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Ansel's Wilderness

The wilderness lives in us all.

Standing at the trailhead, I watched my husband, Paul, with mixed feelings as he loaded his weathered backpack. I put our nine month old, Ansel, into my pack. He kicked his legs as he sat suspended and tugged at his snugly tied sun hat. As a new parent, did I retain the illusion that my life as I knew it would continue to exist? Intellectually no, but emotionally... maybe.

My pack contained sunscreen, Ansel's warm hat, baby bottles, formula, teething cookies and organic cheerios, bibs, infant Motrin, diapers, and wipes. I worried that I might have forgotten something for Ansel, but did not even think for a minute about myself. Paul stood tall by my side, even as he leaned over to lift his familiarly worn and bulging backpack onto his shoulders. I wanted to help him with the absurdly heavy 75 pound pack, but we knew only he had the strength to carry that load. His lean body flexed as he squatted to align and support everything we needed: tent, sleeping bags, pads, stove, our food, bear proof canister, jarred baby food, water pump, water bottles, toiletries and clothes. The diapers, bottles, jarred baby food, Ansel's favorite stackable cups, and his stuffed frog took up more room and increased the weight. The frog soon became our trip's mascot as it was strapped to the outside of Paul's over-laden pack.

Before parenthood, we had backpacking down to a science. We packed light, just the essentials. We felt just as comfortable in our tent as in our bed at home, zipping our down bags together. We hosted family and friends on first time backpacking trips and accommodated them to make the experience a positive one. Backpacking with a baby would just require planning a trip adapted to our son's needs. We could do that, couldn't we?

We chose Rock Creek, located on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the John Muir Wilderness, for our family's first overnight venture. This popular trail led to the majestic beauty of the eastern Sierras within minutes of the parking lot. The trail gradually inclined,

beginning at 10,000 feet, and unfolded into alpine meadows, streams, lakes, abundant wildflowers and a panorama of picturesque peaks and ridges. We could reach a suitable campsite from the trailhead within three miles, which meant we could easily hike out in an emergency. It would not be our typical weeklong trip into remote wilderness with no people, but it was a fine replacement.

Loaded up, we entered the John Muir Wilderness. My husband is in great shape and I am in good shape, though at that time I still had pregnancy weight to shed. As I sweated up the trail, carrying my extra 12 pounds and the 25 pounds of Ansel and his gear, I calculated that I was actually carrying 37 pounds for three miles at elevation with an incline. That was why the pack seemed so heavy. I consoled myself with that impressive body conditioning calculation. As I carried my share, I could not help but appreciate those Bolivian mothers I'd seen who carried babies on their backs throughout their days' work and transit. As I panted up the path, I reminded myself that I was there because I *love* backpacking. Throughout our three-year relationship Paul and I spent much time with packs on our backs, exploring wilderness, traveling through the U.S., Latin America and Europe and working on conservation issues. Backpacking is one of our many shared passions, a means to share our love for nature and wilderness. When those thoughts did not work to distract me from the weight on my back, I asked my husband what Ansel was doing in the pack and Paul described him looking all around, *wide eyed*.

Ansel, who sang and talked throughout the hike, reminded me to open my eyes *wide* and take it all in. I breathed deep and let in the mountain air, relaxed my shoulders, and let my exhale carry some of the weight away. Did he see the same sky blue lakes that joined each other through meandering streams? Did he spy the trout dart out from the overhanging banks? Did the fresh green grass tantalize his eyes as orange and red indian paintbrush dotted the meadow? Could he smell the pine, the penny royal and indescribable pureness of the High Sierra? What did he think of the peaks' silhouettes against the sky? I believe that humans retain some innate understanding of nature's raw beauty and resonate with its pure energy. To me, babies define humans functioning on the most innate level, because babies only know how to be unfiltered and

raw. Ansel *got* nature.

Sometimes Ansel grabbed my braids and pulled on them to remind me he was present. He charmed every passerby with his dimples and smile. He even took a nap in the pack, not his usual hour and half, but a refreshing 35 minutes. It was not all easy, but then neither is parenting.

After about three hours of hiking, three miles in, we arrived at Chicken Foot Lake, elevation 10,789 feet with a dramatic view of granite peaks and spires dotted with snow. It was a relief to lay our heavy loads down and absorb the breathtaking scene. Bear Creek Spire at 13,720 feet and Mount Dade at 13,600 feet rose above the lake as a backdrop to our campsite. We set up camp in a shady area so we could lounge in the tent around nap times.

Ansel enjoyed playing on a tarp on the grass, with his toys but especially the band of pots and pans he banged with a spatula. He loved watching us throw rocks into the lake. Despite the near-freezing water, he also enjoyed being held by the edge and splashing with his hands and feet. His squeals of pleasure, coupled with the view, were inebriating. He was just beginning to crawl and enjoyed exploring the meadow grass, flowers, and rocks. He captured what I love most about nature, awe in the face of simple beauty. The littlest things captivated his attention, like petals on a flower or the feel of pebbles between his fingers. Mind you, he would have loved to eat those flowers and pebbles too.

At mealtime, his backpack seconded as a highchair. Ansel sat in the pack, eager to be fed pureed pears and carrots, and teething biscuits, chased with a bottle of formula. I could feel all the critters hanging out on the edge of our campsite waiting for the right moment to snack on the droppings. The bottle cleaning assembly line included filtered and warmed water and intermediate soaping, rinsing, and drying stations. I sorely missed my sink. I was constantly shuffling items in and out of bags to keep things clean and orderly, not that far off from what I do at home. We filled a kitchen garbage bag with all of the dirty diapers after drying the wet ones in the sun. Usually, when backpacking the garbage you pack out is much lighter than all you bring in. In this case, Ansel was matching every pound we ate of couscous, power bars and corn

chowder.

Later that day, Paul took Ansel fly fishing and I sat against a rock in the sun by the lake, wrote in my journal, and watched Paul fish with Ansel on his back in the covered pack. Life was not continuing as before. I was tired, the tedium exhausted me and yet reminded me of what was actually essential, what was convenient, and what I believed I needed to parent properly and exist contentedly. The psychologist Carl Jung wrote on the importance for people to engage in “nature play” to maintain mental health. Somewhere in the simplicity of nature, the bare essential acts of cooking, sleeping and being in the wild reconnect us with our roots. Paul and Ansel returned to camp, both smiling, with a beautiful trout.

As night fell, we had no idea what we were in for. Ansel’s needs did not translate as easily into the wild as ours did. He was still waking up once in the middle of the night to drink a warmed bottle. I could not warm his bottle at night unless I went out into the cold and dark to light the propane burner. That was not going to happen. He would have to drink a cold pre-made bottle. When dressing him for bed, we reenacted our ongoing debate about whether baby was too hot or too cold. We placed Ansel in more layers of fleece than I care to admit. He could barely move, but at least he was not cold.

After we put Ansel in the tent at 7 p.m., his bedtime, he proceeded to notify all campers in the area that there was a baby at the lake. We were the parents with the crying baby on the airplane that no one wants to sit near. We tried to fit our happy family into our two-person tent, with Ansel on a sleep pad between us. We thought that would work well, but Ansel disagreed. His crib was about the size of the tent. After getting in the tent ourselves, we immediately realized how snug the night would be. Ansel proceeded to wake up maybe five times – but who was counting, mostly after failed attempts to roll over. I rocked him back to sleep, laying him between and on top of my legs as I swayed them back and forth. After hours, I could not bend my legs or move and my whole body ached. By the fourth or fifth waking, I wanted to scream. All I could think about was daylight. By morning, we deduced that it was time to buy a bigger tent!

About mid morning, we were moving slowly, the sun was out and all was calm on the lake and meadow, except for the episode occurring on the tarp where my husband was changing Ansel. With Ansel's mobility and curiosity, changing diapers and getting him dressed now resembled hog wrestling. He struggled to crawl away and let out ear piercing shrills. These sounds were especially surprising against the backdrop of silence. Undoubtedly, any backpacker in the basin thought some large mammal must be dying.

However, that is not what the black bear thought. As I got water from the lake and tried to ignore my son's shrills, I watched a bear come running out of a cluster of trees in the meadow. He looked so distraught and flustered as he ran at full speed into the open. I was not afraid, but rather completely in awe of this wild animal's actions. Ansel's shrills escalated and the bear frantically turned on his haunches, mid way across the meadow, and retreated past his cluster of trees on up the mountain side above our camp. His gait did not slow as he scaled the hill. I watched him in disbelief as he flew past the trees on up to the ridge. The bear just expressed how I feel some days, listening to the screams of my child. The bear had never experienced this form of wilderness: a crying human baby. Our son will never live down the day he scared a bear away.

We hiked out later that day, as Ansel told us his version of the experience in animated baby talk and played with my braids. As we passed the sign marking the boundary for the John Muir Wilderness, I thought to myself that Ansel Adam's Wilderness, our son's namesake, lay just north of us. But Ansel Spitler's Wilderness lay within himself.