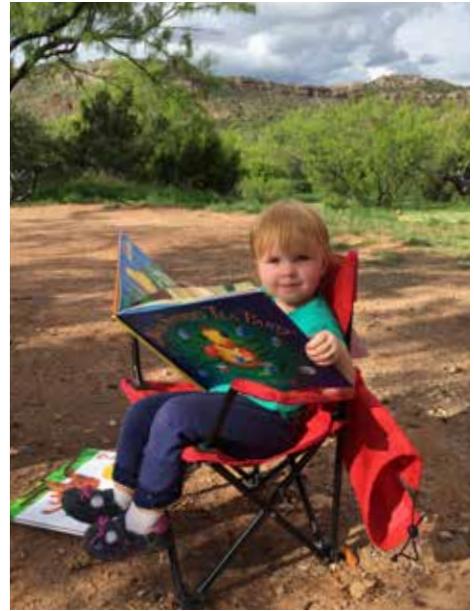




Spurred by the loss of my mother and yearning for more time with our daughter,
my husband and I quit our jobs,
sold our house,
and journeyed west.

Where the Wilder Things Are

BY ALISON MILLER / ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX GREEN/FOLIO ART



TOP LEFT The author's brother and mom during their last trip together.

REMAINDER The author and her family on their sojourn west.

My mom rarely took vacations. ¶ A mother to everyone she met,

she was a thoughtful, selfless woman who made other people's burdens her own. She hardly took the time to sit, much less treat herself.

On my wedding day, she declined makeup and hairstyling and instead spent the afternoon ironing bridesmaids' dresses and crafting centerpiece, slipping into her own unflashy gown moments before my brother walked her down the aisle. That night after the reception, when I left to catch the last bus to the hotel, she was still in the kitchen washing glassware.

When I became an adult, I started treating her myself, insisting she board a plane and meet me at a destination I'd picked for our mother-daughter vacation: Key West, Florida. San Juan, Puerto Rico. Port Aransas, Texas. I loved my mom the most on those trips. Away from her typical responsibilities, she was relaxed, open, and excited

about new places and experiences. She was a stranger from the woman I knew back home, where she was mired in an eternal flurry of cooking and cleaning.

In February 2013 I booked a suite at San Diego's famous Hotel del Coronado, a place with poolside cabanas and a \$93 brunch, where well-dressed servers deliver piña colodas to daybeds in the sand. I urged my brother to join us, and Mom flew from Atlanta, her thinning hair covered by a blue headscarf. I didn't know then that this trip would be our last.

She was in the midst of ongoing chemotherapy treatments, but she treated breast cancer like any other event in her life—it was a project, something she was in control of. In the beginning, she bought a pink three-ring binder and dutifully filed away the piles of paperwork that

came with every doctor's visit. She insisted on driving herself to and from appointments. And rather than dropping everything to travel the world, she worked.

In San Diego, we zigzagged through the zoo, watched whales from the deck of a 90-foot boat, and laughed until we cried pedaling a four-person surrey bike through the streets of Coronado. At a café in Ocean Beach, over burritos and fresh-squeezed

juices, I told her and my brother I was pregnant.

Just over a year later, on April 21, 2014—four days shy of her 59th birthday—my mother sat up in bed for the last time. I spoon-fed her final meal to her: vanilla ice cream with Hershey's chocolate syrup on top. Moments later, I wiped away tears as I spoon-fed oatmeal baby cereal to my 5-month-old daughter, Avery. The next day, my mom's eyes stayed closed and her

breathing slowed. I briefly left her side to warm a bottle for Avery. When I came back, she was gone.

Afterward, I responded like my mother would have, diving back into my harried routine: Get up, drive to daycare, work, drive to daycare again, wash bottles, repeat. My husband, Dan, and I saw Avery for an hour in the morning, and an hour or two at night. The weeks went by, and as our daughter grew more animated, we grew more discontented. About that time, an idea started bubbling in our minds. What if we just said *no*? No to climbing the career ladder, no to counting vacation days, no to spending \$1,000 a month on daycare so we could maintain a dual-income household. And yes to quitting our jobs, selling our house, and venturing to the American Southwest to see as many national parks—and beautiful, interesting places between them—as we could.

In the evenings after we put Avery to bed, we'd lay out our map of the National Park System and sketch possible routes. We charted a course that took us from West Texas' Big Bend to Arizona's Saguaro, and on to Joshua Tree, Sequoia, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite in California. We'd drive east to the Grand Canyon before hitting Zion, Bryce Canyon, and Arches in Utah. After swinging by Mesa Verde, our final stop would be Great Sand Dunes in southern Colorado.

And then we did it. At a time in our daughter's life when we were supposed to be planting our feet in a ZIP code with a good school district, we pushed off into the great wide open—unemployed, unbound, and unworried. Bedtimes be damned.

Over the next six weeks, we spent our days hiking, biking, eyeing wildlife, and gazing at grand expanses, staring off into the distance with mouths agape and repeating things like, "Man, it's big out here." More often than not, we could step outside at night and see 180 degrees of star-studded sky.

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Once, early on in the trip, we found ourselves whispering for no reason, an unintentional reaction to the pure silence around us.

And though we had planned a route, we often allowed our surroundings to inform our next move. Should we sing along to "Rawhide" at Ebenezer's Barn and Grill cowboy dinner show? Yes. Should we load Avery, 17 months by then, into the baby backpack and hike 6 miles into the Grand Canyon? Yes. Should we tack three more national parks onto our itinerary? Yes. Yes. Yes.

Along the way, we grew to appreciate things we'd once taken for granted. You don't know the joy of a hot shower—even if it's in an unsavory campground bathroom—until you've wiped away two days' worth of sweat and

Sonoran dust from your body.

Fatigued from physical activity, we ate with the appetite of teenage boys and slept like tired, old dogs. So many times we just stopped and breathed the air.

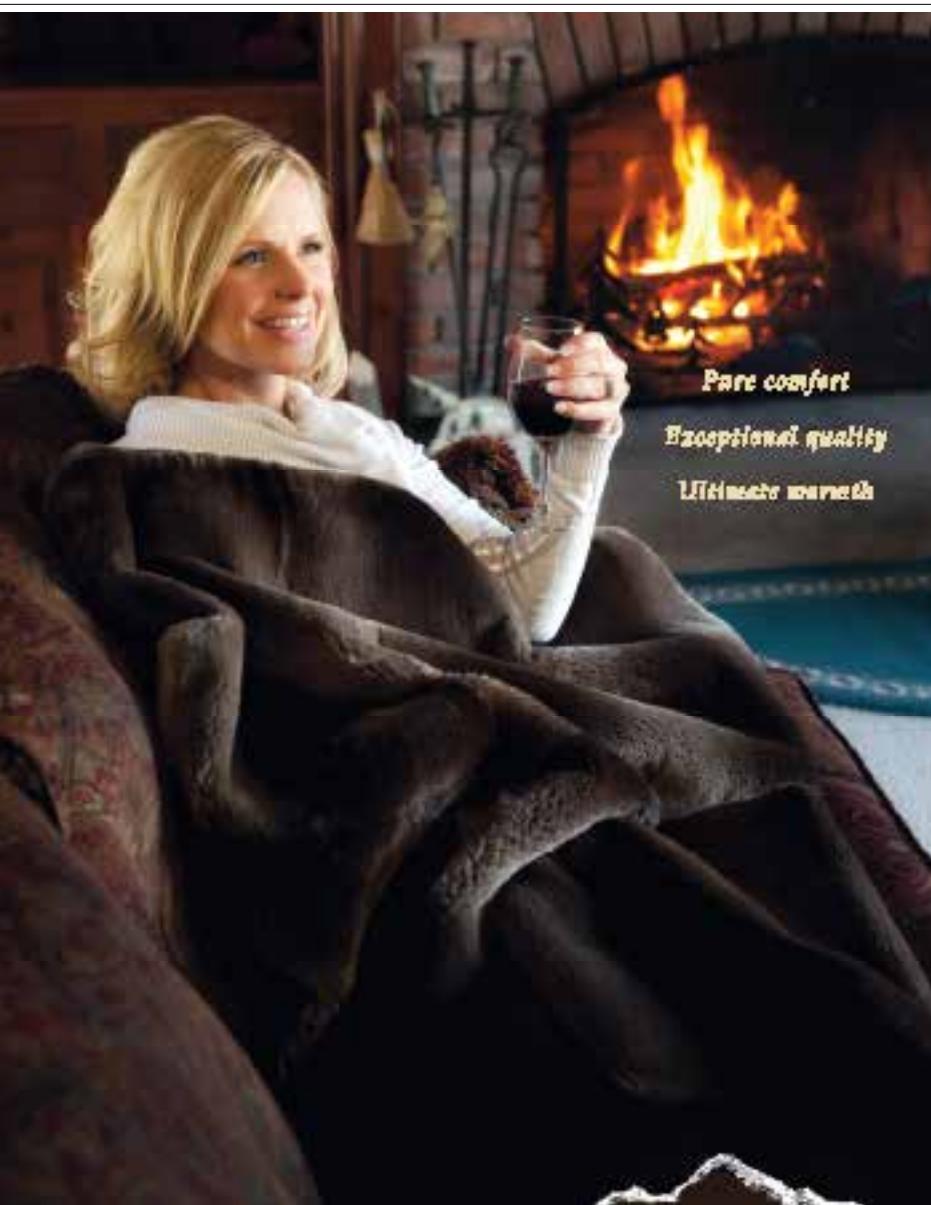
In the mornings, rather than hustling to get out the door on time, we plopped Avery in our bed and let her babble and cover us with raspberries. We walked along trails together, stopping every few feet so she could scoop up a handful of dirt and send it dissipating into the air. At night, we read to her by the light of a headlamp until she fell asleep. And then we'd close our eyes too, pausing to reflect on the day, the trip, and the exciting unknown of our future.

On the first anniversary of my mom's death, the three of us gathered around a campfire amidst

towering Jeffrey pines, just beyond the south shore of Lake Tahoe. Avery sat on Dan's lap, while I sunk into my camp chair, zipped my sweatshirt a little tighter, and wished she were there—wished she were alive and healthy and could fly to Vegas or L.A. or Tucson to join us. I would've had to pester her to make the trip, I know, but she would've loved it.

When I looked over at Avery, her head the only part of her not wrapped in a blanket, her cheeks were flush from the chill, and she was struggling to defy heavy eyelids. It was the kind of quiet moment that has the power to push everything else aside, the kind of moment I vowed I'd make time for, the kind I wish my mom had enjoyed more of.

The Millers currently call North Carolina home. See highlights of their trip at runofthemillers.tumblr.com. You can shoot Alison a note at alisonlynmiller@gmail.com.



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