

A blast of bitter, icy air speared through my coat and prickled along my skin as I trudged breathlessly up the steep hill. With each weary step, my worn-out sneakers kicked up a cloud of swirling dust. Feeble golden streams of dappled early-morning sunlight sparkled on my chestnut-brown hair, providing little warmth. My bare, freezing hands were numb with cold, and I shoved my fists deep into my coat pocket to try to warm them. I was barely into the first steps of my hiking expedition with my family, and I was already utterly exhausted.

Below me, there was an endless landscape of emerald fields, speckled with an assortment of grazing sheep, cows, and horses. I watched as a man led his two German shepherds on a morning walk, and I envied the dogs' boundless energy as they ran ahead of their owner. Turning my attention back to the path I was walking on, I skidded to a screeching halt when I saw an unappetizing mound of stale cow dung blocking my path. I took a detour around it and glanced ahead to where the rest of my family was trotting along. Even further in the distance, I could vaguely make out a rocky hill with several people struggling to climb it. At the very top of the hill was a cluster of boulders, dappled elaborately with the golden splashes of sunlight. A single pole stood at the top among the boulders, marking our destination, Mission Peak. I wondered if I'd be able to make it.

Abruptly I skidded to a halt, my sneakers kicking up a smoky cloud of crimson dust. There, staring unblinkingly at me with huge, chocolate-brown eyes was a cow. It was barely several feet away from me, and I stood motionless for several painful moments, afraid that it would attack. Then the animal steadily lowered its eyes and tore up a shriveled clump of grass, turning its attention back to its food. I cautiously stumbled away from it, never taking my eyes off the cow, until I was a safe distance away from the beast.

*Squish.*

I felt my sneakered foot sink into something oddly squishy, and I shrieked with horror when I realized I was stepping in fresh cow dung! I jerked my foot out of the sticky goo and dragged my foot over the dusty ground to wipe off every trace of cow dung, trying to ignore the unappetizing stench. Silently I cursed cows for leaving their mess all over the place.

Several hours later, the strained muscles in my legs were shrieking a protest with each painful step. Worse still, I was beginning to need to go to the bathroom. My family was also exhausted, and we decided to stop at a picnic table to have lunch and rest. I plunked down on the wooden bench and traced my finger over the past names and dates etched into the wood. Picking up a stick from the ground, I carved my name and the date into the table, slicing deep grooves in the soft wood.

After a refreshing lunch, I decided to go to the bathroom before we continued hiking. Stepping tentatively into the tiny hut near the picnic table, I recoiled sharply when an overpowering stench stung my nostrils. Trying to breathe through my mouth, I peered cautiously down the dirty toilet, and then jerked my head away, gagging. The toilet was little more than a hole in the floor, and inside it was filled with—Well, I probably shouldn't describe it. Drawing in a deep breath, I squatted down and did my business into the hole. It was definitely the least pleasant bathroom I had ever been to.

When I was done, I scrambled out of the bathroom, gasping for fresh air. We continued on our way hiking, bounding along with renewed strength from lunch. Just ahead, I could see the cluster of sun-splashed boulders and the pole that marked Mission Peak.

When we arrived at our destination, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of satisfaction. I had made it to Mission Peak! After four hours of painful hiking, we had made it! I stared out at the elaborate landscape, unable to

keep the joyous smile from spreading across my face. Squinting into the distance, I could vaguely see the parking lot where we had started. My eyes traced the dusty path we had walked all the way to get to Mission Peak. And I had made it, hadn't I?

An icy wind prickled my bare skin as I stared down at the carpet of elaborate farms, buildings, lakes, and hills spread out neatly below me. My warm breath billowed out in clouds, and I plunked heavily down on an uncomfortable boulder, vigorously rubbing my hands together to keep them warm. Weak golden rays of sunlight dappled the world around me, making it glow feebly as if everything was magical. And gazing at the picture-perfect scene around me, I felt like everything *was* magical.

We rested at the boulders for about an hour longer, flexing our aching legs and chewing blissfully at some snacks, before we decided to head back to our car. With renewed strength and energy, I bounded ahead of my family, stomping and jumping to keep warm. My feet kicked up dust as I ran, enveloping my sneakers in a scarlet haze. Since it was downhill going back, it was much easier than our hike uphill to Mission Peak. Long, overgrown weeds and grass scratched at my legs, tickling my skin, but I didn't care. Soon we arrived at our car. As I scrambled into the backseat, I gazed up at Mission Peak, replaying the painful hike to our destination. This was definitely a hiking expedition I would never forget.