple of hours—she is dreading getting back on the murderously hot trail. As she soaks in the water, she decides not to press forward to Kennedy Meadows—she wants to get off the trail.

As Cheryl packs her things, she hears a voice call out to her and address her by name. She turns around to see a man approaching. He introduces himself as Greg and explains that he saw Cheryl's name on the trail register—he has, he says, been following in her footsteps for days. As Cheryl and Greg talk and get to know one another, it becomes clear that he is an experienced backpacker who has been preparing to hike the PCT for years. Greg reveals his extensive knowledge of nearly everything about the trail—and tells Cheryl he's been averaging twenty-two miles a day. Cheryl lies and says she's been covering twelve.

Greg and Cheryl discuss the snow on the Sierra Nevada. Greg is just as concerned about what to do ahead as she is. They make a plan to rendezvous at Kennedy Meadows and make a plan from there, along with the other hikers on the trail. Before taking off again, Greg commends Cheryl for her bravery and intrepidity—he tells her she is the only solo woman hiker he's met on the trail or seen on the register.

The next day, Cheryl hikes through the heat with “new determination.” She doesn't think about quitting once. With Greg serving as her “guiding star,” she presses on through the rapidly-shifting terrain. Even though she encounters a bear as well as a rattlesnake, Cheryl remains focused on the path ahead. As Cheryl continues on, she decides to nickname her backpack “**Monster**.” Even though her relationship with it started off as adversarial, she now sees the backpack as an ally and even an extension of herself—it contains all she needs to survive.

Cheryl thinks she hasn't been healing or redeeming herself because she hasn't been actively thinking about her past and her mistakes. She doesn't see how the entire journey, in and of itself, is healing her already from the inside out.



Cheryl is exhausted by the hard work of just surviving on the PCT, and thinks she'd rather go back to the hard work of surviving in her “regular” life. Her reluctance to give her all to the physical wilderness reflects her reluctance to really deal with the deeper psychological “wilderness” just below the surface.



When Cheryl first meets Greg, she is intimidated by and a little envious of his experience and self-assuredness. Cheryl can't escape the feeling that she's unprepared for the trail, or some kind of fraud for taking it on. She doesn't yet realize how she might be better prepared in some ways than even the most seasoned backpackers by the strength of her determination and fearlessness alone.



Cheryl is relieved to find that even experienced hikers have many of the same fears and concerns she does. Greg's kind words to Cheryl bolster her belief in herself and encourage her to press forward.



Cheryl is spurred on by a sense of competition—but at the same time, she is learning not to see everything on the trail as a threat or a burden. Cheryl is feeling more capable with each passing day, and she is less and less intimidated by the wilderness around her and within her.



Cheryl makes camp after an unfortunate encounter with an army of black ants and sleeps soundly through the night, exhausted from exertion and fright. In the morning, she feels tired: her feet are swollen and her muscles are stiff. As she is packing up her camp, a pair of hikers comes by—Albert and Matt, a father-and-son team from Georgia who are hiking the trail start to finish. The company makes Cheryl “giddy,” even when Albert questions how stuffed “**Monster**” is and asks her about her urination patterns.

While in the “real” world Cheryl shirked attention and help from even her closest loved ones, out on the PCT, she finds herself buoyed by the smallest—and oddest—interactions with even total strangers.



Albert and Matt tell Cheryl there are two more men behind them on the trail, Doug and Tom, before departing and heading on. Cheryl packs up her camp quickly and hikes forward hard, determined not to let Doug and Tom catch up with her—she doesn’t want to keep getting passed by better hikers. As she presses on, she finds herself thinking that hiking the PCT is the hardest thing she’s ever done. She is shocked by the thought as soon as she has it—for so long, she thought losing her mother was the hardest thing she’d ever have to do. Cheryl is both relieved and confused to find that hiking the PCT is hard “in a way that ma[kes] the other hardest things the tiniest bit less hard.”

Cheryl’s increasing determination to prove herself shows that she is growing, healing, and realizing that there are other things in the world to focus on besides her mother’s death. As Cheryl starts realizing that there are harder things in the world than loss and grief, it feels almost like a betrayal—but as Cheryl leans into the lessons she’s learning, she finds herself comforted by her broadening horizons.



Cheryl begins daydreaming about her arrival at Kennedy Meadows. She is excited to introduce herself as an official “PCT hiker,” and to use her new name—Cheryl Strayed. After her divorce from Paul, she took advantage of the opportunity to change her last name from the hyphenated combination of her maiden name and Paul’s last name to something new. When the word *strayed* came to her one day, she knew that “its layered definitions spoke directly to [her] life,” and reminded her of how, though she’d wandered from the path, she learned new things from “the wild places [her] straying had brought [her].”

Cheryl wears her new last name like a badge of honor. The idea of having “strayed” was once frightening to her—but now, in the context of the PCT, she is beginning to see the true value of the act of straying, wandering, and entering “wild places.”



Cheryl continues reflecting on the dissolution of her marriage to Paul. After signing and mailing their notarized, finalized divorce papers, Cheryl recalls, she and Paul embraced in the street as snow fell all around them, whispering regrets and apologies to one another. Cheryl considered inviting Paul over for one last afternoon in bed together, but ultimately she “didn’t have the heart.” She recalls that when Paul bid her goodbye, he addressed her for the first time as “Cheryl Strayed” just before they parted ways.

Cheryl’s new name turns the idea of having strayed from the path into less of an indictment and more of a blessing. She has wandered far off the original course of her life—but the name is an attempt to reclaim herself and start owning her choices. Paul’s acceptance of her new name shows that others are just as excited for Cheryl to rebuild herself as she is.



CHAPTER 7: THE ONLY GIRL IN THE WOODS

Cheryl arrives at Kennedy Meadows—it “seem[s] like a miracle” to her that she has gotten there. While not exactly a town, Kennedy Meadows is a grassy outpost along the trail with a post office, a general store, a restaurant, and a small campground. After picking up her care package—and a postcard from Joe—at the post office, Cheryl buys herself a Snapple lemonade and checks out the “FREE” box, where she nabs a ski pole she knows will come in handy as the terrain on the PCT gets rougher.

As Cheryl makes her way to the campground, she’s surprised to find that people she doesn’t know recognize her—as “famous Cheryl of the enormous **backpack**.” A man named Ed introduces himself to her and tells her that Greg, Albert, and Matt have arrived, but have gone to the store. Cheryl sets her things down with Ed and then goes to wash herself in the river. She has lunch with Ed, an amateur poet in his fifties who shares some of his work with her and tells her that he camps at Kennedy Meadows each summer to greet PCT hikers.

After the other hikers get back from the general store, they greet Cheryl happily, chat for a while, and then go off to take naps. Cheryl is too excited to sleep, and she stays awake going through her box and reflecting on the trip so far. After his nap, Albert emerges from his tent and offers to help Cheryl lighten the load she’s been carrying inside **Monster**. He unpacks her bag and sorts what’s necessary and what’s not, putting everything she doesn’t need in a box. He puts aside a foldable saw, miniature binoculars, deodorant, a razor, and a large roll of condoms. Cheryl secretly tears one condom off the end of the roll and tucks it in her back pocket to keep just in case. After Albert is through helping her, Cheryl lifts Monster onto her back and is surprised to find that it’s much lighter.

Doug and Tom—the two men who have been on the trail behind Cheryl—arrive at Kennedy Meadows and jubilantly greet Cheryl. She greets them just as excitedly. As Cheryl shows them the way to camp, she learns about the two of them—friends from a fancy boarding school on the east coast, they have come to hike the trail together on a whim. Cheryl is relieved to encounter two people who are amateur hikers like her.

Cheryl has pushed forward in spite of her aches, pains, and reservations, and is rewarded with a brief and delicious respite from life on the trail.



Cheryl has been surprised enough to meet so many strangers on the trail, and has been doubly surprised to realize how kind everyone is to her. She is positively bowled over, then, when she realizes that the community of hardcore hikers around her know about her—and accept her as one of their own.



This passage is thematically and symbolically significant, as it shows how Cheryl is healing from her grief and pain not by thinking endlessly about her loss or atoning for her sins—but instead by receiving the grace of the kindness of strangers, and letting others both physically and metaphorically lighten her load.



Cheryl continues meeting new faces and making new friends from all walks of life. It is becoming clearer and clearer that her journey is not about solitude, but community.



Back at camp, the group decides to go to a restaurant in town at 6. Cheryl goes into her tent to get ready—but without a real change of clothes, makeup, or even a proper shower, the only thing she can do to make herself feel a little prettier is to put on a necklace. The pendant on the chain is a feather—it used to be one of Cheryl’s mother’s earrings, but Cheryl lost the mate and turned it into a necklace. As Cheryl finishes preparing to go out to dinner, she thinks about how she is now “one of the guys” in this group—the first time in her life she’s ever been part of such a dynamic.

Before dinner, Cheryl heads down to the river with some of the guys. Doug gives Cheryl a black feather for good luck. Cheryl tells Greg that she’s nervous about the snow up ahead. Greg confesses that he’s uncertain about what the snow pack might look like, too. Cheryl is reluctant to give up on the High Sierra, and Doug chimes in to tell her that there are forty miles ahead before the going gets “seriously rough”—they could hike those miles, evaluate the situation, and then bail out through a trail to a nearby campground and bypass the mountains if things are too tough.

The next morning, Greg gives Cheryl a tutorial on how to use her ice axe, should they decide to brave the High Sierra after all. Albert and Matt are ill with diarrhea, and the others suspect they have drunk tainted water from one of the sources along the trail. As a group loads Albert and Matt into a car to drive them to the nearest hospital, Cheryl bids Albert goodbye, thanks him for his help with **Monster**, and privately reflects on the sadness of the idea that she might never see him again. She’s also melancholy to think that she’ll probably never see Greg, Doug, or Tom again, either.

CHAPTER 8: CORVIDOLOGY

The next morning, Cheryl sets out from Kennedy Meadows. Doug and Tom accompany her for a little while, but after less than a mile, she urges them to go on ahead of her. As she watches Doug and Tom hike on, Cheryl feels grateful to be alone. Before the PCT, Cheryl valued her alone time already—now, though, with a new conception of the “world’s vastness,” she has developed a new appreciation for the intimacy she shares with nature and with herself. It is the last week of June, and Cheryl’s third week on the PCT. In the next forty miles, she’ll climb from her current 6,000 feet up to 11,000. Cheryl is firmly in the Sierras now, and is grateful for the cool breeze. That evening, Cheryl makes camp with Doug and Tom after catching up with them, but in the morning, they go their separate ways again.

Cheryl is encountering lots of unfamiliar things on the trail—not just in terms of nature and the physical wilderness, but in terms of how she sees herself, participates in the world, and forms relationships with new people.



Cheryl's interactions with her new friends give her strength and courage. The kindness of these men, who were recently strangers, is bolstering her and making her feel supported and safe.



There is a fleeting, ephemeral nature to the friendships and relationships Cheryl is forging along the trail—but that doesn't mean that the kindnesses she encounters mean any less to her.



Cheryl has made it through the unforgiving Mojave desert and arrived on a new stretch of trail. Her outlook towards the entire hike is changing, as is her view of the community along the trail. Cheryl feels more connected to herself, to nature, and to others.



The next day, Cheryl encounters a huge patch of snow in the middle of a steep incline. She knows she has to try to cross it, and she gets out her ice axe to test Greg's lessons. Slowly but surely, Cheryl makes her way over the icy patch—but on the other side, she feels much more daunted and frightened of what lies ahead. That evening, as she makes camp with Doug and Tom again, she tells them she wants to get off at Trail Pass up ahead and bypass the snowy Sierras. Doug and Tom say they've decided to push on, and suggest Cheryl hike forward with them—together, the three of them will be safer and more capable. Cheryl, however, insists she can't join them—the point of her trip, she tells the men, is that she's out here to hike alone.

The next afternoon, as Cheryl approaches Trail Pass, the route off of the PCT, Greg catches up with her. He tells her that he's bypassing, too, and together they descend down the trail, meet up with Doug and Tom, and hitch to the nearby town of Lone Pine. Cheryl restocks food at the grocery store, then calls Lisa to inform her of the change in schedule and to ask her to hold on to Cheryl's care packages until further notice. Cheryl then bids goodbye to Doug and Tom, wishing them well on the trail. Doug asks Cheryl if she still has her good luck charm, and she tells him she's wedged it into her backpack frame for safekeeping.

Greg and Cheryl buy tickets for a Greyhound bus to Reno, Nevada, where they'll have to transfer to a second bus to Truckee, California before hitching the rest of the way to Sierra City, where they'll rejoin the trail. On the bus ride, Greg falls asleep almost immediately, but Cheryl is too wired to sleep. She stays awake, fretting about how little money she has to get her to her next stop. Cheryl identifies a homesick feeling inside—but she isn't sure if she misses her old life, or the trail.

During their layover in Reno, Cheryl uses the restroom in a casino adjoining the Greyhound station. At the sinks, another woman admires Cheryl's feather—her gift from Doug—and invites her to the Rainbow Gathering at Toad Lake in Northern California. Cheryl says she went to the Gathering the previous year, in Minnesota, and tells the woman she'll try to make it for this year's.

Even though Cheryl has been touched and transformed by the kindness of the strangers and friends she's met along the trail, she remains devoted to the idea that she's meant to conquer the PCT alone. This constant tension between Cheryl's enduring desire for solitude and her love of the people she meets complicates the memoir's theme concerning the kindness of strangers. Cheryl is learning to trust in the goodness of others—but she is cautious of getting too caught up in her new friendships and neglecting the emotional work she set out to do.



Cheryl feels good about bypassing the Sierras—she doesn't want to put herself in a situation she isn't ready for, and she is excited about the change in plans the bypass will open up for her. Cheryl is sad to bid her new friends goodbye, but at the same time she remains committed to staying true to the purpose of her hike.



Cheryl's love of the trail is intensifying, and she is beginning to miss it just as much as she misses her life in the "real" world. Her increasing affinity and comfort within nature reflects her growing intimacy with her own inner landscape.



Cheryl continues meeting kind, welcoming strangers everywhere she goes. She is more open to the world on this journey than ever before, and in opening her heart and mind, she is receiving all the universe has to offer.



Cheryl and Greg arrive in Sierra City. They find a cheap set of rooms for the night connected by an adjoining bathroom, but even with the good price, Cheryl is down to only 13 dollars. Nevertheless, when Greg asks her if she wants to eat dinner in a restaurant, she can't help but say yes. She takes a bath to make herself presentable, and as she runs the water for the tub, she looks at herself in the mirror for the first time in weeks. She is covered in bruises, scabs, and dirt, and as she gets into the tub, the water becomes so dark with dirt and blood that she's forced to drain and refill it. Halfway through her second soak, Cheryl notices that one of her toenails has grown black. She pulls on the nail and it comes off in her hand.

At dinner, Cheryl and Greg order tons of food and drinks. Cheryl tells Greg about her toenail, and he responds that her boots are probably too small. Cheryl is embarrassed by her lack of PCT knowledge—and, after the meal, she is embarrassed by the fact that she has only sixty-five cents left. That night, after dinner, Cheryl makes a new list of stops and care package schedules for Lisa, then turns over to go to sleep. She can hear Greg shifting in his bed through the wall, and thinks back to a session with her therapist back in Minneapolis during which she discussed her reckless sexual adventurousness.

Cheryl has long known, deep down, that part of her desire to continually create and sabotage new relationships with men is tied to her absent father—and the physical and verbal abuses he perpetrated against herself, her mother, and her siblings during the short time their family lived together. Cheryl can barely remember a single good thing her father ever did for her—even the nice memories of him are “marred” by the knowledge that he was only kind when trying to “woo” Cheryl's mother back.

Unable to sleep, Cheryl wraps a towel around herself and goes back into the bathroom for another luxurious soak. She considers knocking on Greg's door, but decides to avoid disaster and simply take a bath instead. When someone knocks on the door after a while, Cheryl calls back, “Someone's in here,” and the innocuous statement connects her with the self inside of her—the self who deserves to take up space in the universe.

The trail is changing Cheryl's mind and soul as well as her body. Her continual loss of toenails along the trail represents her shedding of her old self to make room for a rawer but stronger new self.



Even off the trail, Cheryl must reckon with her past and the mistakes she made therein. As she fights against the resurgence of old habits, she plumbs the depths of her memories and tries to get some clarity on the person she was—and the person she hopes to become.



Cheryl's traumatic past has impacted her life in painful ways. Part of her journey along the PCT is the journey of recognizing and understanding the reasoning behind her worst impulses so that she can help herself heal.



Cheryl is beginning to exercise better decision-making—she is no longer repeating the reckless mistakes of her past. She is forgiving herself, accepting herself, and healing in the process of doing this.



CHAPTER 9: STAYING FOUND

After bypassing the snow, Cheryl is relieved that it is going to be “clear sailing through the rest of California.” Her destination, the Bridge of the Gods, is 1,008 miles away—Cheryl has only hiked 170 miles so far, but she feels her pace accelerating each day. Cheryl and Greg part ways on the trail just outside of Sierra City, bidding one another a tender and encouraging goodbye. Cheryl feels happy and comforted as she gets back on the trail.

Cheryl soon encounters some snow which covers the trail. She presses forward anyway, using her ski pole for balance. She keeps walking, but becomes worried she has strayed from the trail. She searches for a PCT marker but can’t find one, and decides to consult her guidebook and use her compass to try to triangulate herself in spite of the snow blanketing everything as far as the eye can see. She presses forward in spite of her uncertainty, and within an hour, spots a PCT marker.

When Cheryl spots some skiers, she waves to them and they wave back. Cheryl considers asking the skiers to get her off “this godforsaken trail,” but ultimately decides to continue walking. Cheryl camps for the night and continues walking in the morning in spite of the cold temperatures and the uncertainty she feels about her ability to follow the trail. She knows that the snow is slowing her down and forcing her to constantly second-guess her position—but she also knows that if she doesn’t reach her next stop within the next few days, she’ll be out of food.

Cheryl treks on through the snow for days, reflecting in snippets on her marriage, her heroin use, and what might be going on in the outside world—she realizes that the fourth of July has come and gone. One afternoon, as Cheryl sits in a clearing eating a snack, she sees a bright red fox on top of the pristine white snow. The fox stares directly at her. Cheryl is a little scared of the fox at first, but when it begins running away, she becomes upset. She calls after it, and eventually realizes that she is shouting “MOM” over and over again.

Cheryl is refreshed and reinvigorated after bypassing, a state of mind which reflects the human need to sometimes take a break and extend gentleness and understanding to oneself.



This passage represents one of the many instances throughout the book in which Cheryl’s physical landscape reflects her “inner” landscape. The heavy snow has obscured the trail, representing the fact that, though Cheryl’s confidence is reaching new heights, there are still moments when her confusion and baggage threaten to snow her in and lead her away from the path.



Yet again, Cheryl reaches a moment in her journey where it would be, perhaps, easier to turn back—and yet she refuses to surrender and decides to soldier on in the face of the unknown.



Cheryl has reached a point in her journey when she at last is able to seriously begin thinking about her losses, her mistakes, and her reasons for embarking on the PCT in the first place. Cheryl’s encounter with the fox, though brief, reminds her of the natural world her mother endeared to her as a child—and as a result, Cheryl finds her grief resurfacing and even overtaking her.



The next morning, Cheryl comes to a road which, according to her maps, confirms that she is on the right track. She spots a green SUV parked on the road, but there is no one inside, so she keeps trekking on. Nearly an hour later, she hears a car behind her—it is the SUV, and the couple inside roll down their windows and invite Cheryl to ride with them to a nearby rest stop. She accepts, and gets into the truck. During the ride, Cheryl can't stop thinking about the fox. The silence in the moment they held each other's eye, Cheryl thinks, contained "everything"—including the spirit of her mother, who will never return to her.

Cheryl knows that she will never get her mother back—but she has to have this realization time and time again. In the past, she's tried to mask it with sex or drugs, but now, out on the trail, there is no distraction from her grief. She must look it head-on and confront it.



CHAPTER 10: RANGE OF LIGHT

Cheryl is disappointed when the couple let her out at the nearby Packer Lake Lodge—it is a restaurant and campground, but Cheryl has no money for food. Cheryl goes inside and asks a woman at the register about the snow levels north of the lodge and whether Greg has come through. Getting inconclusive answers to both questions—and knowing she can't afford anything on the menu—Cheryl goes back outside to sit and read her guidebook. A woman named Christine approaches Cheryl and tells her how cool she is for hiking the PCT, then invites Cheryl to come take a shower and have some food in the cabin she, her husband Jeff, and their two teenaged daughters are staying in.

The reason so many people are kind to Cheryl and go out of their way for her seems to be their amazement at and fascination with her decision to undertake a hike along such a huge stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail. People understand the kind of mental and physical exertion Cheryl is subjecting herself to—and they want to help her find comfort and relief, and probably hear her stories to boot.



Cheryl ravenously eats the sandwich, cheese, and chips Christine and Jeff prepare for her. The couple's daughters are out on the porch reading magazines, and Christine says she hopes they'll one day grow up to be as fearless as Cheryl. Christine and Jeff are avid readers, too, and they trade books. Cheryl selects a James Michener book from their shelf. After lunch, Christine drives Cheryl to a nearby ranger station and drops her. Cheryl finds a couple of girls who are driving in the direction of a nearby PCT trailhead and hitches a ride with them. She reads the James Michener novel as she does, and recalls that years ago, she made fun of her mother for liking the man's work. Now, she can't remember why she did such a thing, and she berates herself for all the "small things" she did to hurt her mother over the years.

Cheryl is learning to reevaluate old prejudices and accept kindness from others. Being on the PCT is teaching her about the wilderness and nature, but it's also helping her to become a more empathetic, engaged person. She is trying to investigate why she perpetrated certain cruelties against others—and herself—without judging herself too harshly for the person she slowly allowed herself to become.



When the girls ask Cheryl about her life and her family, she tells them that her father left and her mother is dead. She doesn't tell them about Eddie—but feels bad for not mentioning him, and begins reflecting on all the ways in which he was indeed like a father to her and her siblings. Cheryl was shocked and hurt, she recalls, when after her mother died, Eddie quickly "pulled away" from Cheryl and her siblings, falling in love with another woman and moving her into his house within a year.

Even as she grows and heals along the trail, Cheryl remains hurt and traumatized by the fracturing of her family and ashamed of how she was unable to hold them all together—something her mother once did with grace and ease.



At the trailhead, Cheryl decides to spend the night on the edge of an established campground. Though there is a sign that says campers must pay to stay, Cheryl has no money, and she decides to pitch her tent at the very edge of the camping ground. After she has set up and crawled into her tent for the night, a flashlight's beams penetrate its walls. Cheryl unzips her tent and steps outside. An elderly couple who run the campground are standing there, demanding 12 dollars from Cheryl. Cheryl tells them that she's hiking the PCT and has had to get off the trail due to snow, but the couple has no sympathy for her and they threaten to call the police.

A stunned Cheryl returns to her tent and begins packing up while the couple watches her every move in the beam of their light. Cheryl hikes up the road in the dark, walking for twenty minutes until she finds a clearing where she feels comfortable making camp. As Cheryl lies down in her tent for the second time that night, she uses her fingers to trace the outline of a horse tattoo on her arm—a matching tattoo she and Paul got to commemorate their divorce.

Cheryl begins reflecting on the origins of the tattoo: her mother once had a horse named Lady. Cheryl was only six when her mother bought Lady—Cheryl's mother had just left her father, and though Cheryl was young, she understood that Lady was, in a way, saving Cheryl's mother's life and giving her the hope and strength to move forward. Three years after Cheryl's mother died, when Cheryl went to visit Eddie one day, she was shocked by how thin and wan Lady had become. It was clear to Cheryl that Eddie was not caring for Lady as lovingly as her mother had for so many years.

Cheryl told Eddie that Lady needed to be put down, but Eddie refused to pay for a vet to come out and administer an injection. He told Cheryl he'd put Lady down the old-fashioned way, by shooting her himself, before she and Paul came out for Christmas to have the house to themselves while Eddie stayed with his new girlfriend and her children. On Christmas Eve, however, when Paul and Cheryl arrived, they found Lady in her stall, looking even worse. Cheryl called her mother's father for advice, and he urged Cheryl to put the horse down as soon as possible. He gave her specific instructions for how to put Lady down and told Cheryl not to worry about burying the horse's body—coyotes, he said, would "drag her away."

Cheryl has a rare encounter with a pair of decidedly unkind strangers. Up until now, everyone Cheryl has met has been welcoming and accommodating—now, though, she finds herself having to quickly account for an interaction that leaves her feeling embarrassed, ashamed, and alone.



The unhappy episode with the greedy couple at the campground begins to trigger Cheryl's insecurities, and it leads her down a path to dark thoughts about a traumatic episode from her past.



Cheryl's reflections about Lady continue to demonstrate just how entirely and profoundly her family fell apart in the wake of her mother's death. Her mother had been the one holding everyone together—and Lady's decline in the years after her mother's death reflects the deeper atrophy of the whole family's bond.



Cheryl's memories lead her to a moment when she was forced to confront yet another traumatizing loss, one that was again connected to her mother. To put Lady out of her misery, Cheryl had to intervene in the path of nature—but after Lady was dead, Cheryl was supposed to step back and let nature resume its course.



Paul and Cheryl decided to put Lady down on Christmas Day, with Leif's help. What should have been a sad but simple act, however, soon became a harrowing ordeal as Leif's shots missed, filling Lady's face with "a constellation of bloodless holes." Cheryl, Paul, and Leif watched as Lady died and bled out slowly and horribly over the course of an hour. Leif tried to comfort Cheryl by telling her about an old Indian belief that when a "great warrior" dies, their horse must die too and be the one to take them to the next world.

Cheryl falls asleep and has uneasy dreams of snow. In the morning, she wakes unrested but determined to make it to her next stop—and her next care package. She sets off along the trail and finds that some of the snow has melted. She encounters a man and his friends in a pickup truck who encourage her to stop by a lake up ahead later for some drinks later that evening. Cheryl hikes the rest of the day, stopping at a pond just before the men's camp to freshen up—in the process of washing her feet and legs, she pulls off another toenail.

Cheryl arrives at the men's camp, and they welcome her warmly and hand her a "Hawaiian screwdriver"—vodka and pineapple juice. The drink tastes like heaven to Cheryl, who settles in with the men for an evening of talking and telling stories. The men are deeply impressed by Cheryl's solo hike and commend her on her "cojones" in taking on such an intense "spirit hike." The men share some marijuana with Cheryl and give her a Bob Marley t-shirt to wear on the rest of her hike, calling it a "sacred shirt."

Cheryl parts from the men and camps alone that night, but wears the Bob Marley t-shirt to sleep. After donning it, she lies awake in her tent wondering if she really is on a "spirit hike"—and whether the spirit of her mother, and Lady, and all the others she's lost are walking with her.

On her last day in the Sierra Nevada, Cheryl faces a downhill trail spanning 4,000 feet. By the time she gets to the bottom—where her next stop awaits—she has injured her feet "in an entirely new way," completely bruising and wrecking her toes as they nudge again and again against the tops of her **boots**. At Belden Town, her next stop, Cheryl collects her care package and buys herself a treat—Snapple lemonade—before sitting down for a rest. A woman named Trina sits with Cheryl and talks to her, warning her that the snow northwards on the trail is dense and difficult to traverse. Cheryl is nervous about the dangerous road still ahead, but Trina invites Cheryl to camp and make a plan with her and her friend Stacy.

Lady's miserable, bloody death retraumatizes Cheryl, Leif, and Paul. Though Leif searches for the upside by suggesting that Lady's death freed their mother to go on to the next world, Cheryl is still clearly carrying the burden of the horrific episode with her.



As Cheryl hikes on into the wilderness, she continues meeting kind and generous people—and continues being transformed both inside and out by the trail as nature acts upon her.



There is an undercurrent of doubt and fear throughout Wild as Cheryl, a woman alone in the woods, repeatedly comes upon large groups of men. At each and every turn, however, she is greeted warmly, praised, and never preyed upon or made to feel uncomfortable.



Cheryl is beginning to take the encounters and revelations she's having along her journey more seriously, and she starts to consider the fact that she's not on this path alone. All her new friends—and all the people she's lost—are with her each step of the way.



Cheryl continues meeting new friends along the trail, and she is relieved each time she realizes that much more seasoned hikers than her are just as nervous about the trials up ahead. Cheryl feels less and less alone all the time—and more prepared to conquer whatever's coming her way with her new friends at her side.



Cheryl sits with Stacy and Trina as she unpacks her care package, delighting in all the treats inside. A hiker named Brent—whom Cheryl has heard about from the other hikers she’s met on the trail—soon joins them. Cheryl has changed into sandals, and as Brent looks at her feet, he tells her that her **boots** are too small. Cheryl privately laments that there’s nothing she can do—she has chosen the wrong boots, and doesn’t have enough money to buy new ones (or a place to find them, even if she did). She asks Brent about Greg, and he tells her that he’s heard Greg quit the trail due to too much snow. Cheryl feels “sick at the news”—Greg had been a source of inspiration for her.

Cheryl’s struggle with her boots comes to represent her stubborn resistance to change. Though she knows her boots are too small—and though she endures the blisters and scrapes they give her each day—she is either too scared to change them, or unwilling to give up the struggle and the pain, feeling that she perhaps deserves the discomfort.



After a shower and some laundry, Cheryl, Trina, Stacy, and Brent eat dinner together in a nearby restaurant. They discuss the challenges of the trail up ahead, and a kind waiter brings Cheryl a glass of wine on the house. After dinner, the group returns to their camp. Cheryl sits in her chair and writes a letter to Joe. She struggles to find the words to tell him about all that’s happened to her since the last time they saw each other. On her way to mail the letter, Cheryl runs into the waiter from the restaurant, who invites her back to his cabin. Cheryl politely declines his invitation in spite of the “bald desire” she feels.

Cheryl is learning to control her impulses and desires. She knows that she has relied on sex in the past to numb her to the world and distract her from the present—now, though, there isn’t a moment she wants to miss.



Back at camp, Cheryl sits with Brent for a while. Neither of them can sleep, and they stare up at the stars together. Brent suggests they make a wish—Cheryl says she wants to wish for new **boots**. Brent suggests she wish, instead, for a horse to carry her along the trail. Cheryl says she used to have one when she was younger, and Brent tells her that she’s lucky—“Not everyone,” he says, “gets a horse.”

Brent’s words to Cheryl help her recontextualize the tragedy of losing Lady. Brent helps her see that she was lucky to have Lady at all—and this revelation, perhaps, will help her see that she was lucky to have her mother, and Paul, and Eddie, and all the other people who have come and gone from her life.



CHAPTER 11: THE LOU OUT OF LOU

Cheryl is standing by the side of the highway alone, having just bid goodbye to Stacy and Trina after hiking with them for several days. Though all three of them were hitchhiking together, Stacy and Trina went in a car that had only enough room for the two of them, leaving Cheryl alone. Now, a silver Chrysler pulls up—and to Cheryl’s surprise, a man steps out. He tells her that he can’t take her with him, as he has no room in the car—but says he wants to interview her for a publication called “the *Hobo Times*.” Cheryl insists she’s not a hobo, but the man doesn’t believe her and continues trying to interview her.

This amusing anecdote, in which Cheryl has to defend her status as a hiker—not a hobo—to a strange character demonstrates the unpredictable nature of her journey and the many kinds of kind (but occasionally over-the-top) characters she meets along the way.



As the man—who introduces himself as Jimmy Carter—continues asking Cheryl about her journey, she becomes discomfited by the similarities between her situation and a hobo's. She stinks, she has everything she owns on her back, and she's slept under a roof only three times in the last month. Cheryl insists that "being a hobo and being a hiker are two entirely different things." Against her protests, Jimmy snaps a photo of Cheryl for the "Times," thanks her for the interview, and gets back into his car. He rolls down the window and says he hopes she has a gun—she's about to enter "Bigfoot country." After the man leaves, Cheryl, unable to get a ride, sits down on the side of the road and eats some beans from a can.

Cheryl is forced to realize, over the course of her conversation with the man who may or may not really be named Jimmy Carter, that her lifestyle is indeed a lot like a hobo's. She even eats beans from a can in a rueful parody of hobo life.



After a while, a couple with another man with them—as well as a dog—offer Cheryl a ride in their truck. The man introduces himself as Spider, and the woman introduces herself as Lou. The third man, Spider says, is his brother, Dave. Cheryl tells the group her name and thanks them for picking her up, trying to mask the "unease" she feels, since Spider, Cheryl, and Dave are tough-looking bikers. She tells them about her journey on the PCT, and Spider and Lou tell her they're getting married next week. Cheryl spots a picture of a little boy up by the rearview mirror and asks if it's Lou's son—she says it is. When Cheryl asks if he's going to be in the wedding, Lou says he died five years ago after being struck by a truck.

Cheryl once again finds herself traveling amongst a kind and generous—if a little bizarre—group of strangers. Cheryl is taken aback when she realizes that Lou has undergone a serious loss, just like she has: she hasn't met another person on the trail yet with whom she's really bonded over feelings of grief.



At Cheryl's junction, Dave and Spider get out of the truck with Cheryl. They take the dog for a quick walk, and Lou stays with Cheryl while she wrangles **Monster**. They continue talking, and Lou admits that after her son died, she felt like a part of her died too—the loss "took the Lou out of Lou." Cheryl says she knows what Lou is talking about, and Lou admits that she had a "feeling" that Cheryl was someone who'd known loss. Cheryl says goodbye to the group and gets onto the trail—soon enough, she runs into Stacy and Trina again.

Cheryl is comforted by her conversation with Lou, even though Lou admits that her loss has forever changed her. Cheryl is grateful to meet someone who understands what she's going through—and to see that, though loss has the power to transform a life and tear it asunder, it can also be a force that brings the most unlikely people together in friendship and understanding.



The three women hitch to another tiny village and, inside a tiny café, discuss the section of the trail ahead. A desolate plateau is coming up, and Cheryl is a little frightened by the lack of water sources along the stretch—even though she knows that a water tank has been installed fifteen miles in. The next morning, Trina and Stacy set off, but Cheryl decides to rest her feet at the campsite for another half-day. When it's time to set out, she spends her last money on a burger rather than a large jug of water, certain that she'll be at her next stop, forty-two miles away, in just two days.

Cheryl has a difficult section of her hike coming up—but she's grown a little bit cocky about her hiking abilities, and she is sure she'll be able to traverse the plateau with ease. As a result of her overconfidence, she makes a decision that she'll soon come to regret.



Before setting out, Cheryl calls Paul from a pay phone, and the two of them talk for over an hour. Catching up with Paul, Cheryl thinks, feels like talking with a best friend more than an ex-husband. Back at camp, Cheryl struggles with the complex, competing emotions she feels. Part of her misses her old life—but she has realized that she doesn't want to go back to it. She has been on the PCT for more than a month, but is feeling that she is just now "digging into" what she has come here to do—fix the "hole in her heart." She feels more alone, lately, than anyone in the whole world—but she is beginning to think that maybe it's okay.

As Cheryl prepares to head out on yet another leg of her journey, she allows herself to reach into her past and see how she reacts to it. She is relieved to realize that, though she misses Paul, her feelings of longing for him and her old life are manageable and even a bit distant. She's having such a good time on the trail and learning so much about herself that she's not in any rush to get back to her "old" life.



CHAPTER 12: THIS FAR

At first light, Cheryl quickly and deftly packs up **Monster**. Along the trail, Monster has become less of an adversary and more of an ally. It is still Cheryl's "burden to bear"—but it is also an extension of herself. Cheryl has noticed that carrying Monster has made her stronger and more grounded in her body—although her battered feet are still "entirely, unspeakably fucked." Her pinky toes have been rubbed raw, and there are "permanent blisters" on the back of her heels. Cheryl has learned to cover her wounds with 2nd Skin and duct tape and forget about them as she walks on and on.

Cheryl has learned to bear the burden of Monster as well as the pain of her boots—symbolically, she's also learning to shoulder and manage her grief, her stubbornness, and any physical (or psychological) wounds that come her way.



Though the day is hot as Cheryl sets out, she feels rested, strong, and ready for whatever lies ahead. Now that she has escaped the snow, she feels, nothing can throw her off-course. Cheryl still feels the profound, deep length of the miles she's walking—but she manages to settle into each moment of her trek and find intimacy with nature each day. At midday, with the thermometer on her pack reading 100 degrees, Cheryl sits down for a rest and drains the remainder of one of her water bottles—she still has 32 ounces left in the other.

Cheryl was nervous, uncertain, and constantly agitated at the start of her journey. Now, she's perhaps a little too cavalier about how strong she's grown and how capable she's become—as she enters decidedly dangerous weather conditions, she is certain that nothing can stop her or even slow her down.



As Cheryl continues along the plateau, she begins sweating intensely and feeling oppressed and battered by the heat. She keeps stopping to drink water until she is down to her last two ounces, at which point she resolves to save them until the water tank is in sight. At 4:30 in the afternoon, as she comes around a bend, she spots it, and gleefully drinks her last two ounces. When she gets up to the tank, though, she sees a piece of paper stuck to the side of it: it reads, NO WATER.

Cheryl gets herself into a dangerous situation by making assumptions about the water supply up ahead. Again, the lessons she's learning on the trail mirror the lessons she must learn in life more generally, as well: she is understanding never to take anything for granted, and to always prepare for the worst.



Cheryl is panicked and furious. She consults her guidebook to see if there are any other water sources around. She is slowly beginning to comprehend that this is the most serious situation she's been in so far on the trip—she needs water immediately. She has not urinated all day, and she is so thirsty she can't even gather spit in her mouth—soon, her dehydration will go from being uncomfortable to actively dangerous. Cheryl's guidebook tells her there is another water source five miles up the trail—but the quality of the water is “questionable.” Even so, Cheryl is determined to give it a go.

Cheryl arrives at a “miserable-looking mucky pond.” It is full of water, even though the water is indeed questionable-looking. Cheryl immediately begins pumping water into her bottles through her purifier, even though the act makes her even more fatigued and shaky. She drops iodine tablets into the bottles, but must wait thirty minutes for them to cleanse the water. As she waits, Cheryl sits naked and lies down on the ground near the pool. She has hiked her first twenty-mile day.

Once the water is purified, Cheryl gulps the warm, muddy-tasting water. She drinks both 32-ounce bottles, then pumps in some more. After another half-hour, she drinks the contents of both bottles down once again. As dark falls, Cheryl waits for the urge to urinate—but it doesn't come. She worries that she's harmed her body, but she lies down to rest for the night at least knowing that she's near to water. Two hours later, she awakens to the feeling of “tiny cool hands” patting her—she opens her eyes and sees that she is covered in hundreds of tiny frogs. Cheryl scrambles up and rids herself of them, then pitches her tent and goes back to sleep.

In the morning, Cheryl still doesn't have to urinate. She pumps some more water and drinks it, then refills her bottles and sets out on the trail—it is even hotter today than the day before. Rather than heading on to a state park ahead, Cheryl takes a detour off the trail to a small town with a general store. A thermometer on the store's front porch reads 102 degrees. Cheryl nearly cries as she counts the change in her pack and realizes she doesn't have enough money for a Snapple lemonade. She goes inside to escape the heat anyway, and the cashier, who has seen Cheryl counting her pennies, gives her a Snapple for free.

Cheryl tries to keep calm and cool as she works on navigating herself out of a potentially life-threatening situation. Once, Cheryl approached hard drug use and reckless sex with a devil-may-care approach: now, though, her life has become precious to her, and she is determined to keep herself safe and alive.



Just as Cheryl had to sink to the depths of her own personal recklessness and despair before embarking on the PCT and seeking to change her life, it took a similarly dangerous and unpredictable situation to push Cheryl over a major hiking hump and achieve a new milestone.



Even though she's out of the woods in terms of securing an emergency water supply, Cheryl finds herself up against the strange whims of nature again and again. This point in her journey represents the parallel trajectory in her own emotional healing—even as she makes major breakthroughs, there are still many small hills to get over.



Cheryl has traversed a dangerous and miserable situation—and once she's arrived safely back in civilization, the kindness of a random stranger enables Cheryl to taste some sweet relief.



A man named Rex soon stops at the general store. He is big, gay, and gregarious, with a shock of red hair. He buys some beers and sits outside with Cheryl, and as they talk, he reveals that he is hiking the PCT, too. At one point in their conversation, Rex suggests that Cheryl might need new **boots**. She laments that she has no money. Rex asks if she bought the boots at REI—when she says that she did, Rex tells her that the store has a satisfaction guarantee and will overnight her a pair of new ones, free of charge, if she calls them.

The next day, Cheryl and Rex hike the remaining miles to the state park, and together stop off so Cheryl can collect her resupply box. She calls REI from the pay phone there, and they agree to overnight her a new pair of **boots**. Cheryl feels like she could jump for joy—if only her feet weren't in such bad shape. As Cheryl and Rex arrive at the camping site, Cheryl reunites with Trina and Stacy, who arrived at the site the day before. Trina tells Cheryl she has decided to get off the trail here, but Stacy is continuing on as planned. Even though Cheryl is excited to see her friends, her feet are in intense pain, and every step is excruciating. Even after she puts on sandals, her toes look like “two beets” and feel tender and swollen.

In the morning, Trina leaves, and Stacy gets back on the trail. Cheryl enjoys some alone time at the campsite while she waits for her boots to arrive, but by late that afternoon, there is still no sign of them. She walks in her sandals to a nearby waterfall, but is in excruciating pain the whole time. Back at the campsite, Cheryl reaches down and pulls off her two big toenails—she feels instantaneous relief. She only has six nails left—the PCT has claimed four.

The next morning, Cheryl packs up **Monster** and heads to the general store in her sandals. She knows that regardless of whether or not her **boots** have arrived, she needs to head back out on the trail today if she is going to make it to her next stop in time and stay on schedule. Cheryl's boots are not at the store, and though she hangs around for UPS and USPS to come, her boots still don't arrive. Frustrated, she calls REI and learns they haven't even mailed them yet—they can't overnight them to the park, and won't be able to get them to her for five days. Cheryl instructs REI to send the boots to her next stop.

Cheryl's chance encounter with Rex ultimately ends up changing the entire course of her hike. She realizes that she can get new boots sent to her free of charge—and is almost desperate with relief as she contemplates finding a respite from her too-small boots.



Cheryl is, at this point in her hike, in intense and near-constant pain from her boots. Her toenails are either falling off her feet or swelling up, begging to be released. Cheryl is changing rapidly, and the process hurts—but luckily she has all of her new friends by her side to help her learn, to catch her when she falls, and to keep her motivated along the trail.



Cheryl doesn't feel she can go on without her boots—but with her feet in such bad shape, it seems unlikely that new boots will help much. Cheryl is learning an important lesson: even after escaping a miserable situation, smooth sailing is never quite guaranteed, but one must keep trekking anyway.



In this passage, Cheryl faces the music: she is going to have to go onward without her new boots. Things will be difficult ahead—but at least she is nearly free of a situation that was actively damaging her with every step.



Cheryl knows she needs to move on—but she can't bear to don her **boots**. She considers whether she can wear her camp sandals all the way to her next stop, Castle Crag, but she is daunted by their flimsiness. In a moment of frustration, Cheryl picks up a rock and flings it at a tree. She then remembers a conversation with a psychic she had years ago—the woman, Pat, told her one day she'd have to “get on [a] horse and ride into battle.” The psychic predicted Cheryl would hesitate and falter—but warned her that in order to heal her wounds, she'd have to ride into battle “like a warrior.” Cheryl laughs to herself, then puts on her sandals and begins hiking on.

The remembered conversation with a relative stranger, a psychic, that Cheryl recalls in this passage gives her the strength she needs to push forward and ride into battle, full steam ahead. Cheryl knows that the only way out is through—and the only way through is forward.



CHAPTER 13: THE ACCUMULATION OF TREES

Cheryl considers the history of the PCT, noting that it was a woman, Catherine Montgomery, who first suggested a border-to-border trail through the western mountains in 1926. The trail, however, didn't end up being designated until 1968, and it wasn't finished until 1993. As she walks to Castle Crag in her flimsy sandals, she considers all the people and all the years and all the efforts that went into creating the “utterly timeless” trail. The sensation of “how it [feels] to be in the wild” is so “powerful and fundamental,” Cheryl is realizing, that it has pushed people to create the PCT, and other places like it, out of reverence for nature.

Even at the height of her personal misery and physical discomfort, Cheryl can't help but marvel at the beauty all around her. She knows that the PCT is one of the most astounding places on earth and feels lucky to be there, even if she's traversing it (for the time being) in a pair of flimsy, unreliable sandals that hurt her already-battered feet.



As Cheryl hikes, her sandals fall apart and she's forced to put her **boots** back on. Still, she takes comfort in the mountain vistas all around her as she battles through the pain. Late in the afternoon, after covering several miles, she sits down on the side of a hill and pulls off her boots and socks, massaging her feet as she takes in the vista before her. As she reaches for the side pocket of her pack and pulls on the zipper, **Monster** tumbles over and knocks one of her boots—the left one—over the edge of the mountain. Cheryl clutches the right boot to her chest for a long, disbelieving moment before hauling it over, too. She puts her socks back on, uses duct tape to reinforce her sandals and make a kind of bootie on each foot, and then hurries on towards Castle Crag.

Cheryl's long struggle with her boots is over—as they topple off the mountainside, she realizes that fate has taken things into its own hands. Just because one difficulty is over, though, doesn't mean others don't lie ahead. As Cheryl creates some bootie contraptions to wear on her feet, she understands this fact all too well.



Cheryl hikes a bit further before stopping to make camp for the night. She feels lonely—a rare sensation on the trail—and longs for her family, even as the sheer thought of them fills her with rage and sadness. She reflects on the week before she left for the PCT. She visited her family in Minnesota, and when she went to visit Leif at their old house, she found that Eddie and his friends had carved their names and some random phrases into the wooden dining table that had been in their family since Cheryl's childhood. Cheryl was filled with anger at the table's destruction and disappointment in Eddie. Leif shared Cheryl's sadness, and comforted her by stating that neither of them would ever carve their names into the table because of the lessons of the woman who raised them.

The next day's hike is difficult. The terrain is "churned" and "barren" in some places, and Cheryl struggles all day to get her bearings. Her sandals continue to give her trouble, and she grows more and more agitated as she continues getting lost on unfamiliar paths that take her in circles. Finally realizing that her best hope is to walk north instead of westward, where the PCT diverges at this point in the hike, until she reaches a nearby highway. Cheryl continually reminds herself as she makes camp that night that though she's lost, she has everything she needs.

The next day, Cheryl continues walking until she reaches a highway. She begins trying to hitch, and eventually a large man driving a pickup truck offers her a ride to a nearby trail which will put her back on the PCT. Once she is back on the trail, she continues hiking at "record speed," and at last manages to arrive at Castle Crags by the afternoon. Her booties have disintegrated, but luckily, her box from REI is waiting for her at the post office along with her next care package. A woman named Sarah whom Cheryl met at a campsite earlier on the trail flags her down, and when Cheryl explains that she got lost and had to double back, Sarah explains that almost everyone at Castle Crags got lost on the rough patch of trail preceding it.

Cheryl puts her new **boots** on and luxuriates in their "virgin tread." She walks into a restaurant in the small town to find Sarah, Rex, Stacy, and other hikers familiar to Cheryl all sitting and enjoying some food. After the meal, they all trek to the state park campground and set up their tents, laughing and talking as night falls—and warding off two black bears who stumble onto the campsite. Cheryl drinks steadily all night, and in her dehydrated state, becomes terribly sick. She is embarrassed as she vomits again and again.

Whenever Cheryl finds adversity on the trail, her present difficulties often trigger painful memories from her past. This dynamic represents how Cheryl is making her way through both the physical and psychological wilderness both around her and within her all at the same time.



Cheryl was once obsessed with sticking to the trail and knowing her exact location at all times. Now that she is a more seasoned hiker, she is learning to accept the idea that she won't always know where she is or how she'll get where she's going—a lesson that will translate off the trail once she returns to "real" life and all its unpredictability.



As Cheryl arrives at Castle Crags, desperate for company and new boots, she is relieved to realize that she was not the only hiker thrown by the rough terrain just south of the resupply stop. Cheryl still doubts herself and worries about her naivete as a hiker—but she is beginning to realize that she is truly worth her salt and can hold her own with serious backpackers.



Cheryl is so excited to have her new boots that even black bears don't deter her from her desire to celebrate. She gets so drunk, heady with joy and relief, that she makes herself sick—but rather than using substances as an escape, Cheryl is using them as a way to celebrate with her new friends. Even that is a sign of her healing.



In the morning, Cheryl takes a shower and fights off her hangover—she has to get back on the trail by noon. She hydrates and reads the letters that have arrived for her from Paul, Joe, and Karen. Cheryl organizes her **backpack** and sorts through her heavy load of food from her resupply box, preparing for the 156-mile stretch between here and her next stop. One of the other hikers sits with Cheryl as she prepares, and reminds her that there's only one more stop before Oregon. Cheryl admits she's looking forward to Oregon—but reminds herself that she must conquer California first.

Cheryl is getting tougher and tougher with each passing day. She is determined to conquer the wilderness all around her and close one chapter of her life before moving onto the next. The trail has taught her lessons not just about living in nature—but about living in the world more largely.



CHAPTER 14: WILD

As Cheryl sets out once more, she starts to realize that though her **boots** are new, they are not much better than her old ones—her feet still feel raw and painful, and the strenuous up-and-down of the PCT means Cheryl's feet are constantly working hard. On her second day out from Castle Crag, Cheryl spends so much time lost in thoughts about how hard the trek is and how much her feet hurt that she gets distracted and nearly steps on two rattlesnakes. Cheryl stops to rest once she's far enough away from the snakes and briefly falls asleep on her tarp. She has a strange, upsetting dream—the same dream she had the night before while camping with Rex and Stacy. In the dream, Cheryl encounters Bigfoot, only to realize it is a man in a Bigfoot suit. Cheryl wonders if the dream is a kind of omen.

Cheryl's boots teach her a valuable lesson as she sets off on this new leg of her hike. She is beginning to realize that even when she releases her stubborn nature and stops engaging in self-destructive patterns, things might not necessarily be easier—but she has to trek on anyway and make do with what she has.



That night, Cheryl once again camps with Rex and Stacy. Rex brings up the Rainbow Gathering on Toad Lake and says they should all go—Cheryl excitedly tells them about the hippy-dippy nature of the gathering, which she attended the year before, and mentions that there's a ton of free food. The three of them excitedly decide to hike towards the gathering and rest there for a while the following day. The next day, however, when the three of them arrive at the Rainbow Gathering they find that it is a bust. There are just a few weirdos spread out around the lake. Cheryl is disappointed but tries to mask how upset she is from Stacy and Rex. That night, the three of them camp with some other PCT hikers, and Cheryl has another Bigfoot dream.

Cheryl is disturbed by a series of bizarre, unsettling anxiety dreams. Things on the trail are still difficult in spite of the strides she's made, and neither her boots nor her plans for the Rainbow Gathering are working out for her. Cheryl is learning that even in the idyllic, natural wilderness of the PCT, there are still commonplace disappointments to be found.



The next day, hiking alone, Cheryl runs into a bear. It is just as scared of her as she is of it, and once it runs away, Cheryl breathes a sigh of relief that the thing her Bigfoot dreams portended has come and gone. Later on the trail that afternoon, Cheryl runs into a llama and its owner—she has never seen a llama before, and the encounter is a delight. As she pushes forward, she comes across a picnic table—there is a peach on top of it as well as a note addressed to her from Sam and Helen, some other PCT hikers, explaining that they’ve left it for her. Cheryl hungrily wolfs the peach, and as she is tossing the pit, she spots a deer. She is reminded of her encounter with the fox—the deer has the same amount of disinterest in her as the other animal had.

Cheryl hikes on her own over the course of the next few days, enjoying the natural world around her and taking in the sunrises and sunsets each day. She passes the midpoint of her hike and finds herself filled with a strange melancholy. She thinks about all the strange and wonderful people she’s met on the trail, and how they’ve helped her to realize how many “amazing things” there are in the world. Cheryl feels something open inside of her, and she begins crying—not out of happiness or sadness, but out of sheer overwhelm. Cheryl is just days from Oregon, and feels, for the first time in a long time, “safe in this world.”

CHAPTER 15: BOX OF RAIN

On her second-to-last night in California, Cheryl wakes to the sound of torrential rain against her tent. The next morning, it is only 37 degrees outside. Cheryl hikes onward in spite of the cold, able to “feel” the state of Oregon looming before her. If she makes it to the Bridge of the Gods, she will have hiked the length of the entire state. She wonders who she will be if she makes it there—and who she will be if she doesn’t.

Cheryl runs into Stacy, who tells Cheryl that she is getting off the trail and taking a bus up to Ashland, Oregon. Rex has already quit the PCT, too. Cheryl hugs Stacy before watching her hike away down a jeep trail—Stacy is soon enveloped in the thick fog all around.

The next day, Cheryl walks her last miles in California and reaches the Oregon border. She is a little underwhelmed by the milestone—nothing about crossing over feels “momentous,” and the PCT marker at the border doesn’t even mention Oregon. It merely reads “WASHINGTON: 498 MILES.” Nevertheless Cheryl excitedly writes her name and a note—“I made it!”—in the trail log and continues forward.

Cheryl’s encounters with a series of three very different animals is symbolic of her learning to tame the wild, animalistic parts of her soul. Cheryl has been facing down the “animals” within her psyche—the things that disturb, worry, and paw at her—and conquering each one. As she successfully navigates run-ins with everything from a dangerous bear to a domesticated llama, she realizes that there is hardly anything she can’t face down anymore.



Cheryl has hiked a long way—but she’s only halfway to the Bridge of the Gods. The lessons she’s been learning along the way, however, are beginning to penetrate her consciousness more deeply and affect her in new, surprising ways. Cheryl at last has the moment of catharsis she’d assumed she’d have many of along the way—but even in the midst of her tears, she realizes that there’s no huge reckoning to be had. She is alright and at home in the world, even though she’s thousands of miles away from the life she once knew.



Cheryl is still afraid of failure, even as she officially passes the midpoint of her hike. She wants to press forward and keep going—but she is trying to make room for a reality in which she doesn’t finish her hike, and to not judge herself for either outcome.



Cheryl has outlasted so many other hikers on the PCT—she herself can hardly believe the longevity of her own journey.



Cheryl is beginning to realize that the spots she’s long thought of as major milestones on her journey aren’t all that transformative, tremendous, or exciting. It’s the smaller moments, she’s learning, that make up the journey—not arbitrary landmarks or destinations.



That night, as Cheryl cozies up in her tent, she can hardly focus on reading—she is too excited to get to Ashland. Ashland is not just a trail stop, but a real town with food, music, and regular people. Plus, Cheryl has packed a “real” outfit and 250 dollars in travelers checks in her Ashland box—Ashland was supposed to be her original destination before she decided to bypass the Sierra Nevada and hike all the way to Portland.

Cheryl arrives in Ashland the next day and is greeted with the news that Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead has died. The town is covered in pictures and signs bearing Jerry’s image, and Cheryl takes them in as she walks to the post office to collect her box. Though Cheryl is slightly amused by the many hippies lining the streets in both mourning and celebration, she is forced to realize that she looks (and smells) just like them. At the post office, the clerk is dismissive of Cheryl and hands her only one tiny padded envelope. Cheryl insists she has a box waiting, but the clerk tells her to try again tomorrow. Cheryl is surprised and confused by the woman’s coldness.

Cheryl opens the package and sees that it contains a necklace from her friend Laura in Minneapolis. The necklace reads “STRAYED,” but from a certain angle, it looks like it says “STARVED.” Cheryl puts the necklace on excitedly—it comforts her, even though she only has \$2.29 to get her through the night. Cheryl wanders through town and recognizes some familiar faces from the Rainbow Gathering who have gathered for the Garcia festivities in town. She goes to the food co-op to smell groceries and try on free samples from the health and beauty section. She uses her last dollars to buy herself a lemonade, trying not to think of the huge, delicious dinner she’d hoped to buy on her first night in Ashland.

As Cheryl exits the co-op, she runs into a couple handing out flyers for a Garcia memorial. She gets to talking with them, and when they learn she is a PCT hiker, the woman, Susanna, offers to give Cheryl a free foot massage. Cheryl demurs, but Susanna insists. She goes into the co-op, emerges minutes later with some peppermint oil, and begins taking Cheryl’s boots and socks off. Cheryl tries to explain that her feet are in terrible shape, but when Susanna lays eyes upon them, she insists they are strong like an animal’s. Susanna looks up at Cheryl during the massage and asks if her necklace says “starved.”

Cheryl’s journey along the PCT isn’t just about the arduous moments on the trail—the rest and resupply stops are part of the experience, too, and Cheryl is determined to have as good a time as she can in her first real layover in a major town.



Cheryl wants to differentiate herself from the hippies gathered on the streets of Ashland just as she wanted to make clear to Jimmy Carter that she was not, in fact, a hobo. At the same time, though, Cheryl has begun to accept that she is no better or worse than the many different kinds of people she’s met along the trail—they are all, in a way, travelers and seekers.



Cheryl’s necklace—which bears her new, self-bestowed name—also looks a little bit like it says “STARVED,” a comical coincidence to Cheryl (who has spent much of her journey feeling physically and emotionally starved.) The nickname “STARVED” is just as apt as “STRAYED” at this point.



Susanna’s act of massaging Cheryl’s feet is nearly biblical in its selflessness and grace. Cheryl is ashamed of her battered feet—but Susanna warmly lets Cheryl know that her feet are a marker of her strength, bravery, and fearlessness rather than something to be self-conscious about.



Stacy soon arrives in Ashland and meets up with Cheryl. Cheryl tells her about the post office situation, and though Stacy offers to lend Cheryl money, Cheryl decides to try the office one last time. When she goes back, the clerk gives her the package—which was there the whole time. Cheryl and Stacy check into a nearby hostel, and Cheryl luxuriates in her first shower in over two weeks. She dresses up in her good outfit and goes out to dinner with Stacy and another woman, where she orders everything she wants. She buys a pair of sport sandals at a shoe store, returns to the hostel, but goes back out to attend a Garcia celebration, where she dances and sways to “Box of Rain,” her favorite Dead song.

At the memorial, Cheryl meets a man named Jonathan to whom she has an instant attraction. He asks her to come see his band play the next evening, and Cheryl accepts his invitation. She walks through the streets back to her hostel feeling elated at the prospect of a date—but worried, in the back of her mind, that she might fall into her old habits with men. That night, in bed, Cheryl touches her own body and is humiliated by the rough and raw patches she’s gotten over the months from the hike. She vows that no matter what happens with Jonathan tomorrow, she will keep her pants on in order to disguise her PCT battle scars.

The next night, Cheryl goes to the club where Jonathan is playing. She orders a drink and makes eye contact with him almost immediately. At intermission, Jonathan comes over to greet Cheryl and ask her what she wants to do afterward. He tells her that he lives on an organic farm about fifteen miles away, and offers to bring her there to walk around under the stars. As Jonathan gets back on stage, Cheryl steps out for some air. On the street outside the club, she begins talking with a hippie-ish man named Clyde who tells her he lives in a teepee off the PCT for four months out of the year—and spends the rest of the year living out of a milk truck. He points out his truck to Cheryl and invites her in for some tea—she accepts.

Inside Clyde’s truck, Clyde and Cheryl drink chamomile tea and discuss reincarnation. Clyde offers Cheryl some chewable opium, which she accepts and begins gnawing on—until she remembers her heroin fixation, and spits the root out. Cheryl continues talking with Clyde until eleven, when Jonathan is done playing, and then goes to meet him at the front of the club.

Cheryl is, for the second time on her journey, confounded by a stranger’s relative coldness—everyone else she’s met is so kind, welcoming, and encouraging. Nevertheless, Cheryl doesn’t let the brush with nastiness discourage or derail her, and she remains determined to have a good time rewarding herself in Ashland.



Even though Susanna reassured Cheryl that her battle scars from her hike were a mark of strength, confidence, and courage, Cheryl has some lingering fears about how her body will be perceived in an intimate or sexual setting. Here, she is using her hiking not as a way to feel at one with herself and boost her confidence, but rather as a way to keep her apart from others and indulge her insecurities.



Cheryl can’t help but make friends everywhere she goes. She’s getting better and better at finding common ground with total strangers, and the barriers she once erected around her heart to shut people out have fallen down since the beginning of her hike. Her worldview is broadening with every new person she meets and every new experience she has.



Cheryl enjoys spending time with Clyde and conversing with him—but she is able to restrain herself when substances are introduced into the equation. This shows deep personal growth and maturation on Cheryl’s part—she has learned along the trail that she doesn’t need to dull her consciousness to have a good time.



Jonathan drives Cheryl out to the farm where he lives for free in exchange for work. Though Cheryl doesn't know where they're going, she isn't worried, and surrenders herself to the experience. The two of them take a walk through the fields in the cold mountain air, talking and flirting as they go. Cheryl wants to kiss Jonathan, but she's nervous to, and she delays the moment as long as possible. When they finally do share a kiss, Cheryl is relieved to find that she hasn't forgotten how to do it. In the middle of the blissful moment, Cheryl finds herself wondering how far away she is from the PCT.

Jonathan invites Cheryl into the large tent where he sleeps, and she joins him. It is more of a yurt, warmed by a heater and tall enough to stand in. Jonathan and Cheryl lie down in his bed and begin making out, though they soon realize neither of them has a condom, and decide to refrain from having sex. As Jonathan explores Cheryl's body with his hands, he comes upon her rough patches—but as Cheryl begins explaining them and apologizing for their ugliness, Jonathan tells Cheryl she has nothing to worry about.

The next morning, Jonathan and Cheryl stop at the grocery store to pick up some picnic supplies and then they drive out to the chilly, rocky beach. Cheryl soon realizes she has been to this beach before, with Paul, many years ago while camping on their long post-New York road trip. As the two of them walk down the beach, Cheryl falls back a little and finds herself wandering alone. She begins thinking about Paul and feeling guilty about how she "wronged him." Then, suddenly, Cheryl has the thought: "What if I forgave myself?" She begins to wonder if everything she'd done—and everything she'd tried to escape in hiking the PCT—had meant something and taught her something. She wonders if it is all right if she is never redeemed—but also considers the possibility that she already is.

Cheryl and Jonathan have a picnic on the beach, and then hide away in some craggy rocks to have sex—Jonathan purchased condoms earlier at Safeway. Cheryl luxuriates in the experience, and afterward, as they drive back to Ashland, she feels full, happy, and blissed-out. Back in town, Cheryl gives Jonathan the address she'll be staying at when she reaches Portland before bidding him goodbye with a passionate kiss.

Cheryl has resisted giving into her desire for companionship and sex at various stops along the PCT—but here in Ashland, she decides to give intimacy with another person rather than with nature or herself a spin. Cheryl is feeling confident and in control of herself, and more equipped to experiment with sex and intimacy than she was at the beginning of her journey.



Cheryl has been nervous about showing her roughened-up new body to a lover—but her battle scars, so to speak, are actually appealing to Jonathan. On a more symbolic level, this moment seems to reflect Cheryl's anxieties about new friends and lovers rejecting the person the PCT has made her into.



This passage represents the emotional climax of Wild and one of Cheryl's most profound moments of clarity throughout her entire journey. She has come to see that she never needed to seek redemption for her perceived "sins"—all the choices she's made, good and bad, have made her into the person she is today. Cheryl has faced down her demons along the trail and had some major breakthroughs about her childhood, her grief over the loss of her mother, and her compulsions regarding sex. Now, on the other side of all those revelations, she realizes she can extend a measure of grace to herself and accept that she never needed to be forgiven—she just needed to accept, love, and nurture the person she was and is.



Cheryl decides to allow herself to surrender to her desires. She has at last accepted that she never needed to punish herself to secure redemption—she just needed to learn how to make healthier choices, and to forgive herself for all the times she wasn't able to do that in the past.



The next morning, Cheryl reluctantly prepares to leave Ashland, mailing back to Lisa the things she doesn't need and purchasing some food at the co-op. As she is preparing to leave some prepackaged meals she doesn't want in a free box at the post office, she runs into a man she recognizes from the Rainbow Gathering. She offers him the food, and he thanks her by calling her "baby." Cheryl yells at him not to call her baby. In response, he presses his hands together and bows his head in her direction, "as if in prayer."

Cheryl has come to respect herself along her journey up the PCT—and she is at last ready to command the respect she deserves from other people, as well.



CHAPTER 16: MAZAMA

As Cheryl makes her way towards Crater Lake—which, before a "cataclysmic eruption" 7,700 years ago, was known as Mount Mazama—she is excited to see the huge, beautiful landmark. She is using a new guidebook—*The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 2: Oregon and Washington*, and slowly adjusting to the differences between the Oregonian landscape and the Californian one. Oregon is much more forested, and some PCT hikers refer to it as the "green tunnel." Though it's only mid-August, most of Cheryl's days, weather-wise, feel closer to October, and she must constantly stay on the move in order to keep warm.

Being in Oregon at last makes Cheryl feel renewed and refreshed. She has traversed an entire state's worth of mountains and valleys and can feel her goals growing closer and closer with each passing day.



One morning, as Cheryl wakes, she realizes with a heavy heart what day it is: August 18th, her mother's birthday. If she had lived, Cheryl thinks, her mother would be fifty years old. Cheryl is filled with a deep rage as she wishes her mother had lived to turn fifty. As she hikes onwards, Cheryl tries to think of all the mistakes her mother made while parenting Cheryl and her siblings—smoking marijuana in front of them, hitting them with a wooden spoon, and failing to help Cheryl explore different options for college. Cheryl begins telling herself that her mother failed her—but her anger turns to sadness, and soon she is weeping for how "awful" things have turned out.

When confronted with a new wave of grief, Cheryl tries to stave it off by attempting to ruin her mother's memory within her own mind and focus on rage and hatred rather than sorrow. This is still an effort to numb her grief—but Cheryl cannot get very far with these kinds of tactics anymore before breaking down and realizing she must confront the truth of what she's actually feeling.



After Cheryl's mother died, Cheryl and her siblings had her cremated. The ashes were not what Cheryl expected—they were not fine like sand but instead gravely, with chunks of bone mixed in. Cheryl recalls placing some of the pieces of bone in her mouth and swallowing them whole during the process of spreading her mother's ashes.

This passage speaks to the depths of Cheryl's grief in the wake of her mother's death, and how ravenous she remained for any connection at all to her mother in spite of the woman's passing.



That night, as Cheryl makes camp, she has released her anger. She realizes that her mother was a "spectacular" mom, and for the first time in years, she allows herself to think of her mother's name: Barbara, or Bobbi for short. As Cheryl thinks of her mother as Bobbi, she begins to understand that she was more than just a mother—she was a woman unto herself, and now, Cheryl mourns that loss as well.

This moment represents a huge breakthrough in Cheryl's psychological journey. Up until now, she has been referring to her mother as only her mother—she hasn't allowed herself to see Bobbi as a full, independent woman with a life that was rich in many ways independent from her status as a mother. Cheryl is beginning to accept her mother—and mourn her—holistically.



Cheryl hikes onwards for several more days, and at last she arrives at the large campground at the base of Crater Lake. Cheryl is taken aback by the deep, pure blue of the water and stunned by the “sacred” power the lake seems to radiate. After her visit to the lake, Cheryl returns to the campground for the night—it is Sunday, and she needs to wait until tomorrow to collect her package from the post office. That night, she spends time thinking about her mother—and how much of her life she has spent trying not to become like her.

The next day, Cheryl eats lunch and then sits on a long porch at the Crater Lake Lodge, overlooking the vast blue lake. Though she has 334 miles left to go until she reaches the Bridge of the Gods, she feels as if she has “arrived.” As she looks out at the lake, which was once Mazama—a mountain that had its “heart removed” and turned into a “wasteland”—Cheryl can’t picture any of the emptiness or barrenness that was once here, and can instead see only the “stillness and silence” of the beautiful water.

CHAPTER 17: INTO A PRIMAL GEAR

Oregon feels like a “hopscotch” in Cheryl’s mind—she can see all of her stops clearly, and her pace has become so steady that the fact that she still has 334 miles to traverse seems like a doable thing rather than a daunting task. As she walks through Oregon, even as the weather yo-yos from cold to hot back to cold, she eats fresh berries and takes in the scenery. Her feet stop bleeding and blistering, and though they still hurt “deep,” she recognizes that she has grown stronger than ever. The PCT has gotten easier, Cheryl thinks—“but that [is] different from it getting easy.”

Even though there are stretches of miles where Cheryl feels peaceful and strong and capable, there are stretches where she feels cranky and bone-tired. She is feeling the latter way when she reaches Shelter Cove Resort, a store and campground surrounded by rustic cabins on a lake called Odell—her next stop on the trail. Cheryl pays to stay the night so that she can collect her package in the morning, then has a snack of chips and lemonade before taking a luxurious shower in the bathhouse.

Cheryl’s visit to Crater Lake soothes and inspires her, and helps her to think critically about her relationship with her mother for the first time in years. Cheryl is able to admit to her mother’s shortcomings—and her own—without condemning either her mother or herself. She can see that she and her mother are and were both simply women trying their best to survive.



Crater Lake serves as a metaphor for healing—how beauty, sacredness, and tranquility can come of massive destruction and seemingly endless barrenness.



Cheryl has gone from naïve to overconfident to, at last, a mellow and seasoned hiker who respects the trail’s difficulty while understanding, at the same time, that the trail itself has taught her how to navigate it.



Cheryl has gotten tougher and tougher with each passing day—but she still gets exhausted along the trail and longs for places where she can take a step back, relax, and enjoy some of the indulgences of “regular” life that she once took for granted.



Later, as Cheryl sits in front of the store, three young men come out of the door and approach her. They tell her they've been following her a long way and reading her notes in the various trail registers along the PCT—they introduce themselves as Rick, Josh, and Richie. They ask Cheryl what her trail name is, and she says she doesn't have one. They tell her their trail name is "the Three Young Bucks." They've been hiking from the Mexican border and have gone straight through without bypassing the Sierras, traversing over twenty miles a day. Cheryl is impressed by these "hiking machines."

Being around the Bucks lightens Cheryl's mood—but the next morning, when she goes with them to collect her care package from the post office, she is thrown into crisis mode after she realizes that she forgot to pack her regular twenty dollars in this box. It is 143 miles to her next stop, and she has only six dollars and twelve cents in her pocket. Cheryl assures herself she'll be fine—there's nowhere to spend money on the trail, anyway—and soon heads out with the Three Young Bucks, stopping for breaks with them throughout the day. Late that afternoon, though, they push forward past where Cheryl wants to make camp, and she bids them goodbye, hopeful she'll meet up with them again.

Cheryl presses onward through the Oregonian mountains, and a couple days after parting from the Three Young Bucks, she takes a small detour to the Elk Lake Resort for some food. After ordering a hamburger and soda, she has only two cents left in her pocket. As Cheryl considers the fact that she's now flat broke, she realizes that the poverty she experienced in her childhood has actually prepared her well for the low-budget living she's done on the PCT.

Cheryl hikes onward to a mountain formation called the Three Sisters and finds that the trails are no longer hers alone—she keeps running into backpackers, day hikers, and scout troops. Everyone Cheryl meets is kind and interested in her odyssey, and a couple of hikers even share some beers with her as a good-luck gesture. On the other side of the Three Sisters, the landscape is less lush, and Cheryl finds herself alone again. As evening approaches and the temperature drops, Cheryl looks frantically for a safe place to camp. She hears the yips of coyotes in the distance, and as she gets into her tent for the night, her headlamp lands on a shining pair of eyes in the distance.

Cheryl has been feeling confident about her hiking abilities and proud of the ways she's grown stronger, physically and mentally, as she's traversed the trail. However, when she meets the Three Young Bucks, she can't help but realize that traveling in a group is much easier than going it alone.



Cheryl is learning how to make do with very little along the trail. She's bolstered by the company she keeps and the beautiful nature all around her, and she is beginning to experience a way of life in which money is nearly valueless except in emergencies.



Cheryl once resented the way she and her siblings grew up—but now, out on the trail, she is beginning to see the ways in which her entire life has done the work of preparing her for facing the PCT and all its unpredictability.



Though Cheryl has made new friends at every resupply stop and roadside she's been to, hiking along the Three Sisters introduces to her to a larger volume of people in a shorter span of time than she's encountered anywhere else along the hike. Cheryl feels a little anxious about all the people around—and clearly, the wildlife does, too.



The next day, after hiking dense forest all afternoon, Cheryl stops to make camp near a pond. Two bow hunters—men in their thirties, one with sandy hair and one with red hair—soon approach her and ask if she has any water to spare. Cheryl is intimidated by the men’s weapons—knives, bows, and arrows—and tells them that they can drink water from the pond, but must filter it first. She offers to share her water purifier with them, and even shows them how to use it—but when they tell her that they haven’t had anything but Pepsi all day, Cheryl lets them drink right from her already-purified supply. The men give her a strange feeling, and Cheryl, trusting her gut, is trying to get them to leave her be as quickly as possible.

The men stay around, though, to pump some water into their empty Pepsi cans. Cheryl grows frustrated when she looks over at the men and realizes they’re using her pump wrong—they have clogged it with mud from the bottom of the pond, and now there’s no way for any of them to purify the water. Cheryl tells the men their best bet is now the iodine tablets, and spares them a couple so that they can drink some water. As the three of them wait for the tablets to work, the sandy-haired man asks Cheryl probing questions about what she’s doing out in the wilderness all alone, fixated on the fact that she’s a woman by herself. Both men make lewd comments about Cheryl’s body and appearance, further upsetting her.

Cheryl tells the men that she’s heading out from the campsite before dark. The men say they’re leaving, too, and head onwards. After they depart, Cheryl wonders if she really has to pick up and leave—she’s afraid there won’t be a good spot for camping further on. She decides to stay, but as she begins fixing dinner, the sandy-haired man reappears and accuses her of trying to “trick” him and his friend. He makes more comments about Cheryl’s body. Cheryl tells him he should get going before dark, but the man retorts that it’s a “free country.” His redheaded friend comes up the trail, chiding him for wandering away and urging him to move on. As the men walk away, the sandy-haired one tells Cheryl to look out for herself. He raises his Pepsi can and makes a toast “to a young girl all alone in the woods.”

Cheryl tries to tell herself that nothing happened, and she’s fine—she just came across some “creepy” guys. Still, something in Cheryl’s gut tells her to pack up and move on. In spite of the darkness falling all around her and her half-finished dinner on the stove, Cheryl quickly packs up her camp, loads **Monster** onto her back, and starts walking in the opposite direction of the men. When she feels she can’t walk another step, she begins running.

Cheryl encounters these two bow hunters, and though she’s intimidated by their rough manner and their many weapons, she tries to extend to them the same graciousness and kindness that so many along the PCT have shown to her. Nevertheless, Cheryl can’t shake the feeling that these men are not as kind and good as the others she’s met along the trail.



As the men begin harassing Cheryl, she starts to realize that her instincts were right. Just like when Cheryl was trapped on the plateau with no water, she begins to realize that she is in a potentially dangerous situation—but tries to keep her cool as she attempts to deflect the men’s advances while keeping them calm and happy.



Cheryl’s kindness is repaid only with lewdness and harassment—and a broken water pump. Cheryl has trouble shaking the sandy-haired man off, and for the first time on her entire hike, she begins to feel that being “a young girl all alone in the woods” is truly a liability and a danger.



Cheryl has had her second major encounter with strangers who were anything but kind. While the campground keepers were merely nasty, the sandy-haired man actually frightened Cheryl—and she runs harder and faster from them than she has from anything else on the trail so far. Nature is only half as frightening, Cheryl is realizing, as the dark side of human nature.



CHAPTER 18: QUEEN OF THE PCT

The next morning, Cheryl wakes to rain. It has been pouring all night, and as she breaks camp and continues onward, the rain comes and goes. She can't stop playing the frightening episode from the night before over and over in her mind, but is soothed by the "green grandiosity" of the lush forest all around her.

The following evening, Cheryl arrives at the shores of the huge Olallie Lake, feeling relieved to be at a campground with other people. Though the Olallie campgrounds advertise themselves as a "resort," Cheryl quickly realizes how rustic the lodgings are. Cheryl makes camp and cooks dinner in the rain, and as she curls into her sleeping bag after eating, she comforts—and tortures—herself with thoughts of all the goodies awaiting her in her care package which should be arriving tomorrow. She also thinks about how, in about a week's time, she'll be done with her hike and living in Portland—waitressing, writing, and going about her life.

The next morning, Cheryl picks up her box and some letters from the ranger station. As she opens her package, she feels "rich"—she has forty whole dollars at her disposal now due to having mispacked the twenty from her last stop. Cheryl wonders if she should hike onwards or not—there aren't a lot of amenities at the "resort," but at the same time, it will be rainy and freezing on the trail. When one of the cashiers at the store offers Cheryl a free dinner with the staff, her decision is made.

Cheryl spends the day bathing and repairing her pump, and as she heads to dinner that evening, she runs into the Three Young Bucks. She is jubilant at the sight of them, and after a delicious family-style meal with the resort staff, she quickly heads back to the campgrounds to catch up with her friends. As she walks past the ranger station, the ranger calls out to her. He tells her that he had surgery on his mouth today but would love to have her by for a drink at his cabin later. Cheryl says she has some friends who have just arrived—and if they can join him, she will too.

Cheryl catches up with the Three Young Bucks and shares with them a piece of cake she pilfered from the meal. They all head to the ranger's cabin together, grateful to be able to spend some time warm inside rather than in their chilly tents. The ranger introduces himself as Guy and makes strong, potent drinks for the four of them. When one of the Young Bucks refers to the drink as a "suicide"—a kind of drink made with several strong liquors—the ranger, who is loopy from his oral surgery, begins telling macabre stories about the many actual suicides he has encountered in the woods and even on the campgrounds.

Nature has become a balm and a comfort to Cheryl rather than an imposing wilderness. She actually is beginning to prefer the "company" of nature to the company of people.



Cheryl is decidedly melancholy as she thinks about returning to "real" life. There are certain comforts she misses, as evidenced by her chagrin at the rustic settings of the Olallie Lake "resort," but the idea of getting off the trail nonetheless fills Cheryl with a new kind of sadness.



Cheryl feels freed by the money awaiting her in the resupply box—and is amazed by how significant a mere twenty dollars has become. Cheryl is learning about a new way of living even this far into her hike.



Reuniting with old friends fills Cheryl with happiness and comfort. Cheryl has learned to draw strength and joy from other people, and to let them into her life and her experiences without fear, trepidation, or suspicion.



Guy is yet another of the deeply kind—but wildly eccentric—strangers Cheryl meets along her journey. He is like Jimmy Carter in that he is so strange as to provide a kind of comic relief—and a reminder, for Cheryl, of all the beautiful, zany strangeness in the world.



The next morning, Three Young Bucks and Cheryl head to the store for some coffee. The Bucks tell Cheryl they've come up with a trail name for her. They dub her "The Queen of the PCT," because everyone she meets is always doing nice things for her out of the blue. Cheryl considers the nickname, and realizes that in spite of the supposed danger of being "a woman alone," she has been met at almost every stop along her journey with nothing but kindness and generosity. Right at that moment, the cashier leans across the register and offers to give Cheryl and her friends a cabin for the night for "next to nothing."

Cheryl and the Bucks move their things into a rustic cabin. Cheryl heads back to the store for some snacks and runs into her friend Lisa, who greets Cheryl excitedly and explains that she and her boyfriend wanted to drive up and see if Cheryl had reached the resort. That evening, Cheryl, the Bucks, Lisa, and Lisa's boyfriend Jason all load up into Jason's truck and head to some hot springs nearby to relax.

On the way back from the springs, Cheryl lies on a futon in the truck bed with the Bucks. She feels a deep attraction to Rick, but at the same time, she doesn't feel the "ache for a companion" that has dogged her the last several years. She doesn't feel the hole in her heart anymore, and doesn't want anything but a friend. Nonetheless, Cheryl leans over to Rick and tells him she's glad she met him—Rick tells her he's glad to have met her, too: after all, she's the Queen of the PCT.

Cheryl was worried about what her trail nickname would be—she was afraid it would reflect her ineptitude or her foolishness. She is surprised and grateful, then, to realize that her nickname is a touching one—one that imbues her with the same "magical" power her mother once had to bring out the best in people and keep them tethered together.



Cheryl is surrounded by both new and old friends as Lisa and her boyfriend surprise her and decide to treat her to a relaxing afternoon. When Cheryl left Portland and last saw Lisa, she was a mess—and Lisa seems overjoyed to see Cheryl thriving.



Cheryl has learned, over the course of her journey, how to balance her desire for friendship and companionship with her compulsions towards empty sexual congress and desperate grabs at being liked or even loved. Cheryl has healed, grown, and learned—and become a person who brings people together with her goodness rather than one who frets over her inability to maintain fractured, unhealthy relationships.



CHAPTER 19: THE DREAM OF A COMMON LANGUAGE

The next morning, Cheryl packs **Monster** for the last stretch of her hike. The ranger brings Cheryl a package, addressed to her from her friend Gretchen—it is full of chocolate and wine. Cheryl scarfs the chocolates, but then begins walking the wine back over to the ranger station, unwilling to lug it. As she goes, she hears a voice call out her name—she turns around and finds herself face-to-face with Doug. They greet one another excitedly and catch up on how they've both fared along the trail. Doug says he's just stopping for a moment and is going right back out—Cheryl agrees to wait so they can go together. Doug is charmed to see that Cheryl still has the feather he gave her attached to Monster, and offers to carry the wine on their hike.

Through friends like Doug, Cheryl has found people who can literally and metaphorically help her to share her physical and emotional loads. Cheryl was ready to give up the wine, sweet as it was, in order to lessen the exertion on herself—but with friends like Doug to help, she realizes she doesn't have to sacrifice the good things in life to keep getting by. She can ask for help and receive it.



That night, the two of them make camp and open the bottle of wine, enjoying it as they cook their dinners. They discuss their summers, and Cheryl gives Doug a novel called *The Ten Thousand Things* to read, but he says he doesn't want to add it to his pack's weight. After Doug turns in early, Cheryl sits by the fire and burns the novel as she thinks about Eddie—the person who taught her how to make her first campfire, paddle a canoe, and skip a rock. Eddie was the one to instill a love of the woods and camping in Cheryl. Cheryl pulls out *The Dream of a Common Language* next, and though she knows she should burn it too, she can't bring herself to do so.

A few days later, Cheryl and Doug—plus Tom and a lesbian ex-couple, who have joined up with them—arrive at the Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood, which is Oregon's highest mountain at 11,240 feet. Portland is only sixty miles away, and to Cheryl, the majestic Mount Hood feels like home. She still has fifty miles to go to reach the Bridge of the Gods, and the next morning, she sets out early without the rest of her crew in order to reach it alone. As she realizes how truly close she is to the end of her journey, she begins to feel melancholy—but also relieved as she realizes that she is no longer carrying the “staggering” weight of her mother's loss.

Over the next several days, Cheryl passes several landmarks, such as the imposing Mount St. Helen and Mount Rainier. On her last full day of hiking, she is on a downward tilt as she descends 4,000 feet in only six miles. As darkness falls, she decides to stop and make camp though she's only six miles from Cascade Locks and the Bridge—she wants to see them both in the full light of day. That night, as she makes camp, she pulls off yet another toenail—the PCT officially has more of her toenails than she does.

The next morning, Cheryl feels like she is floating as she hikes the remaining few miles to Cascade Locks. It is Friday morning, and she feels a unique energy in the air as she arrives in town and passes houses, businesses, and cars. The Bridge of the Gods comes into view, and Cheryl walks halfway across it on foot before stopping to look down at the Columbia River—the fourth-largest in the nation—rushing past below her. The feeling of having arrived at her destination is at once small and “tremendous,” and Cheryl lingers in the moment—before heading off to go get some ice cream in town at a spot her fellow hikers have been telling her to check out.

Cheryl always credited her mother with making her a nature-lover—but now, as she considers her life and her childhood more holistically, she allows herself to release some of the anger and resentment she's long felt towards Eddie and acknowledge his significance in her life, as well. Cheryl is continuing to heal and grow even at this late stage of her journey.



As Cheryl bids goodbye to her friends and prepares to end her journey the same way she began it—alone—she reflects on all she's learned over the course of her hike. She feels lighter both physically and emotionally—she has learned how to manage her grief, how to value herself, and how to connect with other people in spite of her cynicism about the world.



Up until the very last stretch of her journey, Cheryl continues shedding pieces of her old self along the way to make room for the new, healed person she has made herself into along her trek.



Cheryl has been waiting for months to arrive at the Bridge of the Gods. When she finally gets there, she is moved and happy—but also slightly amused by how small the moment seems in comparison to the way she'd been building it up in her head. In the end, the destination is not the point—the journey, the friendships, and the growth are.



As Cheryl eats her ice-cream, she thinks about how, by later today, she'll be in Portland. She'll be back to her regular life—she'll be able to eat and drink what she wants, wear normal clothes, and drive anywhere her truck can take her. Cheryl makes some light, flirtatious conversation with a businessman who approaches her to ask her about hiking, and though they make a plan to meet up in Portland, the plan never comes to fruition.

Four years after that moment, Cheryl writes, she would cross the Bridge of the Gods all the way at last with another man—the man who would become her husband. In fifteen years, Cheryl writes, she would bring her daughter Bobbi and her son Carver to get ice cream at this very spot, and tell them about her journey along the PCT. Years after that, she'd begin writing the story of her hike, and in the process would discover that Doug had died in an accident in New Zealand—but as she mourned him, she would look up at the frayed feather he gave her so many years ago, suspended above her desk.

Cheryl writes about how sitting on the bench eating ice cream on the last day of her hike, she still didn't fully understand its meaning—but was able to trust that what she'd done in hiking the PCT was something “true” and “sacred.” Though she didn't yet grasp the enormity of what she'd done, she thought to herself: “How wild it was, to let it be.”

Cheryl is nervous but a little excited about the prospect of getting back to real life. She has discovered along the trail who she wants to be and who she can be—now it's time to put this version of herself to the test.



As Cheryl Strayed writes about the future, she demonstrates just how important her hike along the PCT will remain to her over the years. The Bridge of the Gods will continue to be a place of significance, and the friendships she made along the trail will remain major and meaningful to her long after they end.



Cheryl has, over the course of her hike, gone from being someone paralyzed by grief, desperate to regain control of life through self-destructive acts, and numb to the beauty of the world around her. At the end of her trek, Cheryl still has a lot of growing to do—but she has learned to accept the “wildness” of life, and to let things “be.”





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Tanner, Alexandra. "Wild." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Sep 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tanner, Alexandra. "Wild." LitCharts LLC, September 7, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/wild>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Wild* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Strayed, Cheryl. Wild. Vintage. 2013.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Strayed, Cheryl. Wild. New York: Vintage. 2013.