

Third Place Winner

Redwood Writers 2015 Non-Fiction Contest

"A CHANCE MEETING ON THE JOHN MUIR TRAIL"

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It was hard to resist obsessively staring at the wall of rock we had to ascend tomorrow. Mather Pass (12,100 feet, 3688 m), in the middle of Kings Canyon National Park, loomed ominously above our campsite. Hikers rhapsodize about the striking beauty of the high Sierra, but Mather wasn't beautiful. On the contrary, it resembled a slag heap of crumbling gray granite. One of the things I had learned on the John Muir Trail (JMT) is that I prefer lower elevations where forest creatures scamper about under the protective canopy of trees. Both are in short supply in the rarefied air above 10,000 feet. Sitting beside the gurgling creek, looking across at the jagged peaks of the Palisades, I could, at least, enjoy the warm afternoon sun. Just then a whoosh of air startled me. Two black and white Clark's Nutcrackers fluttered and danced, swooping and diving together in an afternoon romp above the sparkling sapphire-blue water of Palisade Lake. We didn't see many birds up this high and I noticed that they didn't seem to be the least bit out of breath. Not like we were as we struggled up the 1,500 foot Golden Staircase

earlier in the afternoon. My husband, Steve, had proclaimed it to be the hardest climb he had ever done.

I couldn't help myself. I looked back at the pass, thinking about Ralph Burgess' words, "Mather is the most difficult of the big passes." I didn't know Ralph, but had read his prose over and over on this trip. He was well-qualified to render an opinion, as he had recently set the southbound speed record on the JMT. My Kindle was stuffed with mountaineering books, but almost every night it was Ralph's brief account of the trail, posted to a hiking forum, that held my attention.

We were on Day 18 of the iconic trail named for the famed rambler and founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir. The JMT starts in Yosemite National Park and meanders south along the spine of the Sierra Nevada. The trek passes through a patchwork of jurisdictions, including Inyo National Forest, Ansel Adams Wilderness, Devil's Postpile National Monument, Sierra National Forest, John Muir Wilderness, Kings Canyon National Park and Sequoia National Park. Thankfully, one entrance permit covers the whole trek.

The idea that we could hike a long trail had snuck up on Steve and me. For years we had been content with weekend or week-long backpacking trips, but gradually the idea of an extended trek crept up on us. The 211-mile JMT, regarded as the most challenging and stunning part of the much longer Pacific Crest Trail, started to seem within reach as we gained more experience. It still felt slightly audacious, though. Could we weekend warriors really hike that far? After testing our mettle on the 72-mile High Sierra Trail in Sequoia National Park two years before, we decided we were ready for the challenge. So far we had found the steep, rugged terrain and high altitude demanding. We never regretted it though, finding that the stunning, high-alpine scenery and joy of making trail friends along the way made the journey worthwhile.

Today had been rough getting up the Golden Staircase, a twisted trail that in 1938 some mad engineers had created to solve the problem of how to connect the northern and southern sections of the JMT. Much of the JMT follows the natural contours of a land sculpted by the crushing forces of glacial ice in the distant past. This meant that we were traversing a series of valleys separated by high passes. Early explorers to the Sierra had scouted routes that ascended

somewhat gradually, sometimes following a path carved by a river, other times switch-backing up a steep rock face. But this section was framed by high walls on all sides leaving the trail designers no choice but to chisel steep steps spiraling through solid granite.

Steve had struggled on the giant stairs just as I had labored on other days. Both of us were still shaken by the helicopter evacuation of our trail friends, the Texans, a couple of days earlier due to altitude sickness. We were more than two weeks into our hike and I was dogged by the frustration that we were far from trail hardened. Shouldn't these passes be getting easier? Why weren't we getting stronger? When would I become acclimated to the altitude? The truth was, we were getting stronger, but at the same time the passes were getting higher.

The whole way through our hike we had been accompanied by our imaginary friend, Ralph. An active member on the JMT hiking forums, he was just one of the crowd until a post came through a few days before our hike started. He shared the news with the large group, in a rather modest way, that he had completed the entire trail in just 4.5 days. A flurry of exchanges resulted in the recognition that he had set the speed record without even trying. After fielding questions about his pace, gear, food and strategy he had written up a detailed trip report. Not having had the time to read it, I had scanned it into my smartphone thinking it would make good bedtime reading on the trail.

Early on in our journey I read Ralph's report, impressed with his achievement, but didn't yet have enough familiarity with the trail to know where the landmarks were. However, it was very apparent that our pace was at the opposite end of the speed spectrum. Our piddling six- to ten-mile days were nothing compared to Ralph's 40-plus-mile days, but I might as well have been hiking to the moon than to try that pace. We were hiking at our own pace and finding that to be taxing enough. As I became more familiar with the trail I re-read Ralph's account over and over, moving from being impressed to being astounded at his feat. Pretty soon it became a nightly ritual to read his account of the section we were in. Unbeknownst to him, Ralph became our constant companion and we talked about him every day.

That evening I holed up with Ralph in the tent, reading his account once again. "You want to hear what Ralph did? He did this part in 18 hours, everything from Le Conte Canyon to Vidette

Meadows. That means he did the Golden Staircase, Mather, Pinchot AND Glen Passes all in one day." I said to Steve. He was sitting outside enjoying the last rays of sun in his camp chair, a luxury that Ralph certainly wouldn't have had.

"You've got to be kidding," Steve said.

"No, I'm not. He hiked 42 miles at an average of 2.47 miles per hour. It looks like six of our days equal one Ralph-day," I said

"Let me see that," said Steve, scrutinizing the details one more time. A similar discussion the first week on the trail had led to a full dissection of every aspect of Ralph's hike. We had closely examined his sleep schedule, gear list and food plan, marveling at his spare kit and quick pace.

"Now I feel really bad. But I guess we're out here doing it, and that's what counts," I said. "There aren't that many people our age out here," I said, consoling myself, then negating it with, "Even though Ralph is 50. It would be easier to take if he were 25." I was just six years older than Ralph.

I read Ralph's full account to Steve. "Mather is the most difficult of the big passes. The ascent is long, but most of the elevation is gained in short and shockingly steep bursts, including the infamous Golden Staircase. I started the day feeling strong, and (in retrospect) overconfident. I was mentally well prepared for the Staircase, and it felt easier than I had anticipated. But the undulating traverse of the Palisade Lakes seemed to go on forever, and when the final climb came, I realized that I had forgotten that the trail is extremely difficult, requiring not just cardiovascular effort but rock hopping agility and strength. I pushed on up, but reached the top exhausted." Oh, boy, if Ralph thought Mather was hard I was in big trouble tomorrow. I was sure I'd feel just as weary as he had, even though we had already done the Golden Staircase and would be tackling Mather when we were fresh.

The next morning was chilly and a steaming mug of hot tea didn't faze the butterflies in my stomach as I stared up at the daunting pass. Mather was in such close proximity that I had studied every inch of the rock face and was anxious to get it over with. When we finally got on it, we found that the trail was well graded with a minimum of the dreaded steps-made-for-giants

that had characterized the Golden Staircase. It didn't seem so bad and initially we had the trail to ourselves. About half-way up I looked down and saw some brightly colored specks moving around. I thought I might keep my lead, but a couple of strong hikers passed me. Steve pulled ahead too as I maintained my slow, steady pace. I reached a crest and looked down at a knot of people on the pass. Down?? Was it really necessary for the trail engineers to throw in a little extra uphill before delivering us to the pass?

All of a sudden Steve came running toward me, shouting, "Hurry up, you'll never guess who's here." I came out of my pass-induced reverie with a start.

"Who?" I asked, breathlessly, related more to the thin air at 12,100 feet than to any sense of excitement or anticipation. I was curious as to which of our trail friends we might have caught up with. I quickened my pace as much as possible with a 30-pound pack and hypoxia. I crossed the flat ridge strewn with boulders that obscured different groups of people enjoying the view. Who could it be?

"Come on, you'll see," said Steve. I scanned the faces but didn't recognize anyone. The Texans had been whisked away by a big bird, the Doctors were way ahead, DC Boy was so much faster than we were that he had to be a couple of days ahead of us, and the Dog People had exited at Piute Pass. I looked quizzically at Steve.

He pointed to a man sitting on a rock and said, "Guess who that is?" I stared harder, wondering if my hypoxic brain was giving out. Did I know this person?

"It's Ralph!" said Steve triumphantly.

"Ralph?" I squealed. "THE Ralph? The Ralph of JMT record fame?"

The slim, very fit man with close-cropped hair who didn't look his stated age of 50, looked mildly bewildered, and said, "Yes, that's me."

"I can't believe it," I yelled, still several octaves higher than normal. I threw down my pack and stood staring at him transfixed, completely oblivious to the dramatic views surrounding us.

“Are you nuts? You’ve already done the JMT twice this year, set the speed record, and now you’re out here for a THIRD time? Can’t you get enough of this place?” I asked.

“Well, actually this time I’m doing the Sierra High Route,” he replied unpretentiously.

“You’re kidding? You’re going cross-country now?” I said. This was too much. I could barely take it all in. “Does it share part of the trail with the JMT? I thought it was all trail-less,” I said.

“I think we’re sharing the trail for this little bit across the pass, but I’m not quite sure for how long,” he replied. “Probably just a short distance.”

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

“When you get down to that first lake, look up and to your right. Look for the most ridiculous route possible. That’s where we were,” he said, shaking his head.

“Are you doing it with your friend here?” I asked, looking at a bemused guy sitting next to Ralph.

“I ran into Seth out there and since we seemed to have compatible styles we decided to do some of the trail together.” I was blown away. I already regarded Ralph as being the rock star of the JMT, but here he was performing additional audacious feats.

“What’s next after this incredible summer?” I asked.

He got a faraway look in his eye. “I don’t know, I don’t have anything planned, but the yo-yo record is pretty soft,” he said. I couldn’t remember what a yo-yo was in my addled state, but he explained that it’s a round trip. Hike from one end to the other, then turn around and hike back. “I wonder if I could maintain my pace from the earlier trip this year. Going northbound is easier,” he said. I personally couldn’t imagine doing the trail ever again, much less back and forth.

I took his photo, and then asked if I could get one with him. I posed with the famous Ralph, as giddy as if I were with a rock star. "Are you in the JMT Yahoo Group?" he asked. I replied affirmatively. "Me, too," he said.

"Yes, I know, that's how I knew about your record," I said. He asked what my Yahoo name was and I said, "It's my real name," which I stated.

"Oh yes, I know who you are," said Ralph. I promised him I'd send him the link to my blog and, with that, he and Seth gathered their packs and faded down the ramp, on to more bold exploits.

Later, I asked Steve how he had known it was Ralph. "People at the top were saying how hard Mather was, along with the Golden Staircase. I told them there was a guy who had done the whole trail in four and a half days," said Steve. "Ralph looked up and said, 'I'm that guy. I'm Ralph.'" What are the odds that we would run into the JMT-world famous Ralph, and not only that, to learn it was him? It would have been all too easy for us to sit on the pass right next to him and never have known who he was. Most of the conversations we had had on the trail didn't result in name exchanges so this meeting was a minor miracle.

After that much excitement I could barely settle down to a snack. I was elated to see that it was only 11:15 am. We had knocked out one of the worst passes before lunch. Because we had already conquered the Golden Staircase, it wasn't nearly as difficult as we had anticipated. I was on a natural high between meeting Ralph and achieving a big milestone. Muir Pass was but a distant memory, Donahue Pass felt like a lifetime ago, and one by one we were ticking off the big passes. Maybe we were finally, at long last, getting trail hardened.