

WHAT A CHANGE IN PACE CAN REVEAL.

Words by April Thompson.
Photography by Liuba Arutiunova.

SLOW FORAGING

My fellow foragers are a few paces ahead of me, the brisk clip of their stop-and-go traffic slowing as the group halts to examine a squat bolete, pressing on its spongy golden bottom to see if it will bruise. We've taken a gamble on this lesser-used trail in hopes of scoring an orange flush of chicken of the woods, which none of us have found yet this year.

I pause to swipe the screen on my jewel-colored Garmin watch several times to get to my heart rate, and once more to get my step count. Both are too high for my own good. We've scarcely gone a mile, but my feet have started to turn to lead, and my thoughts are slow to coalesce, like there's dust between my synapses keeping them from connecting. These are the early warning signs that the walk is triggering post-exertional malaise, the hallmark of my chronic illness, ME/CFS, otherwise known as myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome.

The foray leader has finally noticed I've fallen behind, but I've warned him in advance that my ability to keep up can be unpredictable. I've learned to quit when I'm behind because one bout of exertion can make me ill for days. In a past life, a life embedded within this one, I was

a multisport athlete who would have been checking to see if I surpassed my mileage goal for the day. I chugged up mountains like they were molehills. I loved being in nature, but as a competitive, type A person, it was the destination I was after, not the journey: the bright blaze of the 10-mile marker, rather than the subtle beauty of a spiral-shelled snail suckling on a warty *Amanita*. I probably hiked hundreds of miles without ever noticing a single mushroom.

In 2006, a mild viral bug I picked up traveling through Europe morphed overnight into a crippling condition that left me so weak I couldn't walk around the block. My days of backwoods backpacking had come to an abrupt end.

ME/CFS forced me to reinvent myself and my leisure pursuits. A few years into disability, I stumbled onto a foraging walk, advertised as a start-and-stop affair, no more than a mile. This, I thought, I could do. This small step eventually led me to one of my new incarnations, as a wild foods instructor and board member of my local mycological society. My physical bandwidth has withered, yet my knowledge of the woods—from mycology to ecology—has increased by leaps and bounds.

The rest of the group has disappeared from sight, faint murmurs of laughter their only trace. I plunk down on an oak stump to give my body a rest before turning back. I hear a woodpecker drilling a nearby pine and follow its low flight to another perch. Down below, a clump of moss hosts a cute little cluster of LBMs (little brown mushrooms) as if spotlighted by waning sunbeams on a tiny green stage.

Then I see it—a ruffly little brown-black cap the size of my thumb. I've found a black trumpet! As my eyes scan the soil for more matches to that pattern, the rest of the scene comes into focus. I haven't found a black trumpet—I've found what looks like an infinite patch of them. I slip off my oak stump to sit next to the first clump and get to work with my knife and basket. Inhaling their funky, fruity scent, I harvest the wrinkly black bouquets by the handful, moving as efficiently as I can to conserve my dwindling energy. I'm already cooking the black trumpets in my mind's eye: Maybe I'll mix them into a risotto or finally try them in a dessert.

I stop before my basket is full. I need to save energy for the walk out, and I also want to leave treasures for someone else to stumble upon, if they can slow down long enough to see them.



—
Craterellus cornucopioides, or black trumpet mushrooms, are named for the mythological horn of plenty.

—
On the episode "You 2.0: Slow Down!" of the podcast *Hidden Brain*, psychologist Fred Bryant recounts a memory of foraging for mushrooms as a child with his mother, an experience that sparked his study of the psychological processes behind slowing down and savoring life.