



Irish Canuck heads down the mountain on another stunning ridge walk.

the sun's rays, I warmed and became my old human self.

When I finally reached the top of the mountain that day, the trail followed the high ridgeline for miles, and it was a joy to see the Rocky Mountains stretch out in a panorama around me. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, only shades of blue. Colorado was majestic, and it became ever more apparent why so many people choose to move and live here.

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I always made an effort to only have about 10 miles (16 km) to do in the morning before reaching a town so that there was plenty of time left to enjoy all the food and comfort town had to offer. So when I arrived at 11:00 that morning, I had time to do some laundry, read the news, and find out that, sadly, Queen Elizabeth II had passed away. I drank to her honor and ordered a big pizza, half of which I would pack out and eat high on the mountain pass that same evening, doing another seven miles into the night.

I decided to take an alternate route after Winter Park, as it would be fun to catch up with WoW, who was apparently one or two days ahead of me. Plus, this alternate would dip in and out of towns more frequently. This way, I could carry less food, which was one way to reduce weight. Most of the other hikers in the bubble around me took the official red route to summit Grays Peak, so I soon found myself totally alone for a few days. There was usually always at least one person a day that I bumped into at a water source or camp at night, but now I didn't meet a soul for days. Learning that my mind had adapted to solitude and could handle it without worrying about

anything was encouraging. Only four months earlier, I had still been quite anxious about sleeping alone in bear country, whereas now I felt quite at home getting in my tent all alone in a deserted valley between two mountains. I felt happy making dinner for myself and crawling into my sleeping bag at 20:00. I was pleased we had left the grizzly bears behind us, though the black bears were apparently still all around.

Living and sleeping alone in the woods had become the most normal thing in the world. But being alone in the high mountains, I had to keep my wits about me because no one would hear me should I fall. As the days grew colder, I kept on my windshell and raincoat all day as the cold wind blew down from Canada, heralding the beginning of winter. I protected myself from the occasional light snow and hail with rubber dish gloves over my fleece gloves. The warm fall sun cast long shadows over the nearby hills. I loved the fact that I was walking through continual panoramic views and that, because I was practically always above the tree line, I could see and anticipate the upcoming challenges ahead. On the other hand, being up so high, I also felt vulnerable to the unpredictable, rapid changes of the elements. My heavy breathing tried to suffuse my lungs with blood, and my body with sufficient oxygen as I climbed from cairn to cairn. With all that heavy breathing, my mouth was always open, which resulted in my lips drying up and blistering in the sun. And putting sunscreen inside my mouth wasn't really an option.

The air became ever thinner as the trail took me up and above 13,000 feet (3,962m). Finally, after hours of early ridge walking one morning, the trail dove down into a valley. I breathed a deep sigh of relief. When I reached the cover and safety of the tree line and was no longer exposed to the cold wind, I felt every cell in my body begin to relax at the lower altitude.

I hadn't known I needed it that much. I sat beside a stream to filter some water and ate a bar. I no longer took long breaks, as my body was