

Boxing Season
by Adrienne Kroepsch



I make sure to put on clean underpants every time I go backcountry skiing. I do this because every time I go backcountry skiing, I think I might be buried in an avalanche. And I do it despite not understanding why a person is supposed to wear clean underpants to harrowing accidents, car or otherwise, as mothers of the world so frequently advise. I wish I could tell you that this is the only ceremony I perform before going backcountry skiing, but it is not. I also leave my apartment tidy and the dishes done. I make my bed. Sometimes I even take out the garbage. I return emails. I say all the thank yous that I haven't said in recent history and I call my parents to tell them hello. I casually mention that I love them. Then I pack my shovel and probe into a backpack with a built-in breathing tube and I check the Colorado Avalanche Information Center forecast and the batteries on my safety beacon like I've been taught in avalanche training courses. That part is standard. The rest, well, I like to think the rest would also be worthwhile should I find myself entombed in snow or strained through a stand of Lodgepole Pine like a noodle in technical outerwear. Morbid, I know, but the thought will cross my mind at least once before I get into my car.

This fear is amplified because I am new to backcountry skiing, or so I tell myself, but it is not unfounded. Colorado's fickle snowpack claims more lives each winter than any other Western state's – around six or seven unfortunate souls. And so, despite my many precautions and deep breaths, I am scared each time I join friends on an outing. I am scared until I get home again and lay everything out to dry. I am scared even when we travel to western Canada, where you might think the snow would be friendlier than to kill a person. The snow often is friendlier there, though it is not above murder. No snowpack is entirely above murder, I have learned. There, in a maritime climate, snowflakes fall heavy, wet, and often, quietly mediating layers from disparate storms until they stick together like good Canadian neighbors. But this is generally not the case in continental Colorado – windy, dry, and capricious continental Colorado. Here, snow segregates and stiffens into hard slabs that sit like hidden traps set by the wind. Here, very little heals. Here, a weak and solitary layer can persist all winter or a snowpack can be rotten all the way to the ground, silently waiting for something or somebody to rip it off like a scab. This I did not learn as a child in ski school.

And so I apply clean underpants when I go out to ski, among the other nervous rituals that I use to steady myself. I perform them despite knowing that these habits put me in the superstitious company of professional tennis players that track the ball they serve with or cyclists that take new wheels to church for a blessing. Worse, I perform these ceremonies knowing full well that, rather than steadying me, they merely announce hazard to the almonds of fear that sleep deep in the medial temporal lobes of my brain. It is perhaps appropriate that the part of the mind charged with processing and responding to fear is shaped like a nut. *That is nuts and you shouldn't do it*, the almonds say each time I press furry climbing skin to ski and transform my beloved black spatulas into instruments that glide up hills as well as they slide down them. *You shouldn't have to ski uphill in the first place. Ride a chairlift like everybody else and stay safely inbound*s, lobby the nuts. They do not care that climbing uphill is my favorite part of skiing in the backcountry, or that, in doing so, I am trying to prove something to myself about my own hardiness. Nor do the almonds care that the Colorado Rockies are

home to me, and that after more than a decade spent in flat and faraway East Coast cities, this is how I have decided to reunite with them in my adulthood. I have been gone since I was 17, but it has become clear that the time and experience accumulated since did not condition me for the prospect of live burial by snow. My mental wiring has not been fortified for occasions of real physical danger, and the almonds do not know what is hitting them. Formally, they go by amygdalae in their official capacity of sluicing my senses for signs of danger and triggering physical response. Informally, they are the fear almonds in my head – the nuts I never knew until I started backcountry skiing.

* * * *

I have a tablecloth that can survive in outer space. It resists fire and water, stands unmoved by chemicals or bacteria. It is not a large tablecloth, but it is a strong one, this being measured by the stretching it can withstand before it visibly strains. These special powers owe partly to glass fibers spun into its threading and partly to a thick 1970s plaid of green, yellow, and orange so fierce that it repels by brute force of unsightliness. The rest of its powers can be credited to the special box it lives in. The box is special because it is my camping box.

The tablecloth almost didn't make the cut when I provisioned this camping box, since the container nearly runneth'd over at the time of its introduction. But my mother produced the plaid specimen from the mothballed drawers of her youth with such flourish that I hemmed, and I hawed, and, ultimately, I accepted it.

"I picnicked on the Rhine with this tablecloth when I was your age," she said, in the slightly British accent she put on while making reservations on the telephone or reminiscing about years gone by in Europe. "I bought the fabric when I was living in Wiesbaden, sewed it to fit in my bicycle basket and cover two place settings."

I fingered its tidy edges in appraisal. Possessing no powers against sentimentality, the plaid glowed only brighter with each West German town she said it had visited. It wouldn't take up much room, sure, but I doubted I would use it in the summer ahead, one that would be spent camping alone in the San Juans as I had declared that I would someday do at age 13, during a family trip to Telluride. A freshman in high school at the time, I asked my father to just leave me there in the box canyon that day. I would make a living bagging groceries or folding towels at a fancy resort. He suggested that I get back in the minivan instead. But here we were this many years later and I was well on my way to the mighty, the volcanic, the imposing San Juans, though this tablecloth situation felt remarkably like every time my mother pushed special occasion pantyhose on me, knowing she would fail. In conjuring symbols of her children, she always said that I was her lightning bolt in a jar. I liked the lightning bolt part, but during moments like this one I wondered *why the jar*. More to the point, I questioned this tablecloth's potential impact on the Great Family Camping Box tradition that was my guiding star. *Dad never put a tablecloth in the family camping box. He didn't even put napkins in there, just a roll of paper towels*, I recalled. Sensing dismissal, mom dropped the accent and appealed to its technical capabilities.

"It's made of fiberglass fabric, you know. Won't melt or catch on fire."

It probably wouldn't biodegrade either. In 40 years, its colors had not faded and its cloth had not wrinkled. Fiberglass fabric was originally developed for draperies in the 1960s as a safety measure, but it wasn't long before it found its way into all manner of external armament thanks to its high tensile strength: spacesuits, helicopter rotors, the hulls of ships. The United States flag waving on the moon is made of fiberglass fabric, and when put that way, well, bringing it would mean I'd have the most capable tablecloth in the San Juan National Forest. It might even come in handy during a wildfire. In fact, having a tablecloth that could survive in outer space would make me damn near impervious at mealtime – and since general imperviousness was the primary objective of building, in the image of the Great Family Camping Box, a latter-day version That Would Be Mine, its inclusion seemed like a small, but worthwhile departure from Great Box tradition.

* * * *

The fear almonds got around to really introducing themselves on my first full day of backcountry skiing above tree line. That day came in mountains called the Selkirks, a stark and snowy sentinel of a range parallel to Canada's Pacific Coast. A poor man's helicopter ski trip drew me to the Selkirks along with my new friends: a dozen Colorado backcountry diehards from Boulder and guy from Sweden whose employers thought he was on a business trip to San Francisco. It was a poor man's helicopter trip because there was no helicopter. We crept into a Valhalla lodge aboard a decades-old snow cat after smuggling a week's worth of bulk food across the Canadian border in order to climb ourselves up everything we intended to ski down. And that was how I got so far above the frozen Shannon Lake, in the vast whitescape of a high alpine bowl on Pyramid Peak: I got there by my own frightened power.

No two avalanches are the same, just as no two snowflakes are the same, and this is part of what I find so terrifying about avalanches. It is from avalanches' uniqueness that their unpredictability stems, which means that avoiding one is an odds game in which the player can never truly know the odds. Snow can slide because a slope is just steep enough, convex enough, or concave enough; because the wind has blown too much or too little, in the day or in the night; because it's been too warm or too cold this month, this week, or this afternoon; because a slope is on the north face of a mountain or because a slope on the south face, because the slope trends east or west; because it's the especially hazardous early season, mid-winter, or late season; because of a poorly placed cliff, or tree, or rock; because of bad luck, or bad decisions, or good decisions and bad luck. Because of too many things – so many that even a highly trained and experienced skier cannot correctly weigh all of these things, all of the time.

Snow that appears innocent and pristine can clandestinely harbor deeply corrupting forces of stress and strain. A loaded snowpack can whumph, pop, or shatter like a windshield, cracks emanating like a spider web or an electrical current, jerking the snow's surface out of stillness such that it froths for just a second, until momentum recruits all it can and an entire mountainside surges forward in an angry wave. An overly soft snowpack can slough and roll in a lethal teardrop, picking up mud and rocks

as it goes. In either case, unlucky skiers in the midst have but a moment to attempt a sidelong escape, if they even get the chance. Mountains that stand stoic and inviting in the summertime wrap themselves in a winter cloak that will shift underfoot without warning or apology. So it is not surprising that backcountry skiers employ euphemisms to avoid calling an avalanche the betrayal that it really is. To encounter one is to be “taken for a ride.” To volunteer to ski a sketchy slope first is to be “the blueberry.” Driving to and fro the trailhead is “the most dangerous part of the day,” or so the self-assurance goes. I do not buy into any of these platitudes. This is perhaps because the fear almonds in my head are convinced that I will succumb to all of them.

* * * *

The importance of the Great Family Camping Box Tradition occurred to me only after I experienced profound displeasure at the thought of borrowing the not-so-great Camping Box of My Boyfriend. Sweet as can be, he had offered me the entire trunk-load of items that had sustained the itinerant bicycle-racing career from which he had recently retired, knowing they were exactly what I needed. He was willing to part with a small MSR stove, canisters of fuel, cooking pots, dishes, utensils, iodine tablets, and other miscellany. Everything I could want for the summer was on offer, housed in a mid-sized navy blue Rubbermaid tub and available immediately. His outfitting was as sincere as it was generous, and I had not the time to reject it in the diminishing days before I left to live in a tent. So it was with great surprise – to both of us – that I refused the tub anyway.

“It just isn’t quite right,” I tried to explain. But the truth was worse than that. What his tub was, was all wrong – all wrong because, as unfair and unreasonable as I knew I was being, I simply wouldn’t be satisfied with any gear that wasn’t styled in the image of the Great Family Camping Box. Until I had been presented with a substitute, I hadn’t realized how badly I wanted to recreate the only organizational scheme I’d ever known. In fact, some part of me *needed* to recreate it. The summer was coming and I was going to the backcountry again and I couldn’t let it – wouldn’t let it – grow as fearsome as winter’s terrain had been. Winter brought shifty mountains that terrified me to the core and this, well, this was not the reception that I had been counting on when I had planned a triumphant return to the Rockies of my childhood. Girding for the summer would banish this fear to colder months like an uninvited seasonal guest, I figured. Perhaps it would get bored there and just go away.

A mythic figure, the Great Family Camping Box had always been a slightly overburdened, four-quart wine box, which, for as long as I could remember, kept station on a high shelf in our suburban Denver garage. Dad dispatched the box only for tours of duty on family camping trips, and as such, it had attended every family camping trip we ever took while growing up. Instead of carrying wine, its four internal sleeves arranged, categorically, the car camping stuff of a family of six with the military precision that my father brought to all tasks. Food-related items went in one sleeve, noxious things in another, stove fuel in the third, and sharp implements in the fourth. The Great Box had marshmallow-roasting forks sticking out of the top, their charred aluminum tines

pointing safely toward its interior. It held the condiments that dad put on everything, like garlic salt and pepper. Inside were always a small hatchet and a wooden-handled knife, as well as a latrine spade and insect repellent. There was an S.O.S. pad handy for scrubbing crusty cooking pots, plus a small sponge and biodegradable soap for everything else. It held additional bits and pieces, of course, but the defining feature of The Great Family Camping Box was not what it contained, but what it was made of: cardboard.

In a time when container stores and closet companies held religious sway over the growing Front Range and its ever-expanding stuff, my father had opted to organize the family's outdoor kitchen in a cardboard box from the liquor store's pile of extras. Suburban storage practitioners insisted that it would slouch and cower in short order, but the camping box held strong, and it held strong in the direst of circumstances, as if the box itself knew its import. So indestructible was this box that even when the trunk of our silver Dodge Caravan popped open at highway speeds outside of Yellowstone and ejected Ritz Crackers and My First Sonys and firewood and sleeping bags onto the road, the box did not budge. When, while absent on a day hike in the Badlands of South Dakota, our six-person Kelty tent dislodged in high winds and tumbled half a mile down a side canyon, full of duffle bags, the box remained safely stowed beneath a picnic table. And as us kids grew old enough to destruct the box ourselves by raiding it for our own adventures, its contents remained always accounted for and returned. The camping box possessed such gravitas that even in my twenties I knew not to borrow from it without asking permission. Dad also kept a list of its contents.

* * * *

The Selkirks were, at the time of our Sunday arrival, suffering from a weeklong drought, which slowly abated with light, but persistent, Monday and Tuesday snows. The poor visibility kept me safely in the trees, on the heels of the pair I trusted most: two erstwhile chemistry PhDs, who had been skiing the world's out of bounds together since long before the ink was dry on their dissertations or their marriage certificate. Fred and Shireen know what they're doing and they look out for one another. I trust their combination and follow their tracks through the cloudy trees, puffed with snow like Hostess snack cakes, where it is always Christmas morning and school recess and the fear nuts in my head scream only mildly that on the next turn I might die.

Fred takes to the backcountry like he takes to his politics – fervently and with no apologies. This is probably because the backcountry is Fred's politics. His are the chafed convictions of a man dispossessed by a Colorado front-country that is increasingly crowded and commercialized, and a side-country that is increasingly motorized and besieged. So he plies the routes away from the resorts or between them and, while he's doing it, carries one ski pole with a jagged nose on its handle like a climbing axe. When he says that it is for attacking snowmobilers, he is only half joking. Fred is not alone in these beliefs, in his displeasure with Ski Country U.S.A., or in his decision to stay outside of it. If self-locomotion is any indicator, then the exponential increases in sales of alpine touring equipment in recent years means that Fred has a lot

of company. In 2010, I became one more of their number, though not entirely one more of their denomination. I had not yet come to loath the present state of Colorado's ski resorts, if only because I had been away from them for so long that I qualified as a tourist myself. I was not angry, simply eager – eager to explore the mountains anew, eager for skiing to be challenging again, eager for fewer boundaries. Too eager, too soon, perhaps.

Fred knows I am new at this and is patient with my relative incompetence, though he does not joke around much and rarely turns or slows while skiing, or conversing, for that matter. He punctuates statements, good or bad, with “fuck,” such that *let's get the fuck out of this sketchy spot* and *this fucking camera lens is always fogging up* carry the same indiscriminate weight in expletives. I like this about Fred – his intensity, his competence, his language – and all of these things establish critical space for Shireen. She is Fred's yin. Stoic and deliberate, Shireen thinks a half dozen steps ahead of everyone around her and is utterly prepared. This may be why nothing seems to surprise her, not even Fred. Her moves are controlled, methodical, and because they are so, she kicks up-tracks so mean that they deflect grown men into tree wells. Skiing with Shireen makes me believe that someday I might be unflappable, too.

But I am not unflappable by Wednesday, when the clouds lift like a hospital gown and the Canadian Rockies present themselves like a patient alight on an operating table – naked, cold and still. As surely as surgeons recommend surgery, opinions coalesce around pushing ski procedures above the trees, to the newly visible Pyramid Peak across the frozen Shannon Lake. Everybody goes. We are fifteen when we bisect Shannon through the middle and she groans in annoyance at our weight and the almonds exclaim with certainty that the ice will break and I will fall in and drown a popsicle death. They are only warming up, however, and do not register with my conscious. It is too early in the day for that. No, I will not meet real fear until around lunchtime – for what might be the first time in my life. And because I have not known it before, I will not recognize it when we do meet. I will assume the tingles in my limbs are my body crying for glycogen, and I will eat everything I am carrying, to no avail. I will assume the acrid aroma emanating from my base-layers and the metallic taste in my mouth are merely the fermentation of days-old sweat. I will mentally catalogue the whereabouts of each immediate family member, wondering if one of them is injured enough to make me feel such deep unease. I will not realize that I am simply scared to my bones, but that I am unable to identify it because existential, quaking fear became, at some point in my life, completely unfamiliar. And after I have a chance to think about it, this I will find just as frightening.

* * * *

Pettyjohn's Liquor Store did not have any wine boxes to spare. What they did have in a pile of refuse behind the front door of their South Boulder store, however, was an empty Knob Creek Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey box that said “Drink Life Deeply” on the bottom. Its original cargo of nine 750mL amber bottles would have appealed to the long line of bourbon-stained livers on my father's side of the family,

back at least as far as the runaway great grandfather who had lied about his tender Bostonian age to join the cavalry in Colorado. Historically speaking, then, a bourbon case was just the scaffolding I needed to build a camping box that would slay dragons, deliver babies, and bend steel. I was sure of it. For if my father's wine box could withstand highways and windstorms, then my whiskey receptacle would prevail in those conditions and more. I set about stocking it. Before long, the Knob Creek box was home to tiny camp stove, lantern, and water filter; batteries and fuel; oatmeal and instant coffee; a latrine shovel and insect repellent; a flashlight and water-proof matches; paper towels, a sponge, a quick-dry camp towel, and biodegradable soap; a few garbage bags and a can opener; salt, pepper, cinnamon, and sugar; rope, cable ties, and a few bungee cords. As insurance policies of different kinds, I also packed a tiny fire-starter log, a solar shower, plus the tablecloth that could survive in space.

I was satisfied with my handiwork, but the process was far from flawless, for in between trips to thrift stores and REI, it became painfully clear that I could not fit everything I needed for San Juan campground life in one box. My single pot, pan, small cutting board, bowl and mug had not yet been placed – and the places, well, there weren't any of them left. Organizational crisis gave way to existential despair as the bright beckoning light of a single, self-sustaining, baby-delivering box of gear receded over the horizon formed by my pile of things. I dialed the only expert I knew.

"Don't worry, camping gear always takes up at least two boxes," my father assured, reminding me of the Great Family Camping Box's sidekick: a small bin once designated for Legos, which held the dishware and pots and pans. Relieved, I selected an Ancient Age Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey box for backup.

But that was not to be the only existential crisis of that day, for it was at this point that my most organized parent – executor of military-grade packing jobs, keeper of lists on a clipboard, master of sock drawers, knower of how much my mother's yellow Volvo 140-series had cost to operate, per mile, on any given year in the 1970s – turned myth and mechanism on their respective heads. This was when dad mentioned, in a casual aside, that I *really was doing well for myself because he hadn't even had a camping box when he was my age*.

"Sorry, dad, I must have misheard you. Did you just say you *didn't even have a camping box when you were my age?*"

No, he said, *he just threw everything in the trunk of his car or, when he was in the service, tossed everything inside his Air Force-issued footlocker, which he then threw in the trunk of his car*. Tossed? Threw? My father did not toss or throw. Measured preparedness was his defining characteristic. He could not make a major purchase without researching it for months. It was not possible to meet him for a powder day unless it had been on the calendar for at least 72 hours, which powder days rarely were. He *planned* his reality into being – and then he organized it. I mean, Dad was the only one with clearance to arrange the trunk of the family vehicle. We knew to leave our stuff on the ground by the rear tires and let him handle it from there.

The proverbial bottom had fallen out of my Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey boxes, the both of them. Dad was not born with his gear organized, alphabetized, and anodized? And when he was my age, he just threw everything into the trunk of his car!

Until us kids had been born and camping became more logistically challenging, he hadn't organized a thing. Until us kids were born! Which meant that prior to our arrival, he'd just been a reckless "throw it in the back, I'll deal with it later" kind of guy, that young bachelor I heard of now and again who was the only person you'll ever meet to have rolled the same Volkswagen Bug *twice*, pounding out the roof each time with a mallet. I hadn't actually believed that guy ever existed. Worse, this admission meant that no longer was I building my first camping box: I was now building my second, since the original had been no more than a product of me – of me and my brother and two sisters. And I was doing it all at an age at which I should have just been throwing gear into my trunk, according to the *true* tradition of the Great Family Camping Box. The tradition I had been following was just a construction, my own – one based on the incorrect assumption that this was just how we did it in our family, going back to the cavalry or before, that there was always a stockpile of supplies in efficient formation, that we were brought unto the world this way and would be prepared for anything because of it. I felt silly, wrongheaded. I had packed so much faith and security into My Camping Box under false premises that, though now it nearly overflowed, the Knob Creek case looked suddenly empty of everything but winter's fear.

* * * *

It is the surface hoar that gets to me. The hoar is actually winter's dew, frozen dew that grows in feathery extensions atop the snowpack on starry nights cold and clear. The dew reaches skyward in perfect crystalline formations and waits there until the wind bends it over or new snow buries it, still standing. Either way, it remains a weak layer in the snowpack, a slippery bed beneath whatever sits atop it, a set of delicate fingers grazing a trigger. In the Selkirks, on this Wednesday, there is layer of surface hoar buried several feet deep and its intent is indiscernible. This uncertainty eats at an equally weak layer in my personal stratigraphy and I fixate on the buried surface hoar as we exit the trees and march onto the broad, white face of Pyramid Peak like tiny ants. My mind's eye paints the blank alpine canvas ahead with the red splotches that signify slide paths on topographic avalanche maps. *That couloir is red, the face below it, too.* The snowpack bleeds at each convexity. What little area is left turns orange instead, the color of the compass rose that daily warns of "considerable" avalanche danger on most aspects. Like an airline terrorist threat level, it seems always to signal in the same quasi-urgent color. I pray that X-ray vision and signals from the divine will demystify the whitescape in front of me, but perhaps because the world's great religions were born not in the snow but in the desert, I receive neither. Instead, Pyramid Peak sparkles above, equal parts immaculate and treacherous, and with each step I look at the dog.

Benny is a powder hound. Mixed of black Labrador, Coonhound, and perhaps some Pointer, he has legs that go for miles, a snout like the wide end of a baseball bat, and paws wide enough to walk on water. Benny needs all of this anatomy to break trail in front of Evan, or to follow Evan as he skis off cliffs, which Benny does with bounding devotion. Evan calls this "dog-walking duty" at Valhalla Mountain Touring, which he

runs with his wife, Jasmin. Today, Benny is on a walk with us because Evan is on a ski with us, and I find myself watching Benny and wishing I shared his playful confidence, the casualness of this carefree daily stroll through his neighborhood. But the almonds are firing steadily now, and my body feels light and primed for dreadful action as I climb, though I think only that I am bonking because I still do not realize that what I've been feeling all day is deep, chilling fear. I cannot fathom how afraid I am until I see Evan put Benny on his leash.

Pyramid Peak is safe to ski only two or three days a year, according to Evan, and we need to determine whether this Wednesday in January is one of those days. And so we perform a biopsy on the snow. Close inspection reveals distinct layers, and their personalities emerge with poking and tapping – too little poking and tapping, however. A mere forearm's worth of force fells one shovel-width block of snow like a broken elevator from a point a few feet down. The surface hoar has signaled its intent to trigger. Upper Pyramid is in fact dressed in the red and orange hues of my imagination, this test confirms, and, within moments, Benny finds himself tied to a ski pole. He strains impatiently on his leash, but Evan will not let him free until we are well below tree line. As I ponder Benny's restraint, I realize now how afraid I really am – afraid to ski up, down, or sideways from the hole we have dug high on this peak in the Selkirks. I wonder how I got to this point, of my own volition, from a lodge with a guestbook that includes "General Guidelines for Dealing With A Fatality" in its pages. (*Priority is to the living, says the emergency response list. After the survivors are safe and secure, address the body.*) But most of all, I wonder if I will ever be capable of putting this fear on a leash, or if it will always be so controlling as to apply the leash to me, and I wonder if anybody else is as scared as I am.

Benny leaves a trail of bloody paw prints across the frozen Shannon Lake when we make our final retreat, the pads on one of his feet torn by the snow. It will be our only real injury that day, though one skier will be "taken for a ride" – a short one – when a small pocket of snow rips out from under him and buries him to the knees. Shireen will be on the scene immediately – beacon, shovel, and radio ready before Greg even knows what happened. They will return to the lodge for a shaky celebration wearing uneasy grins of relief. I will be there ahead of them, having quit with the first group to take turns interrogating and consoling myself in front of the fire. Perhaps I am too eager, too early. Perhaps my backcountry politics are not heavy and wet enough with anger and disillusion to stabilize the weak layers in my constitution. Or perhaps I should just be glad that I'm not careless, overconfident or, technically speaking, a sociopath, which is what I would be without almonds in my head. Perhaps my reintroduction to the West is an introduction to unstable ground and to fear, and maybe I am now more afraid of quitting backcountry skiing than I am of sticking with it. Maybe this pair of underpants will never do.

* * * *

"Aren't you afraid to camp alone," my boyfriend asks as I depart Boulder's foothills in late May. The National Parks knowingly allow people to carry concealed

handguns these days. That, and they have always let crazy people in unknowingly, he reminds me. I pause. I hadn't accounted for gunmen in building My Camping Box, which had lost its mythical standing since I learned the truth about its lineage, but which was now finished and should nevertheless do well to protect me from wet, cold, and protozoa. All this time I had been arming myself against elements, situations, and smelling bad. I didn't even consider *people* to be dangerous. I can see the inconsistency in this position, however. I am young and female and will be sleeping in dark woods, unaccompanied. For whatever reason, this thought does not frighten me. My Camping Box – and by extension, my mind – are packed so tightly with wintertime fears of the natural environment that they have not room to consider an entirely human set of summertime variables. I shrug him off, though I cannot assure him at this moment that the only people I will fear all season are the old couple from Texas that care for the Junction Creek Campground, and then only on the night that I will sneak in purposefully without paying them.

“And you know better than to ride your mountain bike alone, especially in the backcountry,” he probes further. In fact, I do know better than to ride alone, especially in the backcountry, where high alpine single-track attracts lightning and far-flung trails mean that broken bones and head injuries occur a long way from aid. I know better, and yet I have planned a summer's worth of solitary, epic rides for myself. I am confident on my mountain bike, but I see the inconsistency in my position once more. I shrug him off yet again, though I cannot assure him at this moment that the only bad wreck I will experience all summer will occur inside the Durango city limits and on the only day that I will chat up a fireman on a ledge who will come back to check on me when I don't turn up at the bottom of a difficult descent, and that I will suffer only scrapes and bruises.

I know that I am not prepared for criminals or for crashing, but the almonds in my head do not spark up in fear. As long as that the mountains do not threaten to shift beneath me, fear seems to stand down. I have exiled terror to the winter months, hoping that it abates while confined there, secure in my talismans of preparedness and selective sense of hazard. And so it is, as I set up camp by Hermosa Creek in the stalwart San Juans, next to a prominent sign that reads, “No Loose or Hobbled Stock.” I wonder where my mountain bike fits with this rule as I put ear to ground and listen for the rumble of incoming cavalry. Hearing none, I choose an empty campsite with a horse pen. I set up my tent, position My Camping Box, and take my trusty steed out for a long, solitary walk in the backcountry. I ride for hours along Hermosa's banks, between vanilla Ponderosa Pine warming in the sun and Lodgepole Pine guarding small piles of snow, for this is where the path leads and this is how I shall reacquaint myself with the summertime Rockies of my childhood. I go until the trail plunges into a deep river crossing, swollen and frothing with spring melt, with winter snow come back again. The mountains are emptying themselves of last season and the river is surging. Its banks nearly runneth over. And I stand on the edge, feet wet – with no box, no bridge in sight.