Sweeping vistas spread out ahead of me: the glittering Pacific to the West, tree-dotted mountains popping up to the North and South. I am doubled over, attempting to catch my breath and thinking about turning around only half a mile into a 15-mile trip. My watch tells me I’ve climbed over 700 feet in elevation and my pack begs to be lightened; I regret the bag of chocolate covered pretzels and the can of wine added at the last minute. I think of the embarrassment of having to return less than 24 hours after leaving on this first solo hiking expedition and steel myself for the next 14.5 miles. I take another long drink, first of water, then of the view which never gets old. The cliffs rise like cathedrals overlooking the ocean and I think about how I haven't been to church since before the pandemic, more than two years ago now. Soon after that I stopped marking ‘Christian’ under the religion question on paperwork, although my children’s Bible still sits on the bookshelf of my childhood bedroom. I always used to find god in the wilderness: a cool breeze evidence of something bigger than me, the intricate workings of every plant and animal signaling divinity. Now, the wind feels insistent as I wonder what I still believe.

Something that catches me off-guard: on day one in Big Sur, I love the noise of hiking alone. The steady sound of my own boots on the trail interspersed with birdsong, wind, and running water. No voices to drown out the rustles of racing squirrels. Only my own voice to chatter on. The man at the rental car agency said he could never hike alone, needed the company to keep him occupied. He has two daughters and he talked about Door County without a trace of irony. His office was a mess. I told him I’d have to see how I liked it.

The second day of my hike takes me through nine miles of nearly every landscape on the West coast, up and down mountains from prairie to forest to rocky, desert-like trails. I stop at an overlook for a lunch of crackers, cheese, and summer sausage and marvel once again at the view
unfurling endlessly in front of me. Mountains dipping in and out of sight, a hint of Highway One, the dropoff to the ocean below and then endless shades of blue. Coming from the Midwest, I always wonder what it would feel like to have grown up among mountains and coastal views. Does the awe fade if you were born to the soundtrack of crashing waves? Even now, as a lapsed and slightly bitter former Evangelical, I am discovering that rolling foothills and craggy peaks might still convince me god exists.

The walk continues but I begin to tire of the quiet and crave distraction. I break my first rule of camping and pull out my phone; pop small white buds out of their case and into my ears. I’ve downloaded a couple of podcasts, to play in case of emergency. *Normal Gossip, Longform*. I hit start and the voices of strangers fill my ears with stories of family feuds and reflections on writing; I am allowing only happy stories onto my podcast list for this hike. I normally devour true crime, but alone in the woods I decide I would rather sleep than mentally replay scary stories in the dark. I walk until my legs feel like they might give out and I’m convinced I’m dehydrated, although I take water breaks every five minutes. The map says I should be close, I’ve been descending into the valley for the past 30 minutes now. I hear rushing water getting closer and I remember that the next campsite sits beside a river. A picnic table comes into sight.

I nearly run the last 500 feet into camp, shed my backpack, and head straight for the river where I strip down to my underwear and wade in. It’s only March and the water is freezing, but the cold feels fresh against my sweaty body and tired limbs. The podcasts are gone and I’ve returned to only the noise of the woods, bringing me back to the forest sounds setting on the white noise machine at the foot of my childhood bed, turned on each night after saying my prayers and checking for monsters under my bed. I’ve just finished setting up camp when two men show up from across the river. They’re young, probably just a few years older than I am,
and friendly looking. Still, I’m wary because I’m a girl alone in the woods without phone service. They tell me their names are Aidan and Adrien. I think about the true crime podcasts, although I try not to.

Aidan and Adrien explain that they’ve brought a few too many packets of Trader Joe’s curries and offer to share their dinner with me. Surprised, I say yes before I remember all of the ways this could be an elaborate ruse to drug and kidnap me. I walk across the river and tell them thank you so much for the offer but I’m actually not that hungry. They’re attempting to hang a bear bag for their leftover food, lassoing rope over high tree branches and hoping it catches. Good luck, I hope the bears don’t get your food, I say before heading back to my own campsite. I’m not sure I’ve ever slept through a night in the woods, and tonight is no different; I lie awake for hours listening to every sound, sure something (bear or human, monster even) will get me in my sleep, though they never do. I say a prayer just in case.