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One More Step

As the family's Forerunner bounced along the highway to southwest Virginia, my gut turned like a nest of snakes. In the backseat was Hanna, my towering sixteen-year-old daughter, and two backpacks bulging with gear. It was everything we needed to survive ten days on the Appalachian Trail. I looked over at my husband who gave a reassuring smile. Or perhaps it was mischievous. He was our driver and thrilled that he wouldn't be obligated to set a single toe on the rocky trail.

YouTube is filled with glamorous videos of women strapping thirty pounds to their backs, leaving their jobs for six months, and hiking the twenty-two hundred miles that spans from Georgia to Maine. I was a fifty-year old nurse who latched onto the idea of becoming a "thru-hiker" and like a symbiotic creature couldn't let it go. So, I planned a one-hundred-mile test run and was thrilled when Hanna said she would go with me.

In July of 2018, my husband, Mike, dropped us off in the tiny town of Pearisburg near one of the thousands of trail entrances completely hidden by the trees. As I tightened my pack's waist belt, I told myself that hiking was easy. After all, it's only a matter of taking one more step—and then one more. As we disappeared into the woods, we began to ascend through a forest that was dense, green, and dark. The AT is nicknamed the "Green Tunnel" because you can hike for days with only shattered glimpses of the sky above.

We were soon met with thick rhododendrons that grow in hedges along the trail, sometimes forming a bridal archway that showers pale pink petals. Around every turn is a surprise: a rock formation, a meadow, a stream, or a breathtaking summit. It's an environment where moss and fungi grow in abundance, and wool socks never dry.

At the end of our very first day, I began to have issues with aching heels. I'd naively worn barefoot shoes, imagining my feet would comfortably mold to the rocks underfoot. Instead, every step felt like an assault from a sledgehammer. At one point, I schemed on how to hitchhike to a local outfitter to purchase thick-soled trail runners, but in the end, our arrival at the nearest crossroads was after hours. So, on we trudged on.

The following evening, the water source we'd been counting on never materialized. The forest was blistering hot, and hydrating was crucial. As nightfall approached, we gave up on finding water and focused on conserving it. We went to bed thirsty, woke up thirsty, and skipped the oatmeal we'd planned for breakfast. Our AT app told us that the next water source was five miles away. As fog rose from the green forest floor, we hefted our packs and headed north towards visions of waterfalls and sloshing bellies of water.

I was panicked with thirst as we arrived at a murky little stream that trickled under sticks and around velvety pads of moss. Hanna and I flew down the embankment, ducked under wilting branches, and crouched in the dampness to filter our water. We drank like camels then sojourned in that wonderous place that magically pivoted our focus from survival back to just enjoying the hike.

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Throughout the remaining section, staying hydrated remained a challenge as temperatures were blistering hot, water sources were often dried up, and we sweated profusely. We learned to drink heartily at every random bubbling spring or creek, but even with two liters, it couldn't cut the chronic thirst that came with great distances between water sources. I often felt the fatigue and queasiness of dehydration.

Along with the sweating came the funk of body odor so malodorous, we couldn't stand ourselves, much less each other. To conserve pack weight, I left my deodorant at home, reasoning that baby powder would be enough. I soon learned, however, that the sickly-sweet smell of body odor mixed with baby powder is spectacularly foul—even worse than regular BO. On day three, when a sluggish brown river presented itself, we both dove in, stripped off our shirts, and scrubbed every fold and crevice.

The pain in my feet grew into bone-aching agony. I complained frequently and wore on Hanna's nerves. At one of our lowest days, my period started, and I felt sick for several hours. Hanna talked about throwing in the towel and nearly lured me to defeat with temptations of my Sleep Number bed and pepperoni pizza. I convinced her that we only needed to take one more step—and then one more.

That same day we encountered a rattlesnake with the attitude of a prison guard working a double shift. The small but feisty reptile was standing at attention and had taken residence squarely in the center of the trail. We hollered, threw sticks, and like grumpy old women, clacked our trekking poles together. In the end, the rattler won, and we maneuvered generously off trail. Once a safe distance away, we laughed at the encounter.

The AT is a very social trail, and we met the friendliest people on earth. Most notably was Chuckwagon, a grizzled seventy something thru-hiker with stormy eyes and a shaggy beard. We caught up with him at a shelter one night and enjoyed spending time with him along with some other thru-hikers. Chuckwagon had an indomitable spirit and refused to stop, even when he staggered into camp hours behind the other hikers. I honestly don't know how he scaled along some of the perilous ledges and rock scrambles that we found so challenging. He eventually slipped behind, and I often wonder if he made it to Maine.

As the miles behind us grew, so did our skills at backpacking. We learned to hang our food bags high in the trees to prevent black bear thievery, set up a tent in a flash, and to cook on a stove that weighed less than an ounce. And we continued to hike. There is no flat terrain on the AT, and I marveled, perhaps complained, that it seemed we were always either climbing a mountain or descending a mountain.

After sleeping in a tent for a few nights, I lost a battle with Hanna, and we swapped over to sleeping in the shelters. These rustic three-walled structures pop up along the AT every ten miles or so. They offer nothing more than the luxury of a roof and are a welcome retreat from the work of setting up a tent. Some nights, Hanna and I shared the shelter with only the resident mice. On other nights, we slept alongside friendly strangers with barely any room to navigate between sleeping bags.

One night we fell asleep in a shelter alone, but sometime in the middle of the night, a lithe silhouette whisked into camp wearing a headlamp that

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sprouted light like a cyclops's laser. I watched the yellow beam bounce around the forest, never getting a good look at the bearer, not even when the alien-like creature took a squat in the shrubs. When the new arrival entered the shelter, I tried not to squirm, even as I imagined Charles Manson bedding down beside me. When I woke up in the morning, our nighttime visitor was gone.

I shouldn't have been worried. The kindness of the AT community is renowned. One evening, as we milled around a particularly crowded shelter, a shirtless young man arrived to cook his evening meal on a crooked picnic table. After his water turned into a rapid boil, the pot tipped, and boiling water poured all over his abdomen. I jumped up to administer first aid, but as blisters began to form over a field of scarlet skin, it became evident that he needed more advanced medical care.

A married thru-hiking couple in their fifties volunteered to escort him to the nearest road six miles back. They had already hiked twenty miles that day, and it amazed me that they would tack on an additional twelve. The heroic couple appeared later that night after everyone was softly shifting in their sleeping bags. They quietly prepared a meal in the dark and received no accolades.

Life on the AT is never predictable, and that includes the weather. On one occasion, the sky suddenly blackened as if a woolen rug had been tossed over the heavens. Almost as quickly, a teeth-rattling thunderstorm dropped like an axe, and the sky opened up. This all happened as we were beginning our last steep ascent of the day. We'd been dripping like a colander and neither of us had the stomach to don a rain jacket. We became soaked to the bone and freely welcomed the relief from the heat. Great gullies of water ran down the mountain, and by the time we reached the shelter, we were sloshing around inside our trail runners. We changed into dry clothes then sat back like queens of the mountain to watch the storm. After the sky brightened, and the water dripped light an afterthought from the leaves, a scraggly brown rabbit hopped into camp, and we felt truly blessed.

When we climbed the mountain to the popular lookout, McAfee Knob, temperatures were in the high nineties (Fahrenheit). The heat made this a particularly challenging day, and our packs' weight seemed to be accumulating boulders by the minute. As the day hikers bounced up the mountain with seeming ease, we slumped on a log under a cascade of powerlines and gloomily wallowed in a healthy dose of self-pity. We then dragged our way up to the summit to an iconic photo-op on a jutting ledge. I dutifully posed for pictures, but beneath my smile, I was nauseated, exhausted, and severely dehydrated.

You cannot have an adventure in the wilderness without crossing paths with a furry friend. When a small black bear bounded onto the trail in front of us, it took my brain a long second to register any potential danger. By the time, the gears had locked into place, the adolescent bear had scurried through the brambles and disappeared up a hill. This was a highly populated section of trail, and Hanna and I took great delight in 'warning' the southbound hikers of the bear ahead and watching their eyes grow to the size of plums.

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On the last day of our hike, Hanna and I entered Lambert's Meadow shelter. The area was dank and overgrown with weeds. As we contemplated the gloom, I spotted a large copperhead slithering underneath the dilapidated shelter. Even more alarming was a large hole in the center of the floor that had been patched with a slab of wood. Determined to find a new place to spend the night, we rested at the picnic table a few steps from a stone firepit. Incredibly, a second copperhead poked his head out from between the rocks as if he were a stage actor peering from behind a velvet curtain. Hanna and I screamed like prepubescent girls and then clambered to the top of the picnic table. Stoked by his audience's reaction, the snake slithered out, prompting a third copperhead to appear. As if we learned nothing from the rattlesnake, we clacked our trekking poles futilely together while the two poisonous serpents nonchalantly wound their way towards us. Shuddering with fear, we gathered our gear, leapt from the picnic table, and darted like greyhounds towards the trail. After that, every twig was a copperhead, and every fallen branch its rotund mother. Hanna and I came into the wilderness to experience trail life, and we succeeded with an epic Indiana Jones snake-pit adventure.

We raced to put distance between us and Lambert's Meadow. When we reached a stream, we paused to double up on our supply of water. There would be no more filtering until we reached the town of Daleville, but the water's weight made our backpacks miserably heavy, and we agonized between sleeping on the trail, or dumping some water and hiking the last ten miles in. Finally, the lure of air conditioning and food that didn't come in foil wrappers was too hard to resist. I called Mike to come pick us up.

On the last section of trail, we scaled over and around silvery rocks along a breathtaking mountain ridge. The sky was crisp and blue, and the path was dotted with boulders and shaggy pines. Below were winding gray rivers and green farm fields that connected in an endless patchwork quilt. I appreciated none of it and could only anticipate getting to the bottom of what felt to be a very wretched mountain.

The last two miles we descended on a gravel fire road. As the hardwoods reappeared, silence overtook us. Only the softness of our breath and the click of our trekking poles cut through the air. My feet throbbed with pain, and my knees were as stiff as rusty ladder hinges. I was so spent, I feared falling down the sloping mountainside.

And then the car appeared ahead, and tears sprang to my eyes. My husband Mike emerged from the car and grew larger and larger until he was there, and I was in his arms. He was all warmth and smiles as he politely tucked us into the car and rolled down all the windows to dilute the stink that followed us like flies from the forest.

The following day, I was physically ill and spent most of the day in bed. It took months for the pain in my heels to gradually go away. At the time, I didn't think I ever wanted to hike again, but almost imperceptibly, the drive to strap on my backpack returned once more.

I cherish those days I spent in the wilderness with Hanna and those memories that belong only to us. It's not insanity as one might assume. In the hiking community, we call it type two fun. What feels like misery at the time is later recalled with nostalgia. I will often abandon my car at the

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top of a mountaintop somewhere to disappear into the forest for shorter, more reasonable hikes.

When dreams of doing an AT thru-hike periodically re-emerge, I begrudgingly admit to myself that I wouldn't have the fortitude to continue such an enduring mental game. On the other hand, I believe I proved to myself that I *could* build up the physical stamina. After all, hiking is easy. It's only a matter of taking one more step—and then one more.