

One
woman's
journey
to the
brink of
what's
possible
on the
Pacific
Crest
Trail

A
Ghost
Among
Us

by Megan Michelson

photography by
Nick Hall



She wasn't like the rest of them. ¶ They knew that. It was June 7, for one, much later than the others had come. Temperatures in the Sonoran Desert, the southern terminus of the Pacific Crest Trail, were spiking at 120°F. The hundreds ahead of her had started their hikes as early as March. Now there were the stragglers and the maybe-gonna-make-its, and there was her. ¶ Barney and Sandy Mann have seen all types in the nine years they've been offering their San Diego-area home as a PCT staging ground. At mile zero, most of their guests are fresh-faced and clean-clothed, their boots unscuffed, their pride and plans intact. They range from the scared and ill-equipped to the bullheaded and eager, and they carry nervous laughter about them like a weather system. "In the late season, we get two kinds of hikers," Barney says. "They either really know what they're doing or they don't know what they're doing at all. We make sure they have our phone number because they're probably not going to make it very far."

She didn't say much when she arrived. How do you tell strangers that you're hiking to free your soul? She just busied herself organizing her pack and devouring a worn copy of *Yogi's PCT Handbook*. Most hikers go by their given names at this point, but she referred to herself simply as Anish (pronounced ah-NISH).

She wore a white, collared shirt, a knee-length skirt, and trail running shoes, giving her the look of a sneaker-commuting

schoolteacher. Her shoulder-length brown hair bordered full, rose-colored cheeks and wild, hungry-looking eyes. She carried a small backpack, loaded with a beat-up sleeping bag, a one-person tent, a Therm-a-Rest, a wispy rain jacket and wool baselayers, a compact headlamp, 6 liters of water, and snack food pre-portioned into small meals.

The next morning, June 8, 2013, Barney, Sandy, and Anish piled into the Manns' Prius at 5 a.m., and drove the 75 miles to the trailhead in Campo, California, near the Mexican border.

Nobody spoke as they pulled up to the monument, four weathered pillars of wood at the start of the PCT. More than 2,500 trail miles—crossing desert, forest, canyons, and mountain after mountain—lie between this spot and Canada. As Anish had told the Manns, she planned to hike that distance faster than anybody ever had. She gathered her belongings while Sandy took a few photos and said goodbye. "She seemed very confident, but there was no braggadocio," Sandy recalls.

At 6:27 a.m., Anish signed the trail register: *Well, here goes. To Canada. -Anish.*

In the previous two months, hundreds of hikers had signed the register. But Anish wasn't like them, and none of them knew she was coming. In time, everyone on the trail would know her name. And they'd all be hoping to catch sight of her.

BY HER SECOND DAY on the trail, 2-inch blisters bulged off both her ankles. The arid heat dried out her sinuses, causing her nose to drip a steady patter of blood into the dust. But she stopped only to dump sand from her sneakers. She didn't have a moment to spare.

Anish knew from the start that every minute of the two months she planned to be out there would matter. At the time, the self-supported speed record was held by Scott Williamson, a man who'd made a career out of setting and breaking PCT records. Williamson thru-hiked the PCT in 64 days, 11 hours, and 19 minutes in 2011. That attempt bested his previous record by a single day. At the pinnacle of athleticism, endurance records are won a few steps at a time. And almost entirely, they're held by men (see Fleet of Foot, next page).

Indeed, in 2013 there wasn't even a known speed record for women on the PCT. The simple fact that Anish would be first would have given her license to set her target comfortably slower than the men's record, but she wanted to measure herself by the same bar: to be the fastest, no asterisk, no separate column. Yet this wasn't a women's empowerment thing. "I figured I'd go for the record that did exist," she later explained. "My motivation wasn't coming from a competitive place. I just wanted to see what I could do for myself. I wanted to see what was possible."

What was possible? Could she set her mind free by pushing herself so hard and so long that the effort drowned the voices that had been nagging her as long as she could remember?

Anish was born Heather Anderson, the daughter of a former Navy man turned farm and factory worker and

Heather "Anish" Anderson in the forest near her Bellingham, Washington home.



his wife, a social worker, in rural Michigan. She was sharp at academics, but struggled with her weight. By third grade, her peers labeled her “the smart, fat one” and exiled her to the margins of grade-school society.

“Heather was very shy as a kid, always in the back or apart from the main crowd,” says Darcie Schueller, a childhood friend. “She hated having her pictures taken and would scowl or frown in all of them.”

Heather turned to exploring the woods behind her house alone. The deep forest intrigued her, but she was scared, too—

of wild animals, of getting lost, of never being found—so she’d bring her dog and her dad’s hammer. Out there among the cedars and oaks, she found a sense of belonging she hadn’t known before. There was no judgment out there. She was free.

B **BEYOND A DOZEN** or so day-hikers, Anish saw almost no one until the second week of her hike. She passed other tents, but under the veil of darkness. The most common experience others had

of Anish was footsteps in the night.

At mile 454, a collection of trailers and canvas tents make up a place called Hiker Heaven, an unlikely paradise for trail-seasoned trekkers who arrive to wash laundry, drink beer, check email, and gorge on burgers and fries. Hikers gather on hay bales around the campfire, swapping stories about the trials of the first four weeks.

It was dark when Anish arrived, just 10 days and 12 hours into her hike. She dropped her gear and went to the garage to get loaner clothes so she could shower and do laundry. Another thru-hiker approached and asked her, “Are you the Ghost?”

“No,” she responded, a little confused. “I’m Anish.”

It seemed like a weird question. But thanks to word of mouth on the trail—partly from chatter on social media, partly from hiker-to-hiker gossip—many thru-hikers had heard about Anish. They knew little, just a few shadowy details. Some knew that she’d hiked the Appalachian Trail, Continental Divide Trail, and Pacific Crest Trail (the Triple Crown of hiking) once before, but without fanfare and at an unremarkable pace. Anyone who dug deep online might have discovered that she’d started running ultramarathons recently, but again, without raising any heads. Mostly, they just knew two things: She was attempting to break Scott Williamson’s hallowed speed record, and only a lucky few had seen her. One day, word on the trail was that she was en route, but by the next day she was already gone. So early on, thru-hikers took to calling her by another name: Anish the Ghost. Or simply, the Ghost.

By 6 a.m. the next morning, when Hiker Heaven’s owner went to raise the garage door and open for the regular breakfast hustle, the ghost was gone.

BY THE TIME she was in high school, Heather was using food as a crutch.

“I hated my body and myself,” she says. “I consoled myself by eating bowls full of Oreos and milk as though they were cereal. But somewhere deep inside, I knew I was capable of doing something more.”

When she graduated in 2000, she carried 200 pounds on her 5’8” frame, and could barely summit a flight of stairs without sucking wind. She felt alone. She felt like she deserved to be.

During her freshman year at Indiana’s Anderson University, she signed on for a Grand Canyon summer with a program called A Christian Ministry in the National Parks. She’s not sure what motivated her, but something clicked. She felt transfixed by the canyon’s depth. It made the world feel bigger, like there was a place for her in it. “I remember not feeling scared anymore,” she says now. Her roommates invited her on a hike down the Bright Angel Trail. Though she felt familiar self-doubt, she decided to go for it.

In 115°F heat, most of the group decided to turn back partway, but one girl, who was tall, slender, and athletic, was set on making it to Indian Garden. And Heather was set on being that kind of girl, if only she could break free of the one she already was.

On the way back up, she ran out of food and water and nearly succumbed to dehydration. Leaning against the canyon wall, letting the mules pass her by, she felt like her heart might give up. Then she determined that she wasn’t going to quit. “I knew I couldn’t stop, couldn’t give up. No matter how horrible it was, it had to be done,” she says. “I had to dig deep and I’d never had to do that before.” It was baptism by suffering, and by the time she climbed out, she was new.

“Once I recovered from that hike, I realized I wanted to do it again. Removing all the pain from it, descending through the layers of the canyon made a huge impression on me,” she says. “I lost my heart and soul to it right away.”

She logged 150 miles in the Grand Canyon that summer and, instead of Oreos, she devoured trail, ultimately losing 70 pounds and gaining confidence over the next few years. The day after she graduated college, in May 2003, she handed her diploma to her parents, got a ride to Springer Mountain in Georgia, and hiked the 2,180-mile Appalachian Trail. Along the way she started calling herself Anishinaabe, after her family’s Native American heritage. Anish,

FLEET OF FOOT

There’s no official keeper of long-trail speed records, but the website fastest-known^{time}.proboards.com collects honor-code submissions.

| Appalachian Trail | Wonderland Trail, WA | Colorado Trail |
|--|--|--|
| 2,180 miles | 95 miles | 500 miles |
| Supported Jennifer Pharr Davis, 46 days, 11 hours, 10 minutes (2011) | Supported Kyle Scaggs, 20 hours, 53 minutes (2006) | Supported Scott Jaime, 8 days, 7 hours, 40 minutes (2013) |
| Self-supported* Matt Kirk, 58 days, 9 hours, 40 minutes (2013) | Unsupported Richard Kressler, 27 hours, 16 minutes (2013) | Unsupported Shawn Forry, 10 days, 19 hours, 5 minutes (2012) |
| Pacific Crest Trail | John Muir Trail, CA | Long Trail, VT |
| 2,650 miles | 223 miles | 271 miles |
| Supported Josh Garrett, 59 days, 8 hours, 14 minutes (2013) | Supported Hal Koerner and Mike Wolfe, 3 days, 12 hours, 41 minutes (2013) | Supported Jonathan Basham, 4 days, 12 hours, 46 minutes (2009) |
| Self-supported Heather Anderson, 60 days, 17 hours, 12 minutes (2013) | Unsupported Bret Maune, 3 days, 14 hours, 13 minutes (2009) | Unsupported Travis Wildeboer, 6 days, 17 hours, 25 minutes (2010) |

**Self-supported means thru-hiker style: no pre-arranged support, and walking in and out of towns for resupply. Unsupported means carrying everything at once.*

for short.

By 2007, she finished the Triple Crown, married fellow PCT thru-hiker Remy Levin, and got a job in Bellingham, Washington, designing ebooks at a software company. And that's where the story is supposed to end: girl finds herself, marries boy, lives happily ever after. But that's not what happened.

That life meant saying goodbye to the woman who had slept outside for hundreds of nights, hiked alone for thousands of miles, and fallen in love with the sound of her own footsteps. It meant saying goodbye to Anish, and Heather wasn't ready. She wrote on her blog: *Why am I not like other people I know? Why can't I be happy with the things that made my parents, my friends, my siblings happy?*

She tried to be content with life's ordinary things—a 9-to-5 job, a marriage, a home. But none of it was enough. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she felt lost again.

In 2012, after five years of marriage, Remy was happy to settle down and Heather the polar opposite. They divorced. Soon after, either in crisis or recovering from it, she quit her job, sold all of her belongings, and bought a one-way bus ticket to Ashland, Oregon, and the trailhead to her comfort zone: the PCT in Oregon and Washington. It was the one place she knew she could be herself again, where she could find Anish.

"I was very broken in a lot of personal ways," she says. "I was unhappy in my job, in my relationship. I knew I needed to leave, but it was also hard to go. So much of my life felt unstable."

On the trail, she moved at her own pace, and at last, she felt in control of motion and emotion; stability reclaimed. "Trails and the wilderness have this amazing capacity to heal. They are for you whatever you need them to be," she says. "When I went through Oregon, I bawled and screamed and cried about what my life had become. But by the time I finished that 1,000-mile hike, I was happy again."

Before she even crossed the Oregon-Washington border, she decided to attempt a speed record the following year. "It wasn't about being the fastest. It was more the personal push," she says. "For years, I always wondered, 'How fast could I do one of these trails?' It had been stewing for a long time and the time was right to finally find out."

SPEED HIKING IS AN EXERCISE in self-denial. There's irony in moving fast through scenery that makes most people want to slow down, take it all in. But the singleness of purpose, the surrender to discomfort and suffering, is its own reward.

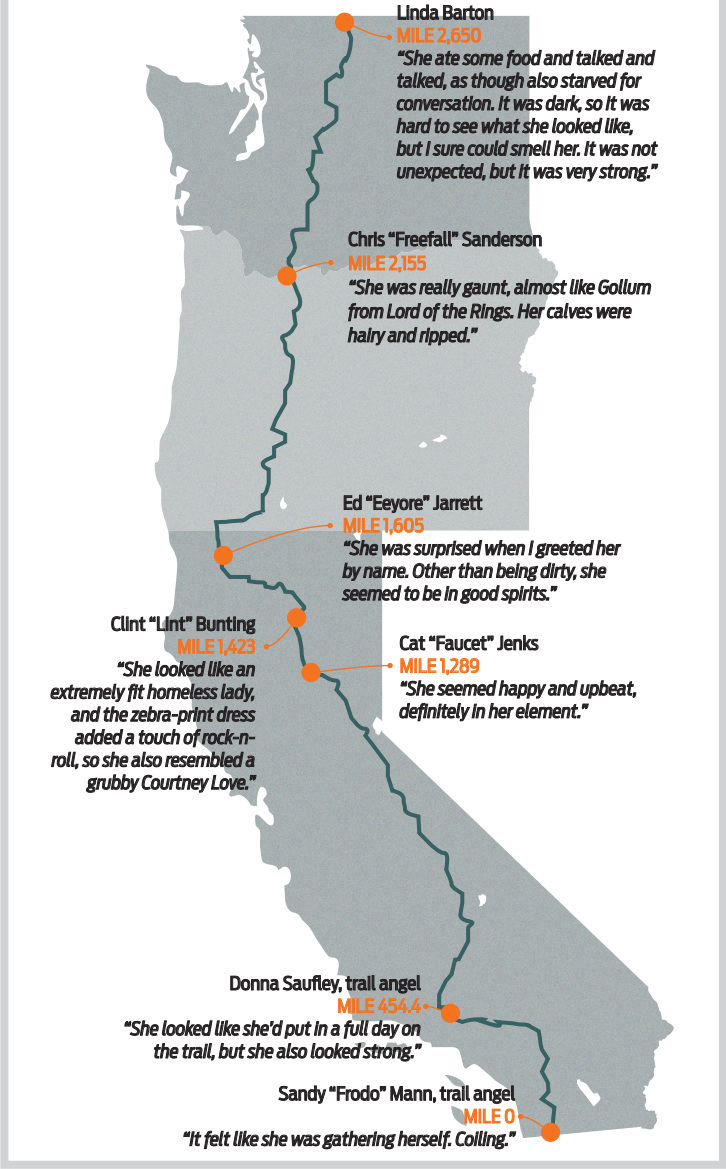
Day after day, Anish rose before 5 a.m. and began to walk within minutes. She'd sometimes fall asleep mid-stride, a quick blink of the eye that would send her into a brief, semi-conscious state. She stopped only for a few seconds when the hourly alarm on her watch reminded her to grab food from her pack.

She didn't move particularly fast—roughly 3 mph—but she walked. And walked. By 11 p.m., with her legs nearly crumpled underneath her, she'd pitch her tent on whatever surface she could find and gulp down a protein shake. She'd punch in a journal entry on her phone, staring at a sticker on the case that read, "Never, never, never give up."

By early July, she'd caught the main wave of northbounders, passing many who'd started weeks before her. Near Belden, California, around the 1,289-mile mark, thru-hiker Cat "Faucet"

SIGHTINGS OF THE GHOST

Impressions of those who spotted Anish along her 2,650-mile journey from Mexico to Canada.



Jenks and her boyfriend, Harry "Sharkbite" Hamlin, were eating energy bars on a trailside boulder when a woman in a zebra-print dress came whirling around the bend.

When thru-hikers meet on the trail, they usually talk food, shared acquaintances, and weather, then say goodbye, promising to pass messages back or look for each other up the way. This year, something else was going on, and Jenks and Hamlin had been on the lookout for Anish. They imagined a grizzled woman with concrete for legs, intimidating even just in myth.

They weren't expecting a scrawny hiker in a zebra dress, which Anish had recently purchased at a thrift store in Sierra City for \$1. And her pack looked too light for a self-supported thru-hiker. Could that be her? But as Anish got closer to them, they saw her focus and had no doubt.

They tried to grill her about her pace, but the conversation

Whitney "Allgood" La Ruffa
MILE 2,155
"I was shocked at how focused she was. Her eyes had that 1,000-mile stare."

Craig "OTC" Giffen | **MILE 1,293** |
"She had a nice vibe about her, a Yoda-like spirit."

Doug "Pacman" Murray | **MILE 1,378** | "We couldn't get many words out of her. She was stuffing as much food as she could."

Chris "Freefall" Sanderson | **MILE 2,155** | "She was really gaunt, almost like Gollum from Lord of the Rings. Her calves were hairy and ripped."

was brief. Anish had to push on. “See you guys up the trail,” she hollered, already past them.

“Yeah, right!” Jenks called after her.

A few miles ahead, nearing the trail’s midpoint, thru-hiker Craig “OTC” Giffen, a husky guy with a long beard and shaggy hair, was walking the trail when a woman trotted past, nodding a quiet hello. He initially mistook her for a dayhiker—her pack was so small and she seemed to bounce along the trail, a rarity among haggard long-distance hikers.

Giffen had heard of Anish’s record attempt in a PCT email blast. By now, she was logging consistent 45-plus-mile days, and the trail community had taken notice. So when she appeared out of nowhere on the trail beside him, Giffen quickly connected the dots. “You must be Anish,” he said.

He was in awe of the fact that she was hiking the trail just like he was—without help or pre-arranged support, walking into and out of towns for resupplies—only much, much faster. Giffen had been at it for 82 days, Anish for 31. “It was kind of like running into Keith Richards on the street,” he said later. “No use asking him if he likes playing the guitar.”

He trailed behind her for the remaining few miles to Belden Town, then joined her in devouring fish and chips. But instead of a post-meal siesta, even a short one, Anish stood up and said quietly, “I’m going to squeeze in a few more miles tonight.” With that, the restaurant’s door swung shut, the ghost departed into the night, and Giffen never saw her again.

In the afterglow of his celebrity meeting, Giffen tried to replicate Anish’s pace. The effort nearly broke him after just three days. Anish was moving so fast.

AROUND MILE 1,350, just north of Mt. Lassen, the towering chunk of volcanic granite that overlooks translucent alpine lakes, mossy forests, and marks the entrance to the Cascades, Anish turned 32. It was a celebratory day—she’d crossed the halfway point of her hike—and one that made her reflect, thoughts scribbled across her journal.

No man can ever fully have my heart, for I am already wedded to the mountains, to the wild places. It is there and there alone that I am whole, contented and at bliss. It is the beauty of the land that has me so enthralled that the miles fly by effortlessly.

Sounds like the opening lines of a loner’s manifesto, but Anish always knew she’d have to return to the civilized world. To the cabin in Washington she shares with her boyfriend, Kevin, and the constellation of part-time jobs that now support her—

cashier, race director, tulip farmer, freelance writer. (Kevin says he understands that the trail may always come before him: “She is for the wilderness and the wilderness is for her.”)

Later that day, in California’s MacArthur-Burney Falls Memorial State Park, she met up with veteran Triple Crownier Clint “Lint” Bunting, a strong mass of a man with tattis covering permanent trail legs.

Bunting has seen a lot of things on a lot of trails, but when Anish caught him, her time- and energy-saving tricks still took him by surprise. She pees standing up, for one, hitching her zebra dress up to her waist to avoid squatting and putting pressure on her legs.

For three days, they passed the miles. It was the longest interaction Anish had with another person for her entire hike. Bunting said he enjoyed her company, and could tell she was happy to have his, but he got the sense she was fighting something. She’d go silent for miles at a stretch, staring at the horizon like a finish line she had yet to reach.

Anish left him at a road crossing outside Etna, California. He was out of food and beelined for a burger. She had more miles to go and wrote in her journal, *I’m constantly amazed at the transformation from athlete into machine. My body has become a calories-in, miles-out machine.*

Only my mind can stop me now.

NEAR THE 2,000-MILE MARK, in Oregon’s Diamond Peak Wilderness, the dizzy spells hit. Her legs cramped, her vision went fuzzy, and twice, she collapsed into the dirt. Her body was giving up. For the first time, the prospect of not finishing entered her mind. *Inside I am a mush of self-doubt, fear, and uncertainty*, she confessed in her journal.

Hiking more than 40 miles a day for weeks on end is an Olympian feat, to say the least, but there are no cheering crowds on the PCT. No supportive family members to prop you up.

At Big Lake Youth Camp in Sisters, Oregon, Anish sat for four hours and cried. She could forgive herself for not setting a record, but not finishing the hike? Unacceptable. “I decided that even if I didn’t break this record, I was going to finish this hike,” she later said. “If I were to quit, it would feel good for a few minutes and then I’d be devastated.”

But why? She’d already hiked the Triple Crown and its 7,000 confidence-boosting miles. But this hike was different. By pushing herself to see what was possible, she could finally win the inner fight, she could make the lost girl she once was disappear completely.

I wonder daily what I am thinking by

taking on a task so huge. Who am I to think that I can do this? The truth is, I don't know if I can or not, she wrote in her journal. Whether I succeed in the ultimate goal or not, I will push myself beyond my current limits and find a stronger, braver woman in the process.

She added lots of protein to her diet and the dizziness went away. She crossed Oregon in nine and a half days, marching toward her home state. The cheerful, bouncing hiker was gone; this was a slugfest now, and she moved with brute-like intensity.

In late July, at mile 2,150 near Cascade Locks on the Oregon-Washington border, Chris "Freefall" Sanderson, a thru-hiker and friend of Anish's, spotted her booking down the trail. He knew she was coming—everyone did, and now they wanted to make sure they saw her.

"The thing that really struck me was how focused she was," Sanderson says. "She was on a mission."

She looked gaunt, her legs hairy and muscular, a sharp jawbone replacing her once ruddy and full cheeks. She'd dropped 20 pounds from her 145-pound frame. They walked 7 nonstop miles together to Cascade Locks—it was the fastest stretch of trail Sanderson had hiked in ages. In town, Anish took a quick shower, resupplied her pack with military-like precision, and got back on the trail to do another 14 miles before bed.

She anticipated dropping her mileage for the final stretch, as the terrain through Washington is some of the most challenging on the trail. Instead, she added more, rising earlier and walking up to 50 miles each day. "There's a feeling you get to toward the end—in ultrarunning, we call it smelling the barn," she says. "You think you're already at your limit, but there's something inside that can go even more."

Just over 60 miles from the Canadian border, Anish's boyfriend, Kevin, surprised her at Rainy Pass. She spent just 30 minutes with him, then pushed on to keep hiking into the night. "I will be at the Canadian border by midnight tomorrow night," she told Kevin. He planned to travel by car to meet her at the end.

"I could tell she was tired—I could see it," Kevin says. "But she had this look on her face that said, 'I'm getting this done.'"

The next morning, on August 7, she rose, once again, before dawn. It was her 60th day on the trail and she hoped it would be her last. She paused for no one on that final day. To other hikers, she was an ethereal blur in an animal-print dress.

Her singular focus had led her here, outside her own head. She discovered what was possible, but she knew it couldn't last. She knew the lightness and freedom she'd built up would fade as soon as she reached the final trail marker.

On the last few miles, before she even knew what she was doing, her pace built into a run. Darkness set in and she began to fly downhill. Her limbs lost feeling—numb to the branches scratching her body. When she tripped and slammed her knee on a rock, she just stood and continued, as free as she'd ever felt.

She reached Monument 78, the northern terminus of the PCT, at 11:42 p.m., 60 days, 17 hours, and 12 minutes after she started, smashing the record by four days. She heaved open the metal casing, adding one last note to the register: *Anish was here*.

Did she find what she was looking for? No doubt a stronger, braver woman walked away from the monument that night, but this was a woman who knew that her hike would never really be done, that her transformation was ongoing, and always would be. "I live somewhere else, but my home is on the trail," she says.

She'd expected to find Kevin waiting nearby, but she found only darkness. A little ways up the trail, Kevin and another friend were asleep in tents, their vigil abandoned. A noise jolted them awake, a primal yell that was part human, part animal. Part ghost. ■

Megan Michelson is the freeskiing editor at ESPN.com.