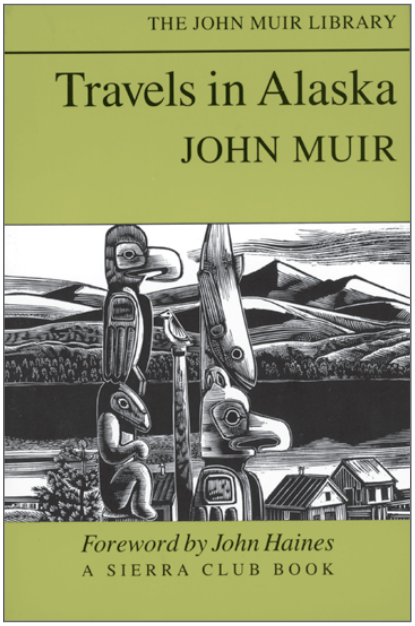

ON JOHN MUIR'S

Travels in Alaska

ASPEN MATIS

I grew up in a whitewashed room on a hedge-lined, suburban street. Blood-red geraniums and poinsettias in dark green plastic pots dotted our lawn, neglected in frequent rain. With the first frost each year, the flowers would freeze. The pots would crack open and spill the soil, black and sweet, that had sustained the plants through months of abandonment.

This was nature as I knew it in Newton, Massachusetts. Newton is called the "Garden City," yet in 1959 the town tore out the historic Mason School and its huge garden, bright with lilacs and buttercream roses, and poured into the new openness 2,178 tons of asphalt. This lot now offers central parking. The strip of flowers that remains, hugging the asphalt, allows the city to keep its name. Wandering these sidewalks, pacing this strip, I felt like a caged cub. I feared I'd be forever stuck in an artless world, until a slim old book I found banished that notion.

The paperback was *Travels in Alaska*, the little-read last thing John Muir ever wrote, published posthumously in 1915. It was both essay-meets-environmentalism-meets-poetry and a memoir of sorts. It exalted beauty and showed me where to see it: in icicles that shatter sunlight into honeyed kaleidoscopes on a spot of snow-blanked ground; in the vein-ridged wing of a common moth. It gave me permission to derail my life and leave the Garden City—first for Alaska, then to walk the height of America, alone, when I was still a teen.

I'd found it, brittle and browning, among flat basketballs and insecticide in my family's garage when I was seventeen, the 1979 trade paperback edition once priced at $5.95 but in this copy that value slashed and marked in pencil at just seventy-five cents. I opened it and it creaked. The spine cracked in two. I felt a swell of compassion for my parents to think that they had bought this wild old book. They had once fostered desire for something distant, something large—a seed they'd buried, abandoned. But neglected seeds—*wild* seeds—might still grow. I read the book in my bed that night in hopes of unburying something.

I was an unhappy teen. I felt blank, could not sit still. I had no friends. Inside my silent skull a whiteout, deafening and

cold. As I read, I wondered what Muir's life was like before he set off on his adventures—was he once a misfit kid? Could he live at peace indoors? Was there a length of time during which Muir was trapped in a civilization rigid and unenlightened, unable to see through the crowds of factories outside his single, ruddy window? Had he once felt as I felt? Could I someday be as free and euphoric as he was when he was discovering for himself Alaska, skip-jumping over crevasses in America's most virgin spill of peaks, so consumed he would forget to *eat*?

Muir hiked and climbed and wrote and wrote and loved the air, the view, the whole moist and sunlit land. He was high on his new smallness. He would not sleep, couldn't—there were too many perfect snowflakes, too many unnamed peaks. And he had to write it here, now, while the blood pumped hot in his arms and his heart. He wrote: "When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty."

On my second day of my freshman year of college, before classes had begun, before I'd removed my colorful construction paper nametag from my dorm-room door, I was raped. I was broken into a spread of shards, sure I was not reconstructible. I dismissed my value. I was lost.

One night I did five shots of vodka back-to-back in my dorm room alone; I woke up in an argument with a nurse, lying in a hospital bed. Before that sad night, I'd never drunk more than two glasses of wine in a sitting. Then I joined an Internet dating site and went out with six people in six days and hated them all, and even met one in my room. I almost wished he were also a rapist and a killer and would at last end my seasickness that had no shore. I did not forget, though, Muir's words, the hope trails grant.

I rushed back to Muir, his books, maps of his treks. *My First Summer in the Sierra*, *The Yosemite*, *The Cruise of the Corwin*. I skimmed them for lines of places clean and gorgeous. I found strands of gems, glittering arrows, pointing to ridged peaks. In *John of the Mountains*, he told me: "In God's wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness. The galling harness of civilization drops off, and wounds heal ere we are aware."

In *Steep Trails*, he wrote to me: "Go quietly, alone; no harm will befall you."

I answered yes. Yes! I would go. I left school and went to the mountains.

Six months after I found *Travels in Alaska*, I was in Alaska. I had talked my parents into paying for the trip. Later that same summer, this time without their blessing and alone, I was hiking the 211-mile John Muir Trail through the High Sierra of California. The John Muir Trail is a segment of the mammoth Pacific Crest Trail, a lovely blip, meandering north. With the manuscript of *Travels in Alaska* in his rucksack, at

the end of his life Muir boarded a train to Los Angeles, sick with pneumonia, hoping the urban doctors might revive him. They did not. He died there. His final ramble before he passed had ended in the desert of Southern California, the southern tip of the Pacific Crest Trail. Post-rape, newly a dropout, I traveled to that same desert and there began my long trek north into shimmering frost, silent glades, black and star-etched nights. I carried *Travels in Alaska* not in my knapsack but in my gut, my tent-snug legs, my will.

I was hiking alone, north from Mexico toward Canada on the 2,650-mile devastatingly gorgeous Pacific Crest Trail. On that walk I met rattlesnakes and bears; I forded frigid and remote rivers as deep as I am tall. I felt terror and the gratitude that followed the realization that I'd survived rape. I was not forever lost. I met myself, my future self, and Justin, the man who would become my husband. Our wedding invitations quoted John Muir: *In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks*.

A week ago, Justin found the old copy of *Travels in Alaska* I'd taken from my parents' garage. It had been wedged onto the tip-top shelf of the narrow cupboard in the bathroom of our Greenwich Village apartment between Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Bonnie Nadzam's *Lamb*—two great American pilgrimage fictions. I was so excited to have it in my hands again that I reread it with a headlamp through the night. In the morning, I called my father. I told him I had taken *Travels in Alaska*. I asked him where it had come from, what it'd meant to him and Mom. He said: "You have it?" He repeated back to me: "By Muir." Then he said he'd never read it, hadn't known they'd had it. He'd never even heard of it.

It turned out that *Travels in Alaska* had mysteriously and fortuitously appeared to bend the tracks of my life and direct me into the wild.