Episode 1: Stranger in a Strange Land

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My husband and I moved into the little cabin in early June. It was hot, I remember, and I was washing dishes with the window open over the kitchen sink, looking out over the acres and acres of wide open sagebrush that surrounds our house in rural Washington state. It's dusk and the dogs outside roaming around and I hear this  ch ch ch ch ch ch ch sound and silly city slicker me thinks, "Gee, I didn't know this house came with an automatic sprinkler system."

And then I almost dropped the plate and raced out onto the deck because Bernie, our labradoodle, who has only ever encountered squirrels, was under the deck messing with a large, very irate rattlesnake.

[Music creeps in]

So I screamed at him to come and got him inside. And then all that night, I just lay in bed, picturing the snake coiled against the foundation of the house feet away from where I was sleeping. So I waited until the morning when the temperatures are cooler and snakes are less active. And I took some deep breaths and a big sip of coffee, and I gave myself a pep talk and grabbed a long two by four and crawled under the deck.

SThe snake was about ten feet away from me, still coiled against the foundation of the house, maybe just waking up for another day of labradoodle hunting. I slammed the two by four into it, smashing it against the side of the cement foundation, and it started writhing, and I'm just squealing and sweating with fear in that cramped, dark place under the deck with the snake.

So I pinned it, and I pushed it along the foundation of the house until we came out the other side of the deck. And the carpenter, Luke, takes a sharpened shovel and chops off its head. He told me after the fact we had to bury it right away because snakes can bite even after they're dead. And I figured he was bullshitting this, you know, newcomer city slicker. But look it up. It's true. So now there's a snake head buried under the corner of the deck.

[Music plays]

I'm Ashley Ahearn, and this is Grouse, a show about the most controversial bird in the West and what it's taught me about hope, compromise, and life in rural America.

[Music ends]

We will get to the sage grouse, I promise. Over the next seven episodes we will be going deep on this strange, wonderful bird. But first, I want to tell you a bit about how I got here. I've been covering the environment for public radio since I graduated from college.

All I've ever wanted to do is tell stories about science and nature. I guess when I started out in this work, I operated from the belief that if people knew more about what we were doing to the planet, then they'd change their behavior or elect better leaders to make better policy. So I threw myself into stories about climate change, melting glaciers, toxic algal blooms, dying orcas, drought, wildfires, salmon die offs, coal mining, oil spills. The news on the environment beat is never, or at least very rarely, good. But I felt like I was doing some good in the world, and I was winning awards and climbing the NPR career ladder.

I was living in Seattle at the time, and my husband, Michael, and I would get out for hikes on the weekends, so I told myself things were fine. But the truth was, after I filed a story, if I heard myself on the radio while driving home.

**AHEARN (on the radio): Glaciers in the North Cascades have shrunk by 50% since 1900.**

I'd turn it off.

**RADIO CLIPS: Oh, boy. Well, I'll tell you, Ashley, it's a lot worse than it was last week because what we expected.**

**Ashley Ahearn has the story of this little frog and its shrinking habitat.**

I didn't want to hear the news I was reporting. It was just so depressing and hopeless.

**AHEARN (on the radio): No glaciers means warmer rivers, and that's bad news for salmon.**

And NPR was requiring that stories be shorter and shorter. So that meant I'd only have about 3.5 minutes to explain some super complex problem.

**AHEARN (on the radio): No one has ever seen a die off as big as the one taking place on the West coast now.**

Maybe get a few different perspectives on it.

**AHEARN (on the radio): One's arm is hanging on by a single gnarled string of flesh.**

Tell people basically how screwed we are.

**AHEARN (on the radio): The young orca appeared to have been dead for up to a week before she washed ashore.**

And then sign off.

**AHEARN (on the radio): For NPR news, I'm Ashley Ahearn in Seattle.**

It was a fight every day not to become numb. And then in 2016, everything changed. President Trump was elected, and the day after the election, I went to cover the pipeline protests at Standing Rock in North Dakota.

**AHEARN: So I'm walking through, walking through camp. I can smell sage, like there's a lot of sage being burned around here, and you can hear fireworks and singing and cheering.**

**[Drum beating, people yelling]**

**And of joyful. Just joy. It's so cold and there's so many stars.**

**PEOPLE TALKING: You want to walk along the flags? They singing. They are singing. Isn't that beautiful? They're praying. We're praying for the water and the earth.**

**[People singing to the drum beat]**

**AHEARN: It's really quiet in camp. There's been an amazing night of singing and drum circling, and I'm curled up in two sleeping bags because it's really fucking cold here and my breath is still, um, clouding in the tent. But I'm. I'm so happy to be here, and I'm so happy to be hearing the voices of all the people that have come from all around the world to support, um, the tribes that are fighting this pipeline.**

Have you ever spent years working on something, or believing in a basic premise, and then lost faith in that premise, or found it to be untrue? That's what Standing Rock did for me.

**TRUMP: We're going to re-negotiate some of the terms.**

And I say this, no matter where you are on the pipeline issue or environmental activism, I had built my career around the belief that good journalism helped the public and held the powerful accountable. And standing Rock blew that premise apart. Trump took office and the pipeline was approved.

**TRUMP: We'll see if we can get that pipeline built. A lot of jobs, great construction jobs.**

I started feeling unsettled. You know, when you can feel a big life change coming, even though you don't know exactly what it looks like yet. Almost like a thunderstorm rumbling on a distant horizon. I had started to question what I was doing with my life, and if I still believed in the basic premise of journalism and what it's supposed to accomplish for our society.

My husband, Michael, tends to clam up when I try to record conversations with him. So I sneakily turned on my iPhone while we were driving through a snowstorm last winter. Sorry about the road noise, and he said I could share this with you. I asked him if he remembered that period of time when I was doubting everything.

**MICHAEL: It was right after standing Rock because you were like, it doesn't matter.**

**AHEARN: Yeah.**

**MICHAEL: Like there were all these beautiful, wonderful people that came from all walks of life and it just doesn't matter.**

**AHEARN: It was like the Tower of Babel. Like all these people from all walks of life just in this place, believing in something. And then to come home and just … I didn't even know what to do with that tape because it didn't amount to anything.**

And the 2016 election brought another realization for me. Living in the liberal echo chamber that is Seattle, I felt like I didn't know my own country. I didn't understand how Trump had won.

For a journalist, there is nothing worse than feeling like you're in the dark or you're not getting the whole story. And that's how I felt after the election. I was covering the environment, so natural resources, wild things, salmon, livestock, logging, wildfire. But I was doing it from a city of city listeners. I think I just had this feeling of hopelessness that my journalism, or any journalism, really wasn't making a difference in this post-truth era we live in.

**MICHAEL: Sense of futility really that came after the election. Not only do people not want more bad news about environment stories, but like the people that elected Trump, don't even … they're in a completely different media ecosystem. It's like a double, you know, it's like the first one was like a stab to the heart. And then the next one was like the nail of the coffin. It's like okay you know, ship that idea, like bury that idea that like, you know, things will magically get better just though like more information reporting in the environment.**

**AHEARN: Yeah, that was a hard realization though.**

Over the years, Michael and I had spent a bunch of time hiking and camping in a little valley on the east side of Washington's Cascade Mountains, about four hours northeast of Seattle. It's called the Methow Valley, and all told, there are only about 5,000 people that live there, and the valley is only about 60 miles long.

It's an interesting mix of people. Multigenerational ranchers and farmers go to the grocery store and town meetings with Amazon and Microsoft money from Seattle. And then you've got retirees. And back to the lander hippie types mixed in with chiseled young rock climbers. There are salmon in the rivers and some wolves in the nearby mountains, and people get worked up about both.

The Methow Valley is in Okanogan County, which is one of the most conservative, poorest and largest counties by land mass in Washington state. So if I was looking for a place to get outside of that NPR filter bubble and the liberal Seattle echo chamber and try to understand what's going on in the other America, this was a place to do it.

So we made the jump. We packed up our things. I quit my job and we left the city. I went from filing news stories on deadline to herding cows on horseback.

**AHEARN: Come on, good girl. Good girl. Here we go, let's get those cows, Pistol.**

**[Horse whinnies]**

**So that's Pistol, she's my girl. She's a little Arabian mare that I got. A lady in the valley gave her to me for free when I started riding her. And she could see that Pistol and I clicked. We're both kind of stubborn, ornery. Hustling ladies that don't take direction all the time and tend to have our own opinions about things. Sometimes she moves cows for me when I ask her to.**

Pistol and I are by ourselves in a little ravine, moving about 30 cows on a local ranch with my friends Dave and DK and Amber off in the distance. We're just out for a day bringing these guys down from one pasture into another one, then we come to a creek. Pistol hates water. Like really does not want to cross creeks.

**AHEARN: Come on. Down we go. Goddamn it, come on Pistol. Alright this is me failing and getting off my damn horse because she won't cross a f*cking creek. Come on.**

No self-respecting cowboy ever gets off his horse.

**AHEARN: Yeah. Every day,a  new challenge that I'm ill equipped for.**

So I get back on after dragging Pistol on foot across the creek and meet up with Dave and DK and Amber as we push the black Angus cows toward the corrals at the bottom of a steep ravine.

**AHEARN: Down we get. Come on! Hey, cow! Good mare, good mare. Come on sweet mare this way. Good girl.**

The four of us riders come together around the herd. LIke pulling the drawstring of a change purse tight. And the cows flow like a black mass into the corral.

**AHEARN: Can you hear Dave in the distance, hollering?**

**DAVE: Hep! Come on cow, hoppy hoppy. Let's go.**

**[Chattering and laughter]**

Nobody saw me flailing to get Pistol across the creek, so we'll just keep that little secret between us. The truth is, I screw up every time I move cows. But I love doing it. And I'm learning every day. Some of the most interesting conversations I've had since moving to this part of the country have happened on horseback in wide open sagebrush. I get to spend time with people who maybe disagree with me politically, but we've become friends. Dave and DK are the first people I call now when my car gets stuck in the snow, or I need advice on putting in fence or grading the dirt road.

But I think in a way I'll always be an outsider. Michael and I will never be of this place as much as we love it. We may never be able to wash the city off of us. There are very real divisions between country people and city people in the U.S. right now. Coastal liberals and rural conservatives. And unfortunately, environmental issues. The kind of issues I've always loved covering as a journalist often become symbols of those larger divisions.

Which brings us finally to the star of our podcast, The Greater Sage Grouse. The bird some refer to as the most controversial bird in the West. You don't hear about them much in other parts of the country, but out here they are a big deal. They're part of the history of the West, and today they've become a symbol of all that is still wild and under threat. But man, are they goofy sons of guns. I got to say, especially during the mating season when the males puff up these giant air sacs on their chests and they strut around making the craziest sounds to attract the ladies. It's like nothing I've ever recorded before. They're a funny looking bird. Many of us may never see up close because they're disappearing, and no one knows what to do about it.

**MAN: It's. It's almost like you're documenting the the demise of a species in a given spot.**

As a reporter, I'd heard about the sage grouse for ages, but I'd kind of avoided covering the issue, to be honest, mainly because I didn't know how to get people to care. Maybe I didn't know how to get myself to care anymore either. But living in sagebrush country, it's clear to me how much these birds mean to people out here. So as I settled into rural life, I got inspired. I started recording people all over the West who have a stake in this birds future. From people in the industries working in sage grouse country.

**MAN 2: People in my Family have lost their jobs because of what we're going through today, and it's unbearable at times.**

To environmentalists fighting to protect sage grouse country.

**MAN 3: For those industries bent on destroying Western public lands for their own profits … I'm watching.**

I talked to ranchers who want to graze their cattle in sage grouse country.

**AHEARN: Do you value them as much as cows?**

**MAN 4: Well now you're talking to a rancher. No.**

To Indigenous people whose ancestors were here before any of these other voices arrived in sage grouse country.

**MAN 5: What happens to them is what will happen to us as people. If they don't have the right kind of environment, they will disappear.**

This bird gets a lot of different people worked up for a lot of different reasons, but really, the sage grouse and the way it divides us says a lot about our country right now. So I'm on a mission to learn about this troubled but deeply western bird. And like the bird, I'm trying to see if I can figure out how to get by in this strange landscape. I hope you'll join me.

Next episode, trudging through the snow in search of sage grouse.

**AHEARN: Ooh, what's this one? Is that more coyote here?**

**MAN: Oh not a very distinct track, but it looks like it could be a grouse.**

**AHEARN: Wait did I just beat the scientist at finding the grouse track?**

**MAN: Not surprising, I'm not wearing my glasses. Everybody can see better than me nowadays.**

This podcast was edited by Whitney Henry Lester. Sound design by Liza Yeager. Kima Lannigan did our artwork.

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Grouse was produced in partnership with Birdnote and was made possible with support from Jim and Berta Faulkner. I'm Ashley Ahearn. Thanks for listening.