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MAPS

Wild is a memoir that begins as a map. Before words, the reader of *Wild* is offered a visual narrative set along the western United States coast. A dotted line extends from Mexico to Oregon, identifying a famously difficult hiking route called the Pacific Crest Trail. Where the dots are blackened in as lines, we see the journey taken by the memoirist, Cheryl Strayed. We envision the trail she followed—alone, on foot.

On its surface *Wild* is the simple story told by the map. Cheryl Strayed sets out to hike a trail, and she achieves her goal. Inspiration, in the form of physical endurance and a test of human will, is the book's very basic premise.

Layered underneath this primary story are the stories about where Cheryl's mind and body have been, and what brought her to the trail: Cheryl's life has fallen apart after the sudden death of her young mother.

She's hit rock bottom, wrecked her marriage, dabbled in drugs, and is on the brink of "ruining her life." Her mission while hiking the Pacific Crest Trail is not just to finish what she'd set out to achieve physically, but to redeem herself. The existence of the book and the fact that you are holding it in your hands proves that she succeeded in the goal of "fixing her life" as well. She has survived; she has become a writer; she has "done well."

These tandem success stories yield a memoir that has become both a rampant source of inspiration and a great literary success. *Wild* was adapted for Hollywood film starring Reese Witherspoon and Laura Dern. Oprah rebooted her book club with *Wild*. The success of *Wild* is so extreme, in fact, that it catapulted its author into the kind of fame that seems, to authors of noncommercial, "literary" fiction and memoir, like winning the lottery.

There are multiple factors beyond the narrative of *Wild* that account for its reach. The Hollywood and big media exposure were, of course, transformative. Strayed had also, in the years leading up to the release of *Wild*, amassed a devoted following as anonymous advice columnist "Sugar," writing (without pay) for the online magazine *The Rumpus*. Curiosity around this mysterious Sugar, with her wise words and frankness about her own hard times, had crescendoed. The

dramatic reveal of Sugar's true identity came just before the release of *Wild*. Thus when *Wild* appeared, Strayed was held up as a sage cultural figure, an advice-giver, and the memoir served as an illustration of how she achieved her wisdom. Literary culture holds the story of Cheryl Strayed blossoming from a struggling writer to a famous and successful writer, and *Wild* being the thing that is known for making her famous and successful; this perpetuates the book's appeal.

The glamour of *Wild*'s success must be mentioned. But in this book, I would like to stay close to the text for the most part and examine the nerve *Wild* struck on a personal level that made so many readers feel it was a book that could both reflect and affect their lives. I find this memoir particularly interesting as a case study because the primary story, the account of the hike, of getting from point A to point Z, is itself not all that compelling when freed from the narrative structure. Unless you are a hiking fanatic—and even if you are—hiking as an act is not very interesting to read about. Nothing outwardly shocking or profound happened to Cheryl on the PCT; she did not have to saw off her own arm to free herself from a rock trap or watch people die in a freak storm. And yet, Strayed did something magical with structure and voice and reflection to transform a

moderately interesting topic into a memoir *The Boston Globe* called “An addictive, gorgeous book that not only entertains, but leaves us the better for having read it.”

Turning a critical eye on *Wild* is not like turning a critical eye on a complex novel. *Wild*'s power is mostly about the psychological response of its readers. It's a story of one person's self that illuminates the reader's own stories of self. Personally, I had a response to Strayed's nonfiction, including the work that preceded *Wild*, that was both personal and critical. Her words on grief triggered a kind of self-forgiveness I had been in search of for a long time. Critically, and as a writer, it became a compelling example of how to build a powerful story out of material that is not inherently narrative.

My introduction to the work of Cheryl Strayed was her 2002 essay “The Love of My Life.” I discovered this essay about ten years after it appeared in *The Sun*, right around the time of *Wild*'s publication, when I was experiencing a divine slice of life: my first book had recently sold, my second book won a contest directly on top of that; I was on leave from teaching for the home stretch of my second pregnancy, loving every minute of pregnancy and relishing the time with my young son. My marriage was stable, if not emotionally fulfilling, and we lived in a beautiful home overlooking the Arnold

Arboretum in Boston. In the family room, gazing out over this carefully sculpted green space, while my son was at school and I had nothing to do but wait for my baby to be born and to read and to write, I flipped the page of the anthology I was previewing as a possible textbook for future creative nonfiction classes, *The Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, to Cheryl Strayed's "The Love of my Life." Within a few pages I felt as if a warming blanket had been yanked from my body. My present reality fell away; the slider on my timeline bumped abruptly to the left and a decade into the past, and I was dropped into one of the darkest stretches of my life.

I was just past thirty at that time, way too old to fall apart over a breakup I always suspected was coming, but I'd fallen apart anyway. For two years I'd wallowed in a wrecked state. Since my life had improved, I'd worked hard to forget about this painful and too-long episode of grief. "The Love of My Life" brought all of it back, and then did something with it I had given up hoping would happen.

One of the most troubling things about that low episode was that I couldn't forgive myself for having fallen apart. Why hadn't I had a "normal" break-up mourning period, picked myself up, dusted myself off,

and moved on? I was angry with myself for the time I wasted, the bottles of wine I drank, the friendships I taxed, the *Law & Order SVU* episodes I watched back-to-back-to-back, the jobs I half-assed, all the embarrassing ways I behaved while feeling so stupidly, hopelessly sad. As I sat with “The Love Of My Life” propped open in front of me I realized I had still not forgiven myself. And this essay, with its friendly, authoritative voice, was a release valve that appeared out of nowhere. I felt like someone had reached through my skin and touched a finger to my heart and then explained the most bewildering emotional state I’d suffered with burning clarity.

The confidence with which Strayed analyzed her own grief following the death of her mother made me feel that I could finally understand myself during my own stretch of grief. I admired Strayed’s crystalline prose, her self-knowledge, and her wisdom. I also admired her frankness about what she considered her bad behavior around sex and drugs and even hurting others, and her ability to both own what she had done and forgive herself for these things. On top of being honest with her mistakes, Strayed had an edge. But what struck me most was the authoritative evocation of her empathy. As if she *demand*ed empathy, not by issuing a demand, but by rendering its value with such clarity.

When I subsequently came to *Wild*, I assumed this particular grief, the loss of that relationship that leveled me beyond comprehension, was the closest thing I would have to compare to Strayed's mourning, and that this connection would be my way into the book. But when I opened *Wild* and started down the trail with Cheryl, it was a different segment of my memory accordion that flattened out and became real and present after years of my holding it at a distant blurriness.

I held a map. Every day we put our hands and fingertips on this laminated old military issue map of western North Carolina. I stood stalled on the trail with thirteen other people. All but two of us had only a vague idea of where we were: we were lost in the woods, again. Our socks, our hair, our packs were soggy with rain. The two people who knew our exact location were the group leaders. Their job was to empower us by letting us solve our own problems, but they were just as ready to make camp as the rest of us. We looked up at them, pleading: *just this once, help us find our way*. Our leaders tightened their lips into lines. The rest of us hated them, hated each other.

We all wanted the same thing. We wanted to stop walking. We wanted to rest. We wanted to sleep. We would soon be out of daylight, and we'd been hiking

in the dark so frequently due to being lost that we had collectively drained our flashlight batteries and were down to four or five shared headlamps for the group, making nighttime hiking over rocks and tree roots unsafe. I didn't dare sit down as we tried to pinpoint our location on the map. If I sat for even a minute I was sure to fall asleep on my pack.

"I think we should turn back and go to the peak where we definitely knew where we were," I said, worried another wrong turn would push us even further into the wooded unknown.

"Fuck you, Alden," said Peter, the boy I sometimes secretly made out with and who was usually nice to me. "There is no way I'm turning around and wasting daylight and energy."

Tears sent streaks of dirt down my cheeks. The next day Peter and I would go back to making each other laugh, and in our group, crew members swearing at each other was par for the course. It was no big thing, but I cried because I had never known this kind of tired and I had no strength to hold in even a small wave of feeling. The wires controlling Peter's filters had similarly been clipped. On the trail, I'd experienced many moments of surprise, observing my limbs or my voice do things my survival-focused brain had no power to prevent.