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Anonymity and Identity: A Thru-Hike of the Appalachian Trail

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Reflective Essay

The goal of my creative project was to delve into my trail experience with a critical outward and inward eye. Hiking narratives conventionally imply or feature the transformation of a protagonist. This assumption makes sense, since trails seem to be progress incarnate. They are more or less a straight line that a person walks from one end to the other. There is a commonly held notion that the ground covered on such a journey coincides with a commensurate internal change. This idea was what drew me to the Appalachian Trail. I was attracted to the idea of transformation and the shedding of an old identity in exchange for a new, rugged, outdoor identity. My reasons for hiking the Appalachian Trail therefore resembled those of others who have undertaken similar journeys in the past. In *A Walk in the Woods* [i], Bill Bryson describes his reasons for pursuing the same footpath, saying, "I wanted a little of that swagger that comes with being able to gaze at a far horizon through eyes of chipped granite." Bryson describes wanting to feel like a tougher version of the person he was before the Trail. Cheryl Strayed sought the Pacific Crest Trail for similar reasons, seeking to hike herself to a better version, as she described in her memoir, *Wild* [ii]. Her narrative helped me to form the retelling of my own narrative by tying together memories from both on and off the Trail.

I found that the texts that helped me most in my writing process had less to do with the subject of hiking than with the subject of remembering. I read several exceptional memoirs that were indispensable when it came to delving into my experience and retelling it authentically. Michelle Zauner's memoir, *Crying in H Mart* [iii] described her relationship with her mother. As she watched her mother deteriorate from cancer, Zauner contemplated the role that her Korean mother played in the formation of her identity as a biracial Asian American woman. The text

portrayed a conflicted relationship; Zauner expressed frustration with and profound love for her mother. Reading Zauner's account of a conflicted relationship that helped form her identity helped me to channel my own conflicted feelings about several people (Hugh, Brendan, and Chris) featured in my journey. Zauner's narrative also helped me to understand how my relationship with those people affected my own identity. Another important memoir that informed my thesis was *Educated*[iv] by Tara Westover, which explores the life of a woman who was raised in a Mormon family. Westover's attention to detail in recounting early life experiences helped to inform my own recounting of events that predated the Trail.

I saw other echoes of my experience in the works of other authors. When I completed my journey, I was reminded of a quote from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* [v]: "I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, well-ordered lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless emptiness." Standing atop Mount Katahdin in Maine, I related to the messiness, madness, and emptiness that Kerouac described; Kerouac's protagonists were a helpful point of reference from which to draw inspiration.

My creative project complements the pre-existing body of travel and wilderness literature by adding several unique perspectives. For one thing, my hike was precipitated by a novel cultural moment, the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the feelings of isolation that accompanied the pandemic's era, and because school was virtual, I was enabled by the circumstances to go hiking. The unique cultural mindset of the time is something that will set my account of the Trail apart from other accounts. The Trail during the pandemic posed a different

challenge than in the past. Not only was I hiking across the East Coast, but I was doing so amidst the largest pandemic in a century.

My project also sought to add a different perspective to the traditional journey memoir. For one thing, I wanted to add a queer voice to the field of outdoor nonfiction. When it comes to wilderness literature, queer voices are sparce. They exist, but the space their work occupies is smaller and more niche. This is especially true for queer voices in hiking narratives and on the Appalachian Trail. From immersing myself in Appalachian Trail hiking culture, I noticed a dearth of minorities in hiker demographics. People of color and openly queer people were virtually nonexistent; as a result, the amount of written work available from those perspectives is much needed. To inform this perspective, I read *States of Desire* [vi] by Edmund White, which provided a framework for examining new places through a queer lens. White situated his own experience seamlessly into observations about the culture of various American cities. In addition to White, the Outside article "Going It Alone [vii]," by Rahawa Haile helped inform my perspective as queer hiker on the Trail. Haile was a woman of color who thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail just a few years before I did. Although we experienced the Trail differently, I could relate in degrees to her feelings of fear and otherness while hiking, and her article allowed me to draw from a new perspective, rather than the somewhat homogenous one that usually informs Appalachian Trail literature.

During the three and a half months that I spent conducting immersion research while hiking the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine, I therefore sought to examine and document aspects of both internal and external identity on the Appalachian Trail. When it came to internal identity, I wanted to see if my identity would be affected by the journey. Would I feel different after completing the trip? More confident? I discovered that Trail culture involves the

shedding of off-trail identities in the adoption of a nickname called a "trail name." Trail names are given to a hiker by other hikers, usually commenting on a distinguishing feature or on-trail moment. Trail names function to offer hikers a sense of pseudo-anonymity, allowing them to discard their off-trail name sometimes entirely as they continue their hike. In my thesis, I paid attention to how trail and given names could shade identity on the Trail.

To conduct research, I employed several methods. I kept daily journals to keep as detailed an account of the experience as I could. Sometimes it was difficult to know what was important to include. The process of documenting fleeting locations, people, and emotions against a backdrop of physical discomfort, exhaustion, homesickness, and constant motion was often overwhelming, but it also provided me with a well of experience from which to form a narrative about my time on the trail. I also created a blog to distill my journal entries into concrete and presentable ideas that would later inform parts of my thesis. I wrote posts on my phone and posted them online throughout my journey.

Upon completion of the Trail, I returned home and began work on the project. Since I sought to examine identity, it took several months for me to parse through my thoughts about the journey and come to a better understanding of how the trip had affected me. Eventually through the process of remembering and of writing about the experience, I came to a better understanding of how the trip impacted my sense of self. The process of reading, writing, researching, and hiking has afforded me a better appreciation of the outdoors and of the endless possibilities of memoir writing.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a memoir about my thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail in the spring of 2021. The Appalachian Trail is a 2190-mile footpath stretching from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mount Katahdin, Maine. The memoir dissects my reasons for undertaking the journey, introduces my travel companions, and contemplates my relationship with my new friends and with myself. Each chapter highlights a particular scene in my journey — an hour, a few days, a week, several states — in which I encountered a certain person, town, or conflict. Hiking the Trail means grappling with both internal and external conflict in a constant state of motion; as my surroundings changed during my trek north, I analyze my sense of self and what it means to be a hiker.

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Chapter 1: Beginnings

I stood atop Springer Mountain and saw fog. I panted, breathing the damp air. A cold sweat had spread across my chest during my climb to the summit. Under the weight of my fifty-pound pack, even light exertion became taxing, goading my heart into an incessant tattoo. Nonetheless, I had achieved the summit, the first hurdle on my long journey north.

The fog pulsed and swam before me, a mass of impenetrable vapor. I looked out over a ledge into what would have been a scenic view on a clearer day, but instead offered a window of dense, anonymous gray. Near my feet was a metal plaque laid in a stone. It read: "*Appalachian National Scenic Trail. Springer Mountain Elevation, 3782. Southern Terminus*." Next to the letters was a map of the East Coast with the thin line of the Trail running through fourteen states, Georgia to Maine.

For some hikers, those who hike south from Maine on the Appalachian Trail, this sign was a hard-fought reward. It meant they had walked over 2000 miles and completed their journey after months of toil. For me, it was just a piece of metal, one small detail of my surroundings on the first day of my hike. It was not unlike one of the trees or bushes I hiked past on the way to the summit. I would soon forget the plaque on Springer Mountain as I sought the Trail's imposing northern terminus, Mount Katahdin.

I lingered on the summit, reluctant to miss a break in the fog, the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the Blue Ridge Mountains, my first chance to see what lay ahead on my journey. The fog did not break. It remained impassive and gray, a closed gate offering no answers. I adjusted the straps of my pack, trying to make them more comfortable. Soon I would grow used to my pack's weight against my back. I continued down the Trail, its path shrouded with fog.

In the spring of 2021, I found myself thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail on a gap semester from college. I saw it as a place where a person could be transformed. Before setting aside months to hike, I'd only had fleeting encounters with the Trail. In the summer of 2019, I hiked forty miles of the Appalachian Trail in Virginia along the Blue Ridge Parkway. I drove seven hours from my home in New Jersey down to the backwoods of Virginia to begin my four-day trek. Highways gave way to one-lane roads which trickled to gravel lanes, evaporating to dust in my truck's wake. Confederate flags like sentinels greeted me as I followed my GPS farther from the main roads. I hitchhiked for the first time on this hiking trip. My friend Megan and I dropped my car at our endpoint, then drove in her car to the beginning of the section. We decided to flag a ride instead of walking to the trailhead with our loaded packs. The man who picked us up drove a red sedan with a kayak strapped to the roof. He had a cigarette-yellow beard, tobacco-stained fingernails, a creased face. He wore sunglasses and a bandana. A loaded ashtray occupied the center console, lilting with haze.

Over the next few days, Megan and I walked north on the Trail. Because it was May, we met lots of northbound thru-hikers on their way to Maine, most having started in Georgia around March. I began to admire their lifestyle: wake up, walk, eat, go to sleep, repeat. I saw a rugged pleasure in abstaining from showers and deodorant. I liked the idea of being nomadic and hitching rides with strangers. The people I met put their lives on hold to hike the Trail. They had shed their old identities and adopted a new persona, assuming a nickname called a trail name. A woman named Wildchild had quit her job at a disciplinary high school for troubled youth; Workshop took six-months leave from his job in finance; Recluse Man was a Buddhist monk from Germany in the U.S. to build monasteries.

Whenever we met another hiker, I added their trail name and backstory to a list. By the end of the trip, I'd collected pages worth of people: Thoreau, Zeus, Tiny, So Far So Good, Rope, Waterfall, Icy Hot, Nugget. They seemed so picturesque, captured mid-hike in my notebook. I began to imagine myself in their place. I pictured a more rugged, matured version of myself. All my insecurities would disappear, I thought, if I could do what they did.

I realize now that I was idolizing the wrong thing about those hikers. I loved the way they moved about confidently, bearing the burden of their packs with poise and a rugged determination. I thought that the Trail would afford me the same qualities, as if hiking were a jacket that I could slip on, just as they had. What I failed to realize was that all these people were older than I was; they'd lived full lives before they came to the Trail. Wild Child didn't get her composure from the Trail, she got it from those troubled youth she worked with; Waterfall was married with a kid on the way; Zeus was an army vet. The Trail had not molded them into their current selves. For decades, they'd been molding themselves into the hikers I met on the AT.

At the time, this was unclear to me. I saw tough hikers and I thought I could be just as tough if I shed my old identity and assumed their lifestyle. More and more, I found myself in pursuit of the outdoor identity. When I hiked long-distance, a part of my ego took over that was difficult to override. I wanted to be the person who had blisters and who slept in the woods for weeks. I wanted to be at the center of an authentic experience, the kind I had read about in so many hiking stories. I wanted to be someone who was different from the person I had grown to dislike.

Every year on her birthday, my friend Mary went skydiving. When she invited me to come along for her twenty-first birthday in the fall of 2020, I agreed immediately. A few days later, I sat in a small passenger plane as it ascended thousands of feet into the air above Maryland

farmland. When it came time to jump, my diving buddy, a professional skydiver, strapped me to his chest. He guided me to the edge. From 14,000 feet I saw the ground, chunked into squares of pale fields and verdant forests. We took the plunge, the ground hurtling up at me, the updraft wiping all thoughts from my mind except "WOOOOOOOOOO!" Back on the ground, I couldn't stop smiling. I had just jumped from a plane. My insecurities suddenly felt small, foolish even.

The feeling of grandiosity wore off, though. The same semester, I began going on trips underground with my school's caving club. But just like any drug, when I came off the high of adventuring, I returned to reality. I was the same person, just now I was the same person who jumped out of a plane or had been in a cave. I needed to up my dosage. Eventually, this would culminate in my 2,190-mile thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail.

Just a few months later, I lay on a hotel bed in Amicalola Falls State Park, Georgia. My father and I had flown south that morning for me to start my hike the next day on February 27. Lying there, I had no idea what the next days and months would hold. After my brief stint in the woods in 2019, it was hard to imagine calling the Trail home for more than a weekend.

The weather was poor. The view outside our window was a gray wall, fog like concrete filling my eyes and mind. I tried to journal about what I was feeling, but my thoughts wouldn't flow. Only a few hours earlier, I had sat on my bed in New Jersey, anticipating what it would feel like to be in Georgia, so close to the start of my journey. Now, I was on another bed a thousand miles away, but it felt the same. I imagined I would feel a sense of purpose at the beginning of my journey, but now I couldn't remember why I wanted to hike, or if I'd ever had a reason in the first place. Eventually I wrote a cursory entry in my journal:

"*Everyone's telling me how much fun I'm going to have and I hope they're right. I hope I don't get my hopes up. People keep saying I'll gain a lot from it but I'm not sure I know what it'll be yet. Maybe independence? A greater self-understanding? Clout? Killer calves*?"

My boyfriend at the time, Chris, had written me a letter for each state I would pass through on the Trail. I held the stack of them, fourteen in all. I considered the unopened envelope with "Georgia" scrawled over it, then ripped it open. The remaining thirteen felt like distant birthdays: vaguely looming but impossibly out of reach. Eventually, there would come times when I would open multiple letters in one night, having passed through states so quickly that the letters piled up like unread emails. I was too exhausted to do anything at night other than set up camp, inhale my dinner, and fall asleep.

Chris's first letter contained general encouragement and cursory state trivia. Georgia is the Peach State; the fourth state to join the Union in 1788; state bird: Brown Thrasher; state flower: Cherokee Rose.

On the back, he'd listed wilderness safety tips from his Eagle Scout days. Many of them were familiar. Before leaving, I'd heard lots of them from my father and his friends, my grandfather, and my uncles. The men in the family rallied to give their two cents. Repeatedly, I'd been told to build fires, watch out for bears and coyotes, to remember the sun rises in the east and falls in the west. Weeks before I departed for the trail, my father purchased me a $300 wilderness tracking device in case of emergency.

"In case you fall down a ravine and can't get out," he'd explained confidently.

"Like those commercials about old people falling in the shower," I said, handling the device. He snatched back the GPS.

As I read through Chris's letter, skimming his ambiguous advice about "not looking wild animals in the eyes," I felt myself growing strangely annoyed. I wasn't scared of animals. I wasn't afraid of getting lost or falling into a ravine or getting hypothermia. I was scared of reaching the end of the Trail and feeling unchanged. I wanted to be transformed. One of my coworkers, a woman named Courtney, told me that the Trail would change my life. It was a common piece of encouragement, and I began to believe that simply completing this kind of journey was guaranteed to give me a level-up; I wanted to hike my way to a version of myself that I liked. Sitting on the hotel bed in rural Georgia, my greatest worry was not bears or falling tree limbs, but that the journey would not be life changing.

I'd achieved lots of my goals in the past, but none of them made me feel any different about myself. In my senior year of high school, I qualified for Youth Crew Nationals in the men's double category. For a few days, I rode on a high from the win. I replayed the feeling of catching water perfectly in-time with my partner, my lungs and legs burning in pursuit of the finish line. Like after skydiving, my insecurities felt foolish as I reveled in the success. But eventually it wore off. I told myself that the Trail was not Youth Crew Nationals. It was the Appalachian Trail. It would be different.

The next day, I checked in at a registration table. The man running the booth told me that the Trail is a marathon, not a sprint. Only twenty-five percent of those who start the Trail in Georgia finish in Maine within the same calendar year. He urged me not to rush into big miles. Afterwards, I did the math on my phone. In the case of the AT, it's more accurate to say that it's about eighty-five marathons and five months long, spanning fourteen states.

Maybe I internalized this message, because I noticed myself talking in terms of "if" instead of "when" I finish. At the beginning of my hike, I was very noncommittal about my

status on the Trail. I identified as a "thru-hiker," someone hiking the entire Trail from start to finish, but I always gave myself an out. If someone asked if I was thru-hiking, I would say "That's the plan," or "Hopefully!" Never a definitive "Yes." It was as if, during those early days on the Trail, I began to grasp the vastness of the journey ahead. To be blindly confident that I would travel across the coast unscathed was brazen. It was to ignore the miles of brutal terrain, freezing cold, mental exhaustion, even Lyme disease and leg injuries. Acknowledging the possibility of failure would make the defeat easier, should it come.

On my eighth day, I saw what the Trail could throw at me. That day, I'd crossed the Georgia-North Carolina border, reaching my first milestone in just over a week. Up until then, the weather had been mild. In my first eight days, it didn't rain. Temperatures leveled at the mid-forties during the day, dropping lower at night. My eighth night, however, was forecasted to reach the low twenties, lower with wind chill, with gusts up to thirty miles per hour. I camped at the Standing Indian Shelter where I encountered a pair of hikers.

The man stood guard of an area behind the shelter. He warned me not to come near, he and his companion were sick, she worse than him. Occasionally I could hear her retching, and he would rush over to wrap a papery aluminum emergency blanket around her shoulders. She wore a bright purple down-jacket which stood out garishly against the winter browns, like a piece of discarded plastic in the pristine woods. Later in the evening, a team of wilderness EMTs arrived. They set up an IV drip to replenish fluids. An hour later, they walked her off the trail. She walked hunched over, white as a sheet, stopping for breaks every few steps. The pair were thru-hikers, like me. I wasn't sure what they had — Noro, maybe giardia. Either way, I was less than 100 miles from the beginning of the Trail; more was surely in store.

That night, I bundled myself in my down sleeping bag. Underneath, I wore a t-shirt, long-sleeve, fleece, gloves, wool hat, and wool socks. The wind battered my tent's tarp, composing a cacophony of fluttering nylon and creaking branches. Other hikers told me that, because of the low temperatures, I should sleep with anything that I didn't want frozen. Resultantly, I shared my sleeping bag with both my water bottles; my cell phone, and charging blocks, which the cold would sap of battery; and my water filter, which would crack if frozen. Rolling over in my tent, I felt like a barefoot father navigating the Lego-strewn floor of his child's bedroom. After a fitful night, the sun rose mercifully to a raw, cold morning.

Even though my hike had only just begun, already I felt as if I had endured some of what the Trail could throw at me. I could combat the temperature. I could fight off infection where others succumbed. I was cold and tired, but I was moving. I realized I was a strong hiker, well-equipped to hike long miles.

Eventually, and not-surprisingly, hiking would turn into a competition for me. I would start hiking with a group that hiked fast. Being in a fast group appealed to me. I wanted to be elite, athletic, and a front-runner, the qualities I hope to embody on the Trail. In the following months, I would come to chase some sense of enlightenment; when I couldn't find it, I would chase it faster and faster until my muscles broke down and my sweat smelled of vinegar. But this was all ahead of me. At the time, I had not even acquired a trail name yet. I was still "Nick," although that would soon change as well.

Chapter 2: Mojo

When I first met Hugh, he was just a Bitmoji, a characterized avatar, on the other end of my phone. I had posted a short message in the AT Thru-Hiker 2021 Facebook group, offering my Snapchat to any hikers my age who wanted to compare notes. A few hikers added me, including Hugh. Hugh had taken a gap year after graduating from high school in 2020, deferring Harvard until the following fall. Hugh had just finished a homestay in rural Maine through World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOFing, for short). Next, he was gearing up for part-two of his gap year on the Appalachian Trail.

I found out Hugh was starting his hike sometime in the beginning of March so he could reach Maine early that summer, leaving time to relax before starting school in August. I was on the same schedule, and I thought Hugh would be a good traveling partner. I pictured myself on the Trail with a flashy band of friends; from what I knew about Hugh, he seemed the kind of person I wanted to be associated with on the Trail. He was smart, well-traveled, independent. Aside from college, the AT would be my first time striking out on my own; for Hugh, the AT was just another facet of his adventure-packed gap year. I wanted in. I posed the idea to him over Snapchat.

"Yeah maybe," he said. "Just not sure exactly when I'm starting." I took his evasiveness as a rejection. Hugh was meeting up with another freshman from Harvard in Georgia. Maybe they didn't want me crashing. We ended up starting on different days, but we kept in touch as we navigated the early Trail's wintry Georgian landscape.

The Trail was a small community so early in the season. During the first week or so, I met hikers who had run into Hugh. By then, he already had a trail family, calling themselves the

"Gap Year Gang." I wondered how Hugh had accumulated a group so quickly. Thru-hikers I met referred to him as "Mojo." I considered with envy how Hugh not only had a trail-family but also a trail-name right from the get-go. I was hiking north with a loose group of companions but none of them felt like a family yet. It felt like the first few days of college, when everyone is friendly but noncommittal, on the lookout for the best possible options. My trail name had not arrived yet either. It was nearly three weeks since I had started in Georgia, and I hadn't done anything noteworthy enough to be dubbed. I tried not to rush it, but I also felt like I lacked a Trail identity. I was still the same "Nick" who started in Georgia.

My first near brush with Hugh came after I exited the Smokies on March 17. The Trail winds for seventy-one miles through The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, about a four-day trek through fog and high winds. On March 15, I summited Clingman's Dome, the highest point on the Appalachian Trail at 6,643 feet, then quickly descended the mountain to escape the blasts of flurried March wind. Two days later, when the Trail shot out of the park onto I-40, I was grateful to be delivered from the rugged terrain and to be heading towards the first taste of civilization in nearly 100 miles. I walked under a highway overpass marked with white AT blazes (a jarring transition after 250 miles of blazed trees) and followed the Trail about a mile into the woods off the freeway. My destination was Standing Bear, a hostel I had been warned not to stay at by a woman named Lucky Penny who I met in the Smokies. Lucky Penny had thru-hiked in 2018 with her daughter and made the mistake of staying at Standing Bear.

"They offer you weed and beer and then make you work to pay it off. It's a nightmare," she warned. "And there's bedbugs!"

Lucky Penny was not the only hiker I met who attested to Standing Bear's dangers, but I met plenty of others who planned to grab a bunk after hiking through the Smokies. Despite its

reputation, lots of hikers fork over the forty-dollar bunk fee because of Standing Bear's convenient location. It's the first hostel that northbound hikers hit after leaving the Smokies. In other words, it's the first opportunity in eighty miles to sleep in a bed, escape the Smokies' notoriously unpredictable weather, and eat a meal that's never been freeze dried. I was ready for anything that resembled civilization after my hike through the park, but once I arrived at the hostel, I had some misgivings.

My initial thought was that it was a commune. That, or a puppy mill. Month-old pit bulls wandered around the property gnawing at people's boots and stumbling over their own paws. Cute, but probably illegal. The grounds were peppered with clapboard shacks that served as the bunkhouses, the outhouse, the communal kitchen, and private rooms. One was painted in fading colors, each vertical board on the shack a different shade of chipped blue, pink, orange. The concessions building was carved with flowers and leaves and inlaid with broken glass from old beer bottles. There was a quaintness to the place but also a grime and grittiness that seemed to run deeper than the old shacks. There was no check-in desk, no reception area. Instead, there was a porch.

"Hello?" I called into an open door.

Through the doorway I could see into the main house. Piles of books lay stacked on the floor. Maps of northern Georgia littered the ground; there was a broken table fan, a cat curled into a ball next to a pile of mouse droppings. A woman named Maria appeared in the doorway. I told her that I was looking to buy some food. She handed me a clipboard.

"The store is up there," she indicated the concrete building decorated with colored glass and imprinted leaves. "Fees are on the honor system. Write down what you buy, and you pay when you leave."

The store resembled a fallout shelter if it were stocked by lazy apocalypse preppers. A drink cooler held expired milk cartons, watermelon Mountain Dew, root beer, a single Roma tomato, and bagels wrapped in cellophane. There were pull-out drawers full of food that seemed to have been gathered from all different places and slapped with a label. One of the drawers declared: “Candy bars, $0.75” and offered dated Pay Days and Baby Ruth. They sold used boots that looked like they’d been swiped right off hikers’ feet. I’d seen enough of Standing Bear at this point; I didn’t want to wait around to experience the drug den side of it, in addition to the commune part. However, I knew Hugh and his group were about a day ahead of me. Just as I would come to rely on him later, I found myself texting Hugh before making the decision to stay at Standing Bear.

“Hey, quick question,” I probed. “Did you guys pass through Standing Bear? Place seems weird.”

Hugh responded quickly.

“I got some food there but didn’t stay the night. I got Midsommar vibes,” he said, in reference to Ari Aster’s film about a Swedish death cult.

When my travel companions arrived, they wanted to stay; they didn’t like the idea of heading back up the Trail when there were bunks and food at our fingertips. A sign in the shop informed me that pizza was available for purchase, and I found myself suddenly persuaded. Part of me also wanted to experience something Hugh had shied away from, even though I’d never met him.

I asked Maria about purchasing a pizza. She disappeared into a building labeled “Employees Only” and emerged with a large frozen Digiorno. Then she directed me to the kitchen, an open-air shack with sombreros nailed to the ceiling and books lining its wood

shelves. One of them read “Liberalism is a Mental Illness” down the spine. A primitive pizza oven sat in the corner.

“Lucky you,” she said. “You’re first in line for the oven.”

As I waited for my pizza to cook, I was joined by other hikers who sat around the table drinking beers. They played cards and made jabs at one another. Some cradled their own Digiorno as they waited for the oven to spit out its current pizza. I’d met most of the hikers in the Smokies. I knew them by name and had shared shelters with them in the park: Yip and her husband, Lorax; Hoosier the forty-nine-year-old retiree from Indiana; my friends Santa and Yung Chef; Two Tents, who returned to the Trail after being sent home during the pandemic in 2020; and a handful of other hikers. I was happy to be surrounded by people who, despite being virtual strangers, were familiar and welcoming. One of my companions, Santa, a nineteen-year-old University of Rhode Island drop-out, guarded four cans of Busch.

“Where did you get those?” I asked.

“Over there,” he said, indicating the porch where I talked to Maria earlier. “They didn’t even card me,” he smirked proudly. “I never get carded,” he said, cracking the top on one of his beers, “because of my beard.”

Santa gloated, but I thought it was obvious they didn’t card him. Standing Bear seemed to operate by its own rules, and a few cans of Busch never hurt anyone. I walked myself over to the porch to get my own. Shamelessly, I asked Maria if I could get some White Claws.

“Do you have ID?” she asked.

“What?” I said, taken aback.

“ID,” she repeated. “You need to be twenty-one to buy alcohol,” she said.

I wasn't annoyed, just confused. I felt like from what I'd seen at Standing Bear, regulations were more a suggestion than gospel. Santa had bought beer, and I was way more mature than Santa. Unfortunately, suspicion is raised in response to appearance, not internal maturity. I still had about three and a half months until my twenty-first birthday on July fourth. I was planning to celebrate it on-trail.

"My bad. I'll go grab it," I said stupidly.

I returned to the food shack and immediately told everyone what had happened. In response to the story, they shouted a single word which would become my new name, filling the shack, and making my chest swell with pride: "ID!" They couldn't believe I had been carded at Standing Bear. Neither could people I met farther north. I would meet a hiker in New Hampshire who bought magic mushrooms at Standing Bear.

"You do sort of have a baby face," said a woman named Monica. It was true, I have always been mistaken for younger than I am. Santa had a beard, which added a few years to his face. Even without shaving for weeks, the best I could produce was a scraggly shadow along my jawline. Not enough to fill the gap between me and some cans of Busch.

I liked my new trail name, and I was happy to finally have one. I felt like I could assume the anonymity of the Trail now. I only had to be "Nick" when I wanted to be, and I was glad to be able to step out of myself for once. For the next three months, I would become "ID." My friends would come to call me "ID" as much as they would call me by my real name, sometimes more than my real name. I had come to the Trail searching for a new identity, and I had gotten it, at least in the most literal sense.

Yip offered me one of her White Claws while I ate my Digiorno.

"It's fine, he's my son," she joked to the other hikers in the kitchen, as if she were pouring me my first sip of wine, saying "Here, have a little, just to try."

At Standing Bear, I met a family of seven who were hiking the Trail. Their oldest kid was nineteen, their youngest fourteen. The AT was their third long-distance hike; they'd already completed the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail since 2018. Completing the Appalachian Trail would earn them the "Triple Crown," a weighty accomplishment in the hiking community. All their kids were homeschooled from the Trail.

"We teach history, Latin, and Bible on the trail," their dad, Vince, explained. "They listen to the lessons on their phones in the morning and we all discuss at lunch." Vince's wife, Monica, asked me what I studied. I told her I double majored in English and Psychology. She laughed.

"You must be drowning in subjectivity," she said.

For dinner, the Standing Bear staff cooked up chili dogs, coleslaw, and baked beans, which they served from the porch. My friends and I ate with the other hikers in the open-air shack-kitchen as rain began to pick up, pattering on the tin roof and drawing mud from the gravel walkways. A large rat scampered across a shelf and disappeared into a hole in the wall.

I looked around at the hikers I'd hiked here with. Although I hadn't exactly chosen them, my companions had become a sort of family. We accidentally ended up at the same shelters each night, so now we planned to end up at them together. I realized that's how friendships form in the first place: not from calculated planning and cost-benefit analysis of desired traits, but from proximity. I looked around at the friends I had made: Gramps, Nasa, Ricky, Santa. Some of them weren't the friends I would have chosen, but I admired them, nonetheless. Part of me still wanted what Hugh had, but I was glad I stayed at Standing Bear, and I figured Hugh was too far ahead for us to ever cross paths.

A few days after leaving Standing Bear, I reached Hot Springs, North Carolina, a sleepy trail town along the French Broad River. My friends and I drank milkshakes at the Hillbilly Market. Ricky purchased rolling paper at a tobacco shop which had a live rooster on checkout counter, and I bought a piece of painted wood from a man who sold art at a popup shop. He had a white beard and wore an American flag bathing suit. There was poetry carved into each piece of wood, which he read aloud when you examined it. The images in the wood were strange, but beautiful: babies and spaceships and flags and fire and lovers, all brightly colored and rendered in a childlike hand. We stayed for the night at the Laughing Heart hostel.

When the sun set, a group of hikers started a bonfire in the yard. That was where we met Fire Bow, a student from New Paltz on gap semester. Fire Bow was bubbly and talkative. She told us how she'd had an old trail name, something like "Duck" or "Spring," but changed it to "Fire Bow" just the other day.

"Isn't it so much more majestic?" she asked. "Someone called me that, and I was like 'No one has ever called me their Fire Bow before!'"

She stuck a cigarette in her mouth and held it there as she sparked a lighter. The tip glowed orange and she held it between two fingers, took a drag. Then she pulled it away from her mouth as she closed her eyes and exhaled the smoke into the cold air, like breath. I was surprised she smoked, but I wasn't sure why. I'd thought of her as a little silly, but the cigarette made her seem edgy and elegant. She mentioned meeting Hugh and his group of friends.

"You ran into Hugh?" I asked.

"They were here yesterday," she said, taking another drag.

"How far ahead are they?" I asked.

“A day or so? They left this afternoon” Fire Bow said. “They’re all Ivy-League boys,” she added. “Fun group.”

“I hope we catch up to them,” Ricky said. “We’ve been hearing about them for a while, I want to meet them.”

So did I. I liked how everyone knew them and had good things to say. I couldn’t imagine the same was true for me. I felt bland. People who ran into me didn’t talk about me further down the Trail. They couldn’t, I was sure of it.

The next day, my cousin Tori met me in town and took me to lunch at a Waffle House. She was nearing the end of her master’s thesis in religious studies at Wake Forest, just a few hours away. She asked me a lot about the Trail. I told her it was fun but challenging. She was a good listener, but her eyes were dark and vacant. She was finishing something tedious and, even though I’d already hiked farther than I ever had in my life, I was at the very beginning of something tedious. Seeing her so tired and jaded made me wonder if I would look like her in a few months, becoming as trodden down as a grad student but in a fraction of the time.

Two days later, on March 22, I arrived at a shelter that stood in a dusty clearing. It was the end of the day and the site bustled with campers. Hikers sat at the picnic table with their stoves hissing, boiling water for ramen and rice. Some licked peanut butter from titanium sporks. Others reclined in tents scattered around the perimeter of the site. Bear cables held food bags like branches weighed down by arms of fruit. Camp was my favorite part of the day.

The shelter was already occupied by a group of college-age guys, so I chose a spot behind the shelter and pitched my tent. After my sleeping pad was inflated, my quilt unpacked, and my camp clothes donned, I freed my feet from my boots and shoved them into Crocs. I

grabbed my food bag and took a seat at the picnic table in front of the shelter. The group of college-age guys was already eating.

There were four of them scattered around the shelter. One sat upright in his sleeping bag with his Jetboil in hand, scraping the remnants of his dinner from the tinny cup. I noticed one of the guys leaning against a beam, and I recognized him immediately as Hugh. I'd seen him on Snapchat. He was short with straight, sandy-blond hair. The hair clung to itself in strands. I could picture him slicking it back, a comb leaving gelled tine-tracks on his head, like a politician. He was dirty and trail-worn, like we all were, but there was a deeper composure to him that I couldn't place. He looked like no matter how dirty he got, his shit was a little cleaner than ours. I wanted to be friends with him.

"Is your name Hugh?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah," he said, surprised, friendlier than I imagined.

"I'm Nick," I said. "I posted on the Facebook group a few months ago, you added me on Snapchat."

"That's right," said Hugh. "Are you with anyone?"

"I am," I said. "That's Ricky," pointing towards my companion who was rounding the corner of the shelter with his food bag.

"Did we catch up to the Gap Year Gang?" Ricky asked triumphantly. I turned to Hugh.

"That's you guys, right? The Gap Year Gang?" Hugh shot one of the other guys a look, smiling but embarrassed.

"We're working on it. Kimchi likes the name."

"I think it's good!" protested a guy with a slight build and a mousy face. "We're all on gap year and we're a gang." Hugh looked like he hated that.

“Your reputation precedes you, either way,” I told them. “We kept hearing about you guys down trail.”

We exchanged introductions. There were four of them. They’d all recently graduated high school and deferred their prestigious four-year universities until the following fall. First, there was Hugh, who I would soon refer to exclusively by his trail-name.

“Mojo,” he explained, “like Mojo Jojo, the evil genius from the Powerpuff Girls. Because I’m smart.”

I’d never watched the cartoon, but I didn’t need to catch the reference to know that Hugh was intelligent. He had deferred his Harvard acceptance until August.

Then there was Erik, aka “Bronco.” Erik was six-foot-four and all smiles. Like Hugh, he was smart, but he broadcasted it differently. He didn’t tell me he was smart, but it was obvious from the things he talked about on-trail: movies, politics, transistors; he was attending Georgia Tech for engineering in the fall.

There was Theo, aka Kimchi, the mousy hiker who had dubbed the group. Kimchi often packed out whole cabbages from town, was prone to food poisoning on-trail, and was attending Yale in August.

Finally, Sam, aka Strega Nona, was also attending Harvard in the fall. He and Hugh had met on a message board for Harvard freshmen who were taking gap years. I noted how the gang was not technically, as Fire Bow said, entirely ivy-league boys, although according to my companion Nasa, an engineer himself, Georgia Tech is the best school for engineering in the country. The group was impressive. More importantly, they were new blood, and they were fun. I could tell that Ricky thought so, too. Ricky and I had hiked together since day-one, and there was an unspoken understanding between us that our group needed diversification. Even though

he'd adopted a trail name, Yung Chef, I still called him Ricky; when we met, I'd known him as Ricky, and I couldn't seem to think of him any other way.

I got the sense that Hugh was interested in fresh faces, too. Sometimes, when Kimchi, or even Strega Nona said something, Hugh would roll his eyes, or look in another direction. I wanted to be their new blood and I wanted to get to know Hugh.

Ricky and I spent the rest of the daylight hours talking and trading notes with the gap year guys. We caught each other up on our journeys: When did they start? Had they done their first resupply in Helen or Hiawassee? What hostel did they stay at in Franklin? What did they think of Standing Bear? Had they run into Mighty Mouse? By the way, where *was* Mighty Mouse (Ricky and I had not seen the erratic and elusive fifteen-year-old thru-hiker since before the Smokies, but the gap year guys had, in Hot Springs).

Talking to the four of them felt like running into old friends. The connection felt effortless and seemed inevitable; we were all on gaps, after all. When the sun dipped beneath the horizon, and hikers began disappearing into their tents for the night, Ricky and I asked where they were headed the next day.

"We're aiming to camp at the third shelter north of here. About twenty-two miles," said Hugh.

"We were shooting for similar miles," I said. "See you on-trail."

From then on, we phased ourselves into the Gap Year Gang. Their group of four became our collective seven, bolstered by me, Ricky, and Nasa. As we trekked north, I was glad to have found what felt more and more like my own trail family. We hiked more miles per day than most hikers, so the trail became a revolving door of shelters, trail towns, and peripheral hikers. A name would enter our lexicon, only for the hiker to fall behind: Hoosier, Donatello, Heater, Two

Tents, Pneumonia, people we met and knew, but were inevitably caught in our wake, as much in the past as the millions of trees and steps behind us.

I loved traveling and being in new places every day, but the nature of the journey was in constantly parting with every shelter and town and person. Our group granted me a feeling of constancy. When my physical and social landscape wheeled around me, metamorphosing and shifting as I pressed forward, my companions were always at camp at the end of the day. We latched to one another quickly and intimately. In many ways, the Trail is a months-long stay at a sleep-away camp, with no counselors and no rules. We each carried just one set of clothes, and my friends' clothes became as familiar to me as my own. I came to associate Bronco with his red fleece long-sleeve, Ricky with his yellow Hokas, Hugh with his blue Edie Bauer dri-fit t-shirt.

This constancy afforded me a surrogate family, but it could also be exhausting. Constancy meant continual progress, often to the point of discomfort and injury. By the time we reached Damascus, Virginia, the Trail's "unofficial halfway point" at mile 470, I experienced the repercussions of constant wear and tear on the body.

Back in the Smokies when Lucky Penny warned me against staying at Standing Bear, she also told me a bit about her own thru-hike in 2018. As I hiked north, I noticed that lots of people seemed to return to the Trail. Either they came back after a thru-hike to visit, or they returned to re-hike the 2190 miles for a second time or third. From passing encounters with these trail veterans, I learned that I chose my thru-hike year with unintentional foresight. Of the 113 days I hiked, maybe ten were wet. When Lucky Penny hiked in 2018, the skies were ruthless.

"I'd say it rained as much as it didn't," she said with the air of someone who'd fought in the trenches. "It was a very wet year, but that's Appalachia."

She was referring to the region's chronically damp climate. The southern Appalachians have the highest annual rainfall of the southeastern United States, soaking up fifty-eight to sixty inches of rainfall.[i] For reference, the average annual rainfall in Florida's Everglades is fifty-four inches. Hikers have the trail's elevation to thank for their wet feet: as moist air rises, it cools and condenses, forming clouds which turn dirt to slop and feet to blistering pulps. Had my journey been as wet as Lucky Penny's, I'm confident that my fortitude would have run out much faster; even the sparse rain I encountered was enough to drain my resolve and land me in a clinic in Virginia.

My first real day of rain arrived on March 25, twenty-seven days and about 350 miles into my trip. I was in Tennessee hiking the last six miles of a twenty-two-mile day when the skies opened up. When water was flying at me from every possible angle, there was only so much my Gore Tex raingear could do. Rain soaked through my layers. The very air underneath my hood was wet, slicking my hair to my scalp and drawing sweat from my pores. Each step became a violent squelch, and I begin walking directly through puddles because avoiding them only slowed me down when my boots had reached complete saturation.

That night, I arrived at the shelter as the first of my group. The lean-to we'd been told would hold ten was, I discovered, more appropriate for six, and there were already three inhabitants. One of them was a hiker named Midnight, an eccentric high school music teacher I had crossed paths with intermittently since the Smokies.

"Do you have a lighter?" he asked me.

Midnight and the other two men were wrapped in their sleeping bags. Midnight held up a bag filled with something fibrous and oily green: weed.

"No, sorry," I said.

“I’ve been here all day,” said an older guy from his sleeping bag in the corner. “There’s no way I was walking in that weather.”

As the rain barreled in rivers down the shelter’s tin roof, my friends trickled into camp: Mojo, Bronco, Ricky, Santa, six of us in all (Kimchi and Strega Nona had fallen a day behind on account of Kimchi getting food poisoning again). I was worried some of us would be forced to set up tents in the downpour, but Midnight was confident we’d fit. I crammed onto a sleeping platform next to Santa and set up for the night. I volunteered to venture back into the rain to fetch everyone's water for dinner. We boiled our dehydrated noodles and rices and ate them beneath the rain’s steady tattoo. We lay half-naked on our sleeping bags, soaked clothes draped like Christmas bunting over beams and nails. I munched candy bars waiting for the sun to set. Midnight and Yung Chef toked joints. It felt like summer camp.

I hiked 100 miles over the next four days on the way to Damascus, Virginia, where we planned to take a day off. In the days following my first deluge, I proved a novice outdoorsman. On March 26, the rain abated but puddles riddled the trail like mines. To keep my feet dry, I stuffed my sock-feet into gallon-size Ziploc bags thinking they would keep water out of my socks even if my boots got wet.

“That’s such a bad idea,” Mojo told me.

“No, it isn’t,” I insisted, marching in place to get a feel for the plastic stockings. “It’s industrious.”

After 24.8 miles, I realized it was idiotic. While I protected my feet from puddles, I trapped my feet’s own moisture inside the bags for eight hours of hiking. By the end of the day, my heels were rubbed raw. The next few days were no better. The 27th was damp and on the 28th I hiked twenty-four miles through heel-deep water and more torrential rain. By now, I was

only a day from Damascus, but the slog was far from over. On the morning of the 29th, I awoke to a pair of frozen-solid boots. Overnight, the thirty-degree weather turned my still-wet boots to ice. I stamped my swollen feet into the rigid shoes and shouldered my pack as I set off to hike the remaining thirty-two miles to Damascus, Virginia.

When I arrived in Damascus, I knew something was wrong. The trail emerges from the woods onto a paved residential road that winds through the town, eventually leading back to the woods about a mile later. As my friends and I trekked through Damascus along this road on the way to our hostel, I limped behind. Applying pressure to my left foot was painful, as if the skin would burst and the bones would turn to mush if I pressed too hard. I assumed it was just fatigue; I'd hiked thirty-two miles since 6AM, completing my first twelve-hour day. Even as I lagged behind my friends, I was sure it was nothing a day off couldn't cure.

I tried to enjoy my surroundings: Damascus was a beautiful change of scenery. Trees flowered white and yellow, ushering in spring. I posed for pictures underneath Damascus's welcome arch. The famous green and gold "Trail Town USA" mural greeted me in town near the country diner, the early evening sky glaringly blue and beautiful behind it. All the while, my body sent me distress signals that something was wrong. When I finally removed my boots hours later at the hostel, I understood why.

My foot was diseased. It felt sickly; with every step I felt like I was stamping moisture deeper into my foot, absorbing it from the ground through feverish osmosis. My big toenails had officially cashed in their chips. A few weeks prior, they were bruise-purple, bloody but still attached to my toes. Now, they were tinted the telltale shade of decay: gray-white and opaque. I could wiggle them away from my toe, as if they were a loose tooth, or like I were prying up the corner of a steppingstone. The pads of my feet were white. It reminded me of how skin blanches

when pressed, but if it got stuck in the blanch-setting. The skin was plump and swollen, saturated with the water I'd stomped through for the past few days. It looked more like tree bark than a human limb, wrinkled and patterned and pocked. It reeked of sweat and infection.

"Oh my *God*," said Mojo as I examined my foot. I hobbled over to where he was sitting on a couch and shoved it near his face.

"Don't!" he protested. "That's not even funny."

The next day, my foot looked and felt the same. Standing was painful and walking was tedious. I began to worry about what would happen if it didn't improve by the next day. There was a chance we would hike out the following morning, but if we did, I knew I would not be able to keep up. While my friends headed to the Dollar Tree to resupply, I limped to a clinic.

I was sitting on a sterile sheet when the doctor came in, my swollen foot dangling over the edge of the seat. I felt like a rogue germ in the middle of a sterile operating room. The doctor examined my foot with an expression of motherly concern.

"Did you hike here from Georgia?" she asked.

I told her I had. She inspected my peeling toes without touching them.

"You've been in a lot of pain, haven't you?"

I nodded.

I left the clinic with pain killers and a diagnosis: trench foot. I'd heard hikers call Damascus the "mental halfway point." A large portion of thru-hikers throw in the towel there. Along with Neel's Gap thirty miles into the trip, and Harper's Ferry at mile 1000, Damascus is a weed-out town. Although I'd only hiked 470 miles, less than a quarter of the Trail, it felt as if I'd hiked across the country. I'd already walked farther than I ever had in my life. I'd spent nights in

the freezing wind on mountains and in hostels with rats, even assumed a new name, ID. I wondered if I needed to keep going, or what I still needed to prove to myself.

When I told my friends I got trench foot, their responses tended towards "That can still happen?" I understand why — hearing "trench foot" recalls eighth grade history textbooks, images of twentieth century soldiers marching through wasted European lands, scraps of boots hanging from their gangrened feet. Trench foot is a war-time condition; it would take an exceptional idiot to contract the same condition a century later, on a walk in the woods.

After being diagnosed, I learned that the conditions that gave World War I soldiers trench foot were not dissimilar from the ones that gave it to me. Trench foot, now called "immersion foot disorder," is caused when the feet are wet for a long time. The dampness hampers circulation, which causes oxygen loss, tissue death, nerve damage, infection, and gangrene if left untreated.[ii] The condition worked its way into vernacular during World War I when soldiers on all sides spent weeks in submerged trenches. During the war, it accounted for 75,000 British and 2,000 American casualties.[iii] While googling the condition in Damascus, I read that a British Officer who served on the Western Front said that water was "always over [his] boots."[iv]

"*Mine too*," I thought.

Today the condition is still common among homeless populations, even at music festivals, and among hikers. All of us hiked through the same rain, but none of my other friends got trench foot. They also didn't put their feet in Ziploc bags, and they didn't let me forget it.

"If you didn't already have a trail name, you would need to be 'Trench Foot,'" said Bronco. "I think you should *still* be Trench Foot," he said, suggesting that I change my trail name.

After my diagnosis, our group decided to take two days off in Damascus. I wanted to think they were waiting for me to recover, but we were waiting for two members of our group, Strega Nona and Kimchi, to catch up. Either way, I was grateful; as it was, I could not hike our mileage on my foot, let alone hobble to the bathroom in our hostel.

We decided to transfer from our first night's hostel to a bed and breakfast a few miles outside town. The house had been in the owner's family since the Civil War. It looked like an old plantation house with its pillars and wrap-around porch. The owner and his wife were sweetly southern and morbidly obese. She cooked us biscuits and eggs in the morning, wearing a lacy apron over her tablecloth of a shirt. My friends and I shared the honeymoon suite upstairs. I positioned my bare foot on a pink, upholstered footrest. The doctor said I needed to air out my foot and keep it elevated.

"You're supposed to take your socks off at night," said Mojo, smiling but also chiding. "Even if you change to dry ones, if your feet were wet during the day, they need to be aired out at night."

All my friends had more hiking experience than me. Mojo was nineteen and newly graduated from high school but had already hiked the John Muir Trail, a 211-mile trek through the Sierra Nevada. At some point in our trip when we began hiking back-to-back twenty-five-mile days, I mentioned that the AT was the hardest thing I'd ever done. Mojo disagreed; his time in the Sierra challenged him far more than the AT ever had. It seemed he was telling the truth. When Mojo contracted Lyme disease later in Virginia, he took just one day off on antibiotics before hitting the trail again. Being the most logistical, Mojo was our unofficial group leader. As such, his mechanical determination to trudge forward set a tone of intolerance for human

weakness. Injury was no excuse to slow down. If you wanted to stay with the group, you needed to suck it up. I knew that if I didn't heal quickly, they would keep hiking without me.

"I told you that putting your feet in plastic bags was a bad idea," he added.

Mojo was right, and I didn't do it again.

The rest of our stay in Damascus was the most relaxing time I would spend on the Trail. The two days we spent there were the longest break we took in 113 days of hiking. We all showered twice in two days (a complete luxury) and made calls home to family. We bought ice cream and bottled wine and watched documentaries about the Pacific Crest Trail. We shed our hiking clothes, choosing to lounge in nothing but bathrobes and bare feet. At the bed and breakfast in Damascus, I felt at once far from home and completely at-home with my new friends. While we rested, I tried to will my foot to heal, to turn from fever-red to fleshy-pink.

I did not know what was driving our journey so relentlessly forward. I knew that other trail families halted their journeys for injury, even accompanied each other to hospitals and clinics. I couldn't imagine my new friends — couldn't imagine Hugh — sitting in the clinic's waiting room for me, like my parents at the dentist. It wasn't personal; there just wasn't enough time in the day. We needed to go food shopping, call home, send postcards, take showers, do laundry, map our route, and rest before hitting the Trail again. Caretaking wasn't part of our group's schedule. Even as I sipped wine in bathrobes beside my new friends, sometimes it felt like we were competing with each other to trudge ever forward. Knowing this, I resolved to keep up. I made up my mind to keep walking even if it meant it would hurt for the next 1700 miles.

Chapter 3: Brendan

In second grade, the boys in my class would play touch football during recess. As a group, we would flood from the school's doors into the courtyard like little marbles. The girls would move in one crowd to the playground, perching on a swing, a slide, the top of the monkey bars. The place was not important if it allowed for conversation. The boys were less interested in talking. They flocked to the grassless lot beside the playground, armed with a football, and tackled each other to the dusty ground.

As a seven-year-old, I couldn't think of anything less appealing than tackle football. I wouldn't know where to run, or what to do with the ball if it found its way into my hands. I would feel out of place. I chose instead to perch with the girls on top of a climbing structure. One day after school, my mom sat me down in her room. Children can always tell when an adult has something troubling on her mind, and my mother was troubled. I sat beside her on the bed in my parents' pink bedroom, the same bed I crawled into at night when I woke up scared. My feet dangled over the end of the bed, not yet long enough to touch the ground.

"Mrs. Muldowney called me the other day. She told me that you don't play with the boys during recess," she said.

As a kid, I had a general sense of right and wrong. Sometimes I did things impulsively, like smack my baby brother or eat with my hands, but I knew as soon as I did them that the parental hands of justice would come down on me with a spank or a firm grip, leading me to my room. However, playing with the girls did not, as far as I was aware, warrant a sit-down with mom, let alone a call home from my teacher. My mom seemed concerned, though, so I assumed I had done something wrong.

“Mrs. Muldowney said you don’t play games with the boys,” she continued. “Is there a reason why?”

Looking back, I wish I had the wherewithal to say “Not really,” because that would have been the truth. That, or “I don't know how to play football,” also true, even to this day. At the time, with the language I had available, I made something up. “The girls are more mature,” I might’ve said. Something innocuous to ease my mom’s mind. Our conversation faded from my mom’s memory, but it stuck with me for years. It sent the message that the boys do not perch. The boys get dirty. They want to prove themselves athletically. They do danger, fearlessly seeking out those experiences that bring them closer to grit and triumph. To not do so warrants concern and a formal, sit-down intervention.

I tried to become more of a boy in the following years. In eighth grade, I made All-Stars in cross country, but I was too nervous to talk to any of the boys on the team. Whenever girls seemed interested in being friends, I disengaged. I felt that having no friends was better than being a boy who was friends with girls. As I’ve grown older, this belief has changed, and I no longer deny myself friendships because of Mrs. Muldowney’s phone call. At the same time, I never completely washed myself of the sentiment of her call. It lingered like an itch I couldn’t reach. Hiking became an outlet. It got me dirty, and it let me prove myself athletically. I thought I could walk myself farther from the monkey bars and nearer to the boys in the dusty lot, and I would never have to learn how to play football to do it. In that way, hiking was a loophole. I could come as I was — uncoordinated, lanky, awkward — and somehow assume the role I had always wanted to fill. It seemed to work out, but I noticed that some of my old baggage seemed to follow me on-trail. It started when me and my friends neared Buena Vista, a small college town near the Appalachian Trail in Virginia.

"I have a friend in Buena Vista. He can drive us to town and back." I'd been saying it for weeks, but it felt like a lie, partly because it was.

On the Trail, local friends are a commodity. Every four to five days, venturing into towns neighboring the trail was necessary. Like we had done in Damascus, we needed to replenish our supplies, shower, call home, and inhale restaurant food by the pound. Accessing town was often a hassle. The Appalachian Trail winds through a few towns directly, trail markers emblazoning sidewalks and overpass pillars instead of trees and rocks (such as Hot Springs, NC; Harper's Ferry, WV; Duncannon, PA; Hanover, NH), but Buena Vista was not one of these towns. It was one of the towns where we had to figure our own way in.

Buena Vista was nine miles down U.S. Route 60, so walking was off the table. Another option was to call a shuttle, but we'd have to pay. Hitchhiking was free, but hitches were increasingly difficult to negotiate now that we were a group of seven and no longer in the deep South, where pickup trucks abounded, and drivers gravitated towards upturned thumbs like moths to a flame. Having friends or family in a trail locale saved a lot of time and trouble, so I gave my friend Brendan a call, even though we'd never met.

I met Brendan in the modern way: on Tinder. The year before, I was on a bus heading to Gainesville, Georgia for the rowing team's spring training trip. Brendan and I messaged back and forth while I was in Gainesville, he in Virginia. We didn't expect to meet each other but chatting killed time. Eventually, we exchanged phone numbers and FaceTimed once or twice. During quarantine, new connections, however tenuous, became suddenly indispensable. I learned that Brendan had been through the wringer.

Brendan grew up devout Mormon. He attended Brigham Young before dropping out after two years. At BYU, you can be expelled for being gay; his roommate was already undergoing an

iteration of conversion treatment. Brendan's father doesn't speak to him anymore, and Brendan chooses not to live at home in Colorado. He pays his own rent at a small liberal arts college in Virginia.

I had mixed feelings about Brendan. I understood his internal struggle, but his external problems were so different from my own. My parents accepted me when I came out, I had not been expelled from school, and I had never needed to pay my own rent in my life. I felt like I'd won some sort of perverse queer lottery, with Brendan drawing the short straw. Brendan himself also made me slightly uncomfortable. The first time Brendan and I spoke over the phone, I felt a lurch in my stomach when I heard his voice. He sounded gay. Against my own fortitude, I thought less of him.

On April 16, I hiked a leisurely ten miles from our shelter to Route 60 where we could be picked up and driven to Buena Vista, nine miles off-trail. The woods approaching the road were swollen with emerging life. A creek ambled in our wake, spawning dragonflies, gurgling quietly beneath my noisy thoughts about what I would purchase to eat when I reached town. Bright yellow forsythias asserted themselves amid the browns and feeble greens of the woods.

I was one of the slowest hikers in my group, so I usually left camp earliest to get a thirty-minute head-start on my friends. Just a few miles from the road gap, Strega Nona caught up to me. I hadn't spoken much to Strega Nona one-on-one before. Usually, we interacted within the larger trail family, so I asked him how he felt about going to Harvard in the fall. He had mixed feelings. During the first part of his gap year, he started a podcast where he interviewed other incoming freshmen on gap years. All of them, like Mojo and Strega Nona, were not gap-yearing idly. Strega Nona told me about a girl who was interning with the department of homeland security, a guy who founded a tech start-up. Strega Nona spoke with his guests about their need

to be so productive. Because many of the students had never taken so much time off from school, they suddenly found themselves feeling the need to fill their time not just productively, but prolifically.

“They all tie their self-worth to their accomplishments,” he told me. “When they’re not working, they don’t feel good about themselves. That’s why I’m out here, to take time off.”

Strega Nona seemed like the perfect foil to Mojo’s marathon-fervor, even though they were both going to the same school. He saw the Trail as “time off,” and Mojo seemed to see it as a proving ground. I wondered whose mentality was better, and I wondered if I was leaning towards the wrong team.

Strega Nona and I arrived first to the road, where we claimed a picnic table and relieved ourselves of our packs and trekking poles. Soon, the others arrived in ones and twos until we slowly became a group. Brendan was on his way, so we lounged in the early spring warmth on the side of the road until he arrived.

A car or two rolled into our lot beside the Trail, making us think they were our ride. The occupants turned out to be people pit-stopping, or parking to day-hike up the Trail. The sun staggered above us as we waited. It felt like we were always racing for enough daylight, and Brendan was using some of it up. An hour past the time we expected him, I worried my group was angry with me for delaying our day. Brendan had been my idea, after all. A shipping truck with a bed full of lumber roared past us.

Mojo picked a tick off his thigh. “I’m going to start trying to get a hitch,” he said.

I agreed it was at least worth a shot. I, too, had come to regard passing vehicles opportunistically, and letting a car pass without at least trying its luck felt wasteful.

Mojo situated himself alongside the road, making sure his pack was on his back and his poles were in his right hand before sticking out a thumb with his left. Procuring a quick hitch was largely performative; drivers were more likely to stop when they saw someone who, in their eyes, deserved a ride. A hiker, for example, rather than a vagrant, and we looked a lot like vagrants without our packs.

Mojo was rewarded quickly with a hitch: a gray Honda civic with chipped paint. The front two seats were occupied, leaving three seats available for Mojo, who automatically secured a seat by flagging the hitch, and for two others.

“I’ll stay,” I told them, forfeiting my claim on a seat. “I should be here when Brendan arrives.”

Mojo ended up crowding into the back of the sedan with Ricky and Bronco, and they zipped off to town with their packs on their laps. I remained in the lot with Strega Nona, Kimchi, and Nasa.

Brendan arrived just a few minutes later, crunching onto the side of the road in a navy blue RAV4. A pride rainbow tire-cover marked the back of the car like a tramp stamp. Brendan stepped out of the car. He was dressed in tight light-wash jeans, a tight short-sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled, and brown loafers without socks. His flame-red hair was styled, and he stood tall and muscular with the broad shoulders of a swimmer. When he spoke, his voice lilted effeminately, and I tried not to wince.

“Welcome to B-yoo-nuh-Vista!” he said, mocking the local pronunciation.

“Hey!” I said, going in for a friendly hug. “Sorry, I smell really bad,” I laughed.

“It’s so nice to meet you!” he said, hugging me back, politely ignoring my scent.

"I'm Brendan," he addressed my companions. I couldn't tell if their smiles of greeting were strained. I wasn't sure if they felt as embarrassed as I did, or if no one but me cared that Brendan was the way he was.

Brendan drove erratically, fast and choppy. The road sinewed through the mountains as we descended into the valley, and Brendan took the turns sharply. I sat in the passenger seat, breathing his cologne.

I found myself wincing through the day. Over lunch at a Chinese restaurant, Brendan referred to his messy male roommates as "a bunch of straights" and shared in-depth stories about his Mormon upbringing and the homophobia at BYU. After lunch, my friends went food shopping while Brendan and I went for a walk around Buena Vista. None of the brick buildings on the main strip stood higher than two stories. There was a Ma and Pa grocer called M & P Market. Along the street, highlighter-yellow daffodils asserted themselves rebelliously beside the receding browns of early spring. Although the town felt like it was stirring from the depths of winter, I got the sense that it didn't get much busier in the spring, summer, or fall.

"How are things?" I asked him. I knew he had recently transferred to Southern Virginia University in Buena Vista after dropping out of Brigham Young, and I was curious about the transition.

"Things are good! Better, at least."

Brendan told me that his new friends were accepting. He was on the swim team, and he could be open about his sexuality. On the weekends, he and his teammates would hike, or play boardgames at his apartment.

"I drank alcohol for the first time the other weekend."

He said it tentatively, like he was still getting used to the pride he felt about his new lifestyle. Although Brendan had left BYU and his Mormon parents, he was still shaking off their grip. SVU was still a Mormon university, though Brendan claimed it was less strict.

"I couldn't leave the faith," he said. "But it's better here."

Buena Vista hardly seemed like a queer haven; it made me sad to imagine his old life knowing that he considered Buena Vista an improvement. I was glad Brendan was happier, though, even beneath my embarrassment. I realized I'd technically known him longer than my Trail friends, we just hadn't met in person until now. But just like everything, I would leave him behind as I continued north, and I would probably never see him again.

At the end of the day, all seven of us piled into the RAV4 for Brendan to take us back up to the Trail. Again, I took the passenger seat and again I could smell the cologne on him. Brendan plugged in his phone and began playing a song by Carly Rae Jepsen.

"Corny, but a queen," he announced to the car.

Mojo snickered in the backseat and for a moment I hated Brendan. I caught Nasa's eye. He grimaced, and I knew it was because he got carsick easily. Brendan tore up the mountain, swerving around turns at high-speed. He was a terrible driver.

Back at the trailhead, we unloaded our packs and geared up for a climb. The northbound trek out of Buena Vista would be a steep ascent for two or three miles. I hugged Brendan again and thanked him for the rides.

"Let me know when you get to Katahdin," he said.

I told him I would, but I wasn't so sure.

I hit the Trail quickly, before my other friends. I wanted to process my thoughts about the day, and I also wanted to distance myself from Brendan. Although our group held two queer

members, me and Mojo, I realized that queerness for our group existed in a bubble. With an absence of other queer people on-Trail, Mojo and I could define queerness as we wanted to. We never interrupted the status quo in the way I felt Brendan had. We all hiked the same miles, all proved our manhood just by being out there in the wilderness. Brendan felt so much softer and more sterile. He smelled of cologne and gelled his hair and listened to Carly Rae Jepsen. I felt like his being so gay reflected poorly on me, made me seem softer by association, and I was annoyed. I didn't want to be like him. I was a hiker.

I launched myself up the mountain and found myself on a high, windy ridge overlooking another mountain range, its peaks splayed out in the distance, imposing and gray. As I took in the view, breathing heavily, I heard footsteps behind me. Mojo had caught up. I wasn't surprised, but I always felt a little annoyed when he overtook me. Mojo was the fastest hiker in the group; he always passed me, no matter how far ahead I started or how fast I was hiking.

He seemed to know what was on my mind.

"So," he probed. "Brendan."

"Chris isn't like that," I blurted, but immediately felt childish and ashamed. Why did I feel so defensive? Did I expect an attack from Mojo — some subtle expression of judgment or ridicule?

"I mean — I don't know." I struggled for words. "Brendan was just kind of a lot."

The ridge was wide enough that Hugh and I could walk side-by-side. He thought for a moment before speaking.

"I didn't like when he called his roommates 'straights.' I don't like when people do that," Mojo said. "I feel like it creates more separation."

I was glad we could talk openly. Even if the other guys had similar misgivings about Brendan, they would never have felt comfortable bringing them up. Frankly, I would have felt a little uncomfortable with them voicing those kinds of opinions. With Mojo, it was easy. It felt natural to debrief about Brendan. We could be honest and a little mean, if we wanted to. Had I been disapproving of Brendan's tight jeans to any of our straight companions, they would have been confused. What exactly was the intention behind my jab at Brendan? I wasn't entirely sure myself. These were things I could only discuss with Hugh.

"I feel bad for being embarrassed by him, because he's super nice" I said, and it was true. "But I am."

"I mean, he's not really *my* type," Hugh shrugged. "But if that's what you're into . . ." Hugh was making fun of me, but he was inviting me to laugh as well.

"Shut up," I said, but I smiled.

I recognized the irony in thinking in terms of "Hugh and my straight friends" when it had bothered me that Brendan so openly acknowledged the same separation between him and his roommates. When he called them "messy straights" in between bites of lo mein, I winced. Yet here I was, discussing a subject with Hugh that I would never have confided in my straight companions. Part of me wondered if Hugh and I were giving each other an outlet to be intolerant. Maybe we had brought the same baggage to the Trail and allowed each other to keep carrying it.

I thought back to Brendan's excitement talking about his first drink of alcohol and I realized that he was making progress. Real, tangible progress. He had drunk alcohol, a sin in his old life. He'd joined his school's LGBT club, something I would not personally have gravitated towards, but which seemed to make him happy. He was doing well. It showed in his face, the way he carried himself. Brendan seemed to be taking steps towards embracing something

important that I was pushing away. I wondered if the arduous steps I was taking on the Trail were taking me farther from where I should be, not closer.

Looking back, I see that my failure to feel comfortable with Brendan was more about how I felt about myself than how I felt about Brendan. I wanted to be a hiker and to be perceived as tough. I thought gayness was incompatible with that identity. Although Brendan wasn’t a hiker, he had done a lot of challenging things I had never faced. He dropped out of a prestigious university, left his home and family, moved across the country, and became financially independent, restarting his life in a completely new place. Brendan was tough as hell, in his own way.

At the time, and even now, I find it hard to not see Brendan and, by extension, myself, as embarrassing. When I was on the Trail, I felt like I was there to prove myself. I was still trying to get myself off the swing set and onto the football field. I had not known Mojo in the second grade, but I was willing to bet that he had also sat atop the monkey bars with the girls during recess. As I walked across the ridge with Mojo, I wondered if he was trying to hike himself to redemption, away from the Brendans and the girls at playgrounds. I wondered if Mojo, like the freshmen Strega Nona had interviewed, tied his self-worth to his accomplishments, to this accomplishment to completing the Trail. I wondered if that was driving our twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and thirty-mile days. I knew I was falling into that mentality, and I wondered what would happen if I couldn’t keep up.

Chapter 4: Virginia Blues

In the coming weeks, I found out what falling behind felt like. Virginia is home to more of the Appalachian Trail than any of the fourteen states the Trail passes through, about 550 miles, just over a quarter of the entire trail. On-trail, completing a state was always a morale-boost. Crossing a border felt like tangible progress. After Virginia, I could count down the remaining states on my fingers: West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and, finally, Maine. But Virginia did not forfeit its claim over me easily. The Trail traverses nearly the entire length of the state diagonally. It can take hikers more than a month to travel from border to border, and by halfway through, Virginia takes a toll. Hikers call this burnout the "Virginia Blues." By the time I reached mile 900, I was in the throes of the Blues.

Spring was in full effect, but the Virginian landscape was blurring together in a mess of greens and rugged grays and browns. Often, the woods and mountains I hiked one day were indistinguishable from the woods and mountains I hiked through the day before, and the day before that. It seemed never to end. I climbed peaks only to hike down and climb up another. As spring wore on and the days lengthened, we hiked longer days, taking advantage of the extra sunlight. Virginia held slightly milder terrain than Tennessee and North Carolina, but rather than making the days easier, it only emboldened Mojo. He saw the smoother miles as an opportunity to push harder and farther days. Soon it was normal to hike from sunrise to sunset. I could see two camps forming within our trail family: those who were burning out, and those who wanted to push our pace to the limit.

On one side were the Big-Milers: Ricky, Nasa, and Mojo. Off-Trail, Ricky and Nasa were both ultra-marathoners. Mojo was not a runner, but somehow, he was able to effortlessly leave every single one of us in the dust. Mojo would set our course for the day, and we would all follow. Ricky and Nasa seemed to relish the miles. Nasa took them long and slow. He was always the last person to arrive at camp, often trudging into camp around sunset while we were eating. Ricky took the miles faster, the only one in our group who could regularly keep up with Mojo. They hiked together, a driven, inevitable machine. Since I left camp the earliest in the mornings, after a few hours they would overtake me as a duo. I would yield to them, standing aside in the tall grass, gasping on the side of the Trail as they passed. Together they would disappear into the maze of pines and hemlocks ahead, seeming to move as one.

On the other side were Medium-Milers: me, Kimchi, and Strega Nona. I had hoped for better allies. Kimchi had twice been forced to take time off-trail due to food poisoning, although I felt his second bout of diarrhea could have been avoided had he not packed out a cabbage to make into soup. Strega Nona felt similarly to me: we just weren't having fun anymore. But Strega Nona didn't have much sway over the group. Once, Mojo and I were hiking through a dense forest of rhododendrons. We encountered a stream that required fording, so we removed our boots and socks and plunged our feet into the frigid mountain water, negotiating slick rocks and mossy boulders. Strega Nona was sunning himself on the opposite shore, reclining with his feet in the stream. Mojo and I did not stop to take a break with Strega Nona; after fording, we crammed our socks onto our wet feet and returned to the Trail. When we were out of earshot, Mojo told me that he did not like Strega Nona.

"He's not who I would have chosen as a friend, normally."

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Mojo and Strega Nona met through a group of other Harvard gap-year students. I had always assumed they were friends. If Mojo hadn’t told me outright, I never would have known how he felt. He was good at masking his disdain. Although he had confided in me, the secret made me uneasy. I realized I might not know how Mojo truly felt about me, or if he was talking about me behind my back. Beneath our competitiveness, I had come to respect and admire Mojo. I wondered if he felt the same about me, or if I was misreading our relationship completely.

“I feel like he’s lazy,” Mojo said.

I didn’t feel like Strega Nona’s break made him lazy. He was doing what he said he hoped to do on the Trail: take time off. I realized that Mojo and I had different values. Mojo saw a stream as an obstacle: something that impeded progress, something to traverse. For Mojo, a river was not a source of pleasure, something to engage with, or to touch. My values aligned more with Strega Nona’s, but I had resolved in Damascus to keep up, so I did not take breaks at rivers. Resultantly, Strega Nona’s opinion held little social currency.

By the time we reached Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, the pace argument came to a head. The Trail wound through the Shenandoah’s for about 100 benign miles. In our guidebooks, the elevation line ran across the pages like an underscore, or a flatline, finally at rest after 900 miles of peaks and valleys. I was looking forward to milder days, but some members of our group had different ideas.

On Monday, April 20, we hiked a short, twenty-mile day through the Shenandoah’s, staying for the night at Blackrock Hut. The following morning, Mojo sat at the shelter’s picnic table and mapped routes for the day. He proposed a thirty-four-mile day on Tuesday, followed by a twenty-six mile day on Wednesday. He hoped to cover the entire 100-mile Shenandoah

stretch in less than four days. I protested. The pace we were traveling at wasn't fun anymore, and I was worried I would want to quit at this rate.

I also wanted to keep the group intact; half of us began to feel held back by those who wanted to slow down, and half of us were slogging through the days trying to keep up. I was worried the group would split.

"We shouldn't count out thirty-mile days when the terrain is good," argued Mojo, referencing the Shenandoah's comparatively benign geography.

I disagreed. When I was pushing my pace, I covered about three miles per hour, less when I grew tired. Without breaks, it took me about seven hours to hike twenty miles, a relatively short day once a hiker acquired their trail-legs. When hiking thirty-plus miles, due to fatigue my pace would fall gradually throughout the day; eventually, I would be inching ahead, hiking just two miles every hour. I was looking at a twelve- or thirteen-hour day, nearly double the time it took to hike twenty miles. Regardless of terrain, I would be spending half of the day upright with my forty-pound pack on my back. It would not be easy, no matter how flat the terrain.

"We're still on pace to finish early," I countered. "When I started, I thought it would take five months to reach Katahdin, but now we're traveling at a four-month pace. Thirty-mile days would put us on rate to finish in three months. It's too fast."

I couldn't understand what was driving Mojo's incessant need to up our mileage. What more did he need to prove to himself? I felt like our current pace affirmed what I needed to affirm in myself: that I was strong and rugged and tough. At our current pace, I was already a hiker. I wondered if Mojo didn't feel like a hiker yet. Maybe no matter how fast he was hiking, he never affirmed what he needed to. I realized the problem was a conflict of mentality. For me,

the 2190-mile-long trip was already a challenge. Some days, it was all I could do to get up on my sore feet and keep moving. Mojo and Nasa, the Trail was a proving ground. They wanted to push their minds and bodies as hard as they possibly could, and that meant upping the mileage.

"What do you want to do?" Nasa challenged. "Hike eighteen miles per day and get to camp at 1:00?"

He was referencing our shorter hike the day before, the twenty-mile hike where Mojo had arrived at 1PM, forcing him to sit through about seven hours of daylight before he could go to bed.

"I don't think you realize how frustrating it is for me to get to camp so early," Mojo added. "Like, deeply frustrating."

I couldn't imagine why this was frustrating for Mojo. If I were gifted with Mojo's speed, I would have lounged for hours, flipped through the shelter log to see which of our friends had already passed through, maybe written an entry myself. I would have explored the camp, even gathered kindling for a fire, something we hadn't had time to do since the first week or so.

Mojo's words stung because it meant he'd been harboring resentment. I didn't know how frustrated he'd been about the short day until now. How long had he been feeling this way? It scared me that I might not know how upset my friends were, or what they might be thinking about me. I recalled the time that Mojo had called Strega Nona lazy for taking a break at a stream, and how Mojo thought less of him for it. I wondered if Mojo thought less of me now, for wanting to hike fewer miles.

Hot tears welled up behind my eyes and suddenly I was overcome by a crippling fear. Surely the group could not remain unified if Mojo kept pushing us. Although I started my trip solo and expected to hike alone, I had fallen in with the Gap Year guys around mile-300. When I

began my trip, I had expected to be challenged by solitude, but after months of walking through the woods, my constant companion was human accompaniment; I'd never been surrounded by people more consistently than on the Appalachian Trail. Now, just a hundred miles shy of the halfway point, I was faced for the first time with the prospect of being completely and utterly bereft of companions, and I was scared. I wasn't sure if I could complete my trip without them.

In the end, the fast guys won. We agreed to hike thirty-four miles through the Shenandoah's, my longest day of hiking yet. At the time, I felt like I needed to compromise to satisfy the Big-Milers and keep the group intact. Looking back, I wondered why me and the Medium-Milers were given an ultimatum: keep up or shut up.

There was a saying on-trail that hikers threw around: "Hike your own hike." It was supposed to be a light-hearted message. We were all on the Trail to take our own journey, so we shouldn't feel beholden to anyone else. This was the reason my friends would have kept hiking if I had needed to take an extra day off in Damascus for my trench foot. It wasn't personal. We all needed to hike our own hike. However, at this point, I felt like our hikes were each other's hikes. We were in a group. Didn't that mean something? Whenever I hiked ultra-marathons, I felt like I was hiking Hugh's hike.

I hit the Trail around 7AM. I walked through the cool morning and into the afternoon; I walked as the sun began to sink below the horizon and a chill settled over the mountains. Throughout the day, I could feel blisters bubbling then bursting underneath my toes as I negotiated rocks and roots. My feet grew increasingly sore and after twenty-eight miles were swollen, painful with each step. I tried listening to music or podcasts to take my mind off the slog of hiking, but eventually the words in my ears just sounded like noise. Still, I walked and walked and after nearly thirteen hours of hiking I arrived at the shelter at 7:30 PM just as a cold

wind whipped up and flurries began falling from iron clouds. I was the last to arrive, except for Nasa, who was taking his thirty-four miles slower and steadier than me, as usual.

The day was over, but the long days were taking their toll. Weeks ago, a thought had sprouted in my mind. With each thirty-mile day it grew ever taller and louder until it wasn't possible to ignore: I can't do this anymore. I don't *want* to do this anymore.

On days like those, even more than exhaustion I felt anger. If I were alone, I would never hike so far in one day. It was sadism! Mojo's hyper-drive determination was inhuman, and I felt like he was making me choose between leaving the group or slogging through long, painful days. But on the flip side of these angry thoughts was always doubt. I was angry, but did I have a right to be? Mojo wanted to hike long days, and I was fighting it. I wasn't sure if I was shying away from challenging myself, or if I was recognizing my own limitations. This was my own hike, after all. It should be me who set my own limits and decided when to push them. I didn't want my trip to be marked by hedonism, but I also felt like abstaining from ultra-marathons didn't make me a hedonist. Beneath all my internal debates was the fear that I would quit. If I stayed with my group, I would want to quit because of the long days. Alternatively, if I left the group, I might want to quit because I was alone. For the first time I began to question the nature of my journey and what it meant for me to hike the Appalachian Trail.

A few days later, I sat at the Elkwallow Wayside, one of the park's roadside rest stops where convenience store food was sold. I bought a plastic-wrapped hard-boiled egg, three cheese sticks, a tube of powdered donuts, a can of vegetarian baked beans which I opened with my Swiss Army knife, and a small peach yogurt. Hiker cravings were eclectic but always horrifically calorie dense. As I ate my motley meal, I was joined at my picnic table by an older man who was section hiking. He asked if I was hiking the whole Trail.

“That’s the plan,” I said feebly. “But I might skip New Hampshire.”

This was a plan I’d formulated to make the journey easier to swallow, and to keep me trekking along day by day. The New Hampshire section of the Trail is notorious for being the most difficult portion, and I couldn’t imagine facing something harder than what I was doing. Telling myself I could skip New Hampshire allowed me to slog my way through Virginia.

“You would skip the hardest part?” he challenged, disapproving.

I grew bashful, and a little annoyed.

“You only need to hike 2000 miles to be considered a thru-hiker by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy,” I countered.

I could bypass New Hampshire and still hike 2000 miles of the AT, the vast majority of the trip by all accounts, and technically complete a thru-hike.

“If you skip it, go back and do it later,” said the man.

“Like, go back another season?” I asked.

“No, go back this season. You don’t want to finish with any regrets.”

His words stuck with me, but whenever I considered them, another set of words refuted. I recalled Strega Nona’s podcast where he interviewed Harvard gap-year students and found that they all tied their self-worth to their accomplishments. When they’re not working, they don’t feel good about themselves. Strega Nona and Mojo came from the same academic environment, but Strega Nona was on the Trail to take time off. The man from the wayside made sense, but so did Strega Nona’s logic. I didn’t want to finish my trip with any regrets, but I also didn’t think that I should need to hike every inch of the trail to feel proud of myself. I didn’t want to end up like Mojo, who I was beginning to suspect could never be good enough for himself. I understood

where he was coming from, of course. That was the entire reason I was out here in the first place.

Chapter 5: Leaving and Returning

Virginia wore on in a blur of trees, extra-strength Advil, and small southern trail towns. In line with Mojo's plan, I hiked through the Shenandoah's in four days, shooting out into Front Royal on April 24. I hoped to take a rest day after hiking through the park so quickly, but we had just taken a zero in Waynesboro, VA before the Shenny's, so our pace did not let up.

I recalled that most recent zero. Due to the pandemic, lots of restaurants were takeout-only. There was a Cook Out around the corner from our hostel, so we queued up in the drive-through line behind a train of pickup trucks and sedans, our packs on our backs. At this point in my journey, it felt natural to be just another vehicle. I was a motion-machine. I fueled up with a peach milkshake and, later that night, an all-you-could-eat Chinese buffet. I ate myself into a calorie migraine and retired to a couch in the hostel for the night. The next day, I video-conferenced with a group of students from a student-run podcast at Penn State, who were interviewing me about my trip. At some points in the interview, I was surprised by what I found myself saying.

"It's been great. I'm having the best time of my life."

"*Really?*" I thought as I said it. I wondered if that was true, or if it was just how I wanted to feel. There were times when I did feel that way, like the double zero in Damascus, or when we reached McAfee Knob earlier in Virginia. Most of the time, I was hurting. Bad. After leaving the Shenny's, other members of my group began deteriorating as well.

On April 10, I had tweezed the body of a tick out of Mojo's ass.

It was past dark at the Sarver Hollow Shelter, mile 681.8. Mojo had detected a bite during a tick-check and asked me to remove it. I shined my head lamp onto the flesh of Mojo's lower

hip as I probed with my pair of pink tweezers for the mangled remains of the pest that had buried itself into Mojo. I had torn the tick's body away from its head, hoping the head would come with it, but it adhered stubbornly to Mojo's skin.

"Do you see it?" Mojo asked, ashen faced.

"I see it," I said, concentrating. "It's pretty deep."

Mojo stared resolutely ahead. He looked like someone steeling themselves for an amputation.

"Am I hurting you?" I asked, pinching the skin around the bite, trying to assault the target from a better angle.

"It's fine," he replied feebly. "I'd rather it was out."

I dug around until I was sure the mandibles would stay in Mojo's hip unless I gouged a hole in it with the tweezers. I gave up, and the tick stayed in Mojo's hip. From across the shelter that night, I could see Mojo's face illuminated by his cell phone, feverishly researching Lyme disease symptoms. I had never seen him so scared before. I didn't think he was capable of it.

After reaching Front Royal two weeks later, Mojo Ubered to a hostel, where he took a day off while starting antibiotics for Lyme. The news came as a shock because it meant that Mojo had finally succumbed to something. The miles were no match for him, but a creature the size of a sesame seed had done what I could never do: make him take a day off.

As Mojo rested, me and my companions continued hiking. It was an odd role reversal. Mojo was now in the position I was in when I had trench foot in Damascus. He was now the one being left behind. I noted the callous satisfaction I felt at hearing the news of Mojo's ailment. It meant that I could slow down. Without Mojo plotting our pace, our group could move at a more

human pace. It also meant I was, temporarily, at least, in the lead. For a few days, Mojo would not overtake me while I hiked.

Two days later, Mojo texted our group saying that he was hitting the Trail again. I was baffled. He had taken just one full day of rest before resuming his hike. I was more convinced than ever of his mechanical determination. There was no way he was feeling better after just twenty-four hours on antibiotics. And yet, two days later, he had caught up, as tangible and there as the hole my boots had gouged into the pad of my left foot. I was conflicted because it wasn't that I didn't want Mojo around. I liked Mojo. I just hated the pace.

After Mojo returned, he seemed to be making up for the time he had taken off. As the remaining miles in Virginia ticked away, Mojo and my companions began preparing for the Four State Challenge. Understanding the Challenge requires knowledge of Trail geography: After crossing the Virginia border into West Virginia, hikers meander for three miles through Harpers Ferry, WV, before crossing the Potomac River into Maryland; the Trail runs through Maryland for forty miles before spilling into Pennsylvania, where hikers cross the Mason-Dixon line, officially leaving the South. Hikers challenge themselves to trek forty-four miles from the Virginia border to the Pennsylvania border, traversing four states within twenty-four hours.

On April 26, all six of my companions camped at the Virginia-West Virginia border. In the middle of the night, they trickled out of camp to walk nonstop to Pennsylvania. The following morning, I hiked to Harper's Ferry to buy new shoes at the local outfitter. I had worn the same pair of Keen's since day-one. By now, their rubber treads were sloughing off like snake skin. I was switching to trail-runners, which were more breathable and supportive than boots. I pit-stop in Harper's Ferry and hike the forty-four miles of the Four State Challenge over the course of two days, catching up to my friends in Waynesboro, PA, where they were taking a zero

after completing the challenge. I didn't care that I was the only member of my group not undertaking the Challenge; my feet hurt too much to care about bragging rights, and by now I was used to being caught in Mojo's wake.

My morning in Harper's Ferry was the first time I spent alone since beginning my trip. Even though I lugged a forty-pound pack, I felt airy and unencumbered. The sky glowed a robin's egg blue. Harper's Ferry looks lost in time, like if a European village dropped out of the sky and landed smack on the intersection of Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland. I had no one to keep up with, so I stopped in an old cemetery. I read plaques at a stone church overlooking the Potomac. I sat at a coffee shop and ordered two egg sandwiches, a chickpea salad, a French toast muffin, a slice of apple pie, and a blackberry milkshake.

Afterwards, I found my way to the outfitters and bought a new pair of shoes: women's size twelve Long Peak Altras, magenta pink. They were on sale, more comfortable, and forty dollars cheaper than the men's pair. The woman helping me at the store looked at my ravaged toes. At this point, both the toenails on my big toes were either gone or hanging from a cuticle. I remembered tearing the first one out just a few hundred miles earlier at a Day's Inn in Virginia. At least two or three more toenails had sloughed off, made like tissue paper from the moisture trapped inside my shoes. Although the scent of infection had receded after my trench foot healed, when unsheathed my feet necessitated a few feet of clearance. I apologized for their less than appealing state.

"I've seen worse," the woman assured me, and I believed her.

When I told her about my trench foot, she recommended Vicks. When I told her the clinician in Damascus had prescribed me painkillers, she looked concerned.

"Don't worry," I said. "It was just ibuprofen."

"Good," she said, somewhat reassured. "The last thing hikers need is oxycodone."

With the amount of ibuprofen I was taking, I could imagine how easy it would be to spiral into dependency on-trail. After leaving the outfitter, I beelined for the first trash bin I could find and dropped my old boots by the laces into its depths. It's recommended that hikers change their shoes every 400-500 miles and I had worn the same boots for nearly 1200.

A group of two older couples struck up a conversation with me. I learned that one of the women grew up in New Jersey and attended Red Bank Catholic, which was in my hometown. It made me think of my parents and brother, just a short walk from downtown Red Bank.

"Do you need anything?" she asked, suddenly straight-faced and earnest. Talking business. For a moment I saw lunch: she would get it for me happily, but I'd just eaten, and I wasn't sure how I felt about continuing our interaction, as much as I genuinely liked the couple. I was tired, and the miles wore out my social battery as much as my physical one.

I said farewell to the couple and was surprised that I felt an odd sense of abandonment. I had refused their offer, but now I was parting permanently from people who had shown me kindness, albeit briefly. Now I was heading back into the woods where, by sundown, I would be camping alone, zipped inside my tent listening to the sounds of the encroaching night. Sometimes the Trail felt like a train of fleeting interactions, countless brushes with people and experiences that would fade with the next day's miles. I craved permanence: something that I wouldn't leave behind, or that wouldn't leave me behind.

I crossed the bridge over the Potomac, leaving behind the three vacation-like miles of West Virginia and entering the forty-mile stretch of Maryland. I passed a group of monks in long brown dress-like robes. I passed a group of men with large cameras searching for birds. I passed a hiker named Brittany who I'd met at the cafe, whose tiny dog was her hiking partner and

carried saddlebags like a miniature camel. Soon, I rounded a bend and Harper's Ferry was lost to the indistinguishable miles behind me.

The miles out of Harper's Ferry were a relief. My new shoes seemed to walk the miles for me. Immediately, my feet felt healthier and more supported. The trail-runners allowed my feet to air out; the skin on my feet stayed dryer and the skin became less soft, less prone to blisters. I was surprised to find that the switch to new shoes also changed how my legs felt. My muscles grew less sore, and my joints suffered less impact from walking. I felt like my body was stitching itself together from the feet up. I began to feel more comfortable by the prospect of long days and, by extension, finishing the Trail.

During my hike through Maryland, the relief I felt from my new shoes was coupled by another feeling. At first, it lingered quietly in my thoughts, but as I walked farther away from Harper's Ferry and longer into the day, it slowly crept to the front of my mind.

Compulsively, I imagined that my mom and dad and brother, Christian, had all died. As I walked, I imagined getting a call that they'd been killed in a car accident. The thoughts grew grisly. My mind added depth to the scenarios: my dad driving; he'd forgotten to wear a seatbelt; his head launching through the windshield as the car collided with the guard rail; my mom's neck twisted at an odd angle; Christian bleeding out on the side of the highway.

Our family friend, Mike, had died of a heart attack the previous summer. I imagined attending a service like the one held for Mike, except it was for my family. Mike's wife and daughters had cried and clutched each other's hands as people spoke about Mike at the service. I imagined myself at my family's service entirely alone, receiving consolation from friends and family and strangers, only for them to get back in their cars and drive home, leaving me to go to bed in my childhood home without my family.

I walked and walked, and my brain replayed scenarios of my family dying grisly deaths until I couldn't stomach it anymore. I wasn't sure why I was overcome by these thoughts. Why I was so scared of being left behind. For weeks, I worried I would want to quit because of my group's pace. Only now, after buying new shoes, was I confident that I had a chance to keep up. Why start feeling this way now? Why, all the sudden, was I so scared of abandonment?

The following day on April 28, I hiked twenty-two miles, catching up to my friends in Waynesboro and crossing the border into Pennsylvania. I was glad to have regained my group, but the reunion felt tenuous, like a pile of leaves, cohesive only until the slightest breeze arrived and scattered its members irreversibly.

Things seemed to move quickly from there. On April 30, I reached the official halfway point, mile 1090.5. My family, as it turned out, was not dead. They drove out to visit on May 1. I worried they would get into a car accident on the highway, but that didn't happen either. They parked our tan Toyota Tacoma next to a white barn beside the Trail and cooked veggie burgers for me and my friends and whoever else hiked by. I couldn't stop hugging my brother despite his protests that I smelled, in his words, "like ass." On May 2, I left my family behind to keep hiking, and on May 3, I left my group behind.

Mojo wanted to hike thirty-one miles, and I didn't. We'd hiked eighteen miles to the Rausch Gap Shelter, where we ate lunch. I proposed that we stop for the day. The forecast was calling for rain and there was already a group of older hikers in the shelter; I envisioned a lively night of meeting new people, something we hardly did anymore now that we were so far ahead of the bubble. But Mojo refused to hike just eighteen miles in one day, and the rest of the group followed his lead.

I don't know what made me throw in the towel on that thirty-mile day and not any of the previous ones. Maybe it was because the forecast was calling for all-day rain. By that point, I hadn't taken a day off since April 19, before the Shenny's; maybe I was feeling extra worn out. Maybe it was because I had just said goodbye to my family, and I had less fortitude to fuel our constant forward momentum. Or maybe I wanted to defy Mojo in some small way. Refusing to follow in his wake felt like an act of resistance. Even if no one else from the group fell back with me, I felt like I was telling Mojo that I was not beholden to him.

I told my friends that I was going to stay at Rausch Gap Shelter for the night.

"It's my time," I said jokingly, like I was resigning myself to imminent death.

I told myself that it was time to start going at my own pace. This thought was accompanied by the fact that I might not see my friends again, maybe ever. When Ricky shouldered his pack, heading for the next shelter, I told him I'd miss him. We had met on the summit of Springer Mountain, more than 1000 miles ago on our first day.

Mojo wouldn't look me in the eye.

Dismissively, he said, "I'll see you when I see you," stalking out of camp.

I was hurt, but I hoped his curt goodbye was rooted in affection. If Mojo had chosen to leave the group, I'd feel annoyed with him for making me miss him, too.

Bronco hugged me as he left. I hadn't hugged any of my friends before, partly because there had never been any reason to, and partly because we'd only known each other for about a month and a half. I found it difficult to navigate the friendships I'd made on the Trail. On one hand, I felt like I knew the guys in the group well. We spent consecutive days and weeks in each other's company and had experienced a lot of people and the country together. But sometimes they felt like strangers. We left each other behind and kept walking. When Mojo got Lyme, we

kept moving, assuming he'd catch up if he so desired. We'd only ever known each other through our semi-anonymous trail personas. I wondered if I meant anything to them at all. But when Strega Nona hugged me goodbye, he held me tight and close.

That night, I lay in my tent, listening to the rain patter gently against the rainfly, trying to imagine the course of my trip without my companions. Part of me knew my time on the Trail was my own trip; people came into the experience and left it fluidly. When my mom backpacked across Europe in her twenties, she'd travel with people until she wanted to go somewhere they didn't, and they'd board separate trains, one to Greece, one to Hungary. No strings attached. But this wasn't a vacation. Already I felt so much more alone, just a few hours without them. When I spent two nights alone in West Virginia and Maryland I knew I was meeting back up with the group after we'd all made it to the Pennsylvania border. Now, I had no idea if I would see them again. Speaking to the other hikers at the shelter now seemed less appealing without my own friends with me. They were all decades my senior. They hiked slow miles and told bad jokes.

I was alone in the woods, and I was scared.

Three days later, on May 6, I woke up to an overcast day. Strega Nona and Kimchi had texted me the previous day, saying they had split from the group, too, and planned to hike slower, did I want to join them? I hadn't responded. Although I had branched off from Mojo and my other friends, I stayed in touch almost immediately, asking about their daily mileage, trying to match it or surpass it on my own schedule. I was surprised by my ability to hike long days even without the group. Mainly, I was bored and lonely.

I bit into a piece of coconut cake that I bought at a diner the night before. Its icing was smeared inside the Ziploc bag I'd used to pack it out, and the cake was squashed, but it tasted like manna, soft and sticky. Tears welled in my eyes. There was something about the childish

frivolity of eating cake for breakfast set against the backdrop of solitude that drew out my loneliness like a splinter from a toe. As I ate, I thought about how my mom used to bake me a birthday cake every year and let me choose how I wanted her to decorate it. One year, it was shaped like a blue iPod Nano, another year a beehive with yellow buttercream icing. Back then, I had shared the cake with my brother and friends; I couldn't remember a time where I had ever eaten cake alone. I crammed the last of the cake into my mouth with my bare hand and wiped my eyes with dirt-stained fingers. As I sat alone in the small pyramid of my tent, I realized there was a real pitifulness to crying and eating cake. I didn't want to be pitiful.

I brushed the crumbs from my shirt, letting them litter the floor of my tent. My sadness was replaced with a subtle anger, fueling a quiet determination. Although Strega Nona and Kimchi had extended an offer to hike with them, I knew I would refuse. I was going to catch up with the guys in front. I would not finish hiking without my friends.

Two days later, on May 8, I caught up with Mojo, Bronco, and Ricky at the Delaware Water Gap where they were taking a zero. I learned that Nasa had suffered a stress fracture in his right foot and was forced to fly back home to Minnesota. I was upset to learn he was gone; he and I had been close, but part of me felt like if he hadn't insisted on hiking so far and so long, the bones in his foot wouldn't have splintered and he would still be here. Strega Nona and Kimchi had fallen well behind, so now there were four of us: Ricky, Bronco, Mojo, and me.

The town of Delaware Water Gap sits on the border of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. That night, we Ubered across the border to a Pennsylvanian Walmart, where we received the COVID vaccine, the Johnson & Johnson single-dose, which was easier to manage on-trail than the two-dose shots. I knew what I was signing up for when I rejoined Mojo, so I stopped complaining about pace, even when we hiked twenty-five miles the next day while each of us ran

high fevers from the vaccine. We cleared the seventy-five miles of the Trail in New Jersey in just three days. I might've wanted to slow down on the miles through my home-state, but the trail through New Jersey was hardly recognizable to me. I was endemic to the suburban, beachy part of New Jersey, and the Trail resembled Pennsylvania more than New Jersey. In fact, the only place I saw rattlesnakes on the entire Trail was in New Jersey, a creature I was not aware existed in my home-state and imagined must surely have been introduced to the region by mobsters, as pythons were introduced to the Everglades by Floridian pet owners.

On May 11, after seventy-three days on the Trail, I left my home-state behind and crossed the border into New York, where my boyfriend Chris planned to visit me.

Chapter 6: Chris

I met Chris in a parking lot about ten miles south of our campsite, meaning he would hike the second half of my day with me. We planned to hike the remainder of the Trail in New York together, about forty miles and two days away to the Connecticut border, where his parents would pick him up. I was excited to show Chris my new peripatetic life, but I grew worried about Chris's ability to keep up. I was more than halfway done with the Trail, and I was a seasoned hiker. Chris was joining me with fresh legs on the hike over Bear Mountain, one of the higher climbs in the Trail's NY section. On May 12, I hiked across an overpass to the parking lot where Chris and his parents waited for me.

He was smaller than I remembered him. He was a short guy, but as he stood there in the parking lot, ready to take on the AT, he looked hopelessly out of place. He wore a Trinity College t-shirt with cargo shorts, massive leather hiking boots with metal clasps, and thick wool socks that seemed to swallow his feet. His outfit was not altogether inappropriate, bar his cotton shirt and his shoes; I'd recommended sneakers instead of boots to prevent blisters. His overbearing father chose his gear, insisting instead upon the boots he himself wore when hiking the Catskills in his twenties over thirty years ago. I knew Chris's father was not someone who could be argued with, so Chris stood before me in boots that were sure to turn his uncalloused feet into pulp.

The bigger issue was his pack. It was enormous. Chris stood only about 5'7", so his pack dwarfed him in size when shouldered. In an era of ultralight backpacking culture where hikers measure every ounce, sawing off the ends of toothbrushes to save weight, Chris brought his ex-Eagle Scout pack, a bulky external-frame contraption closer to a torture device than a practical

tool. I eyed the monstrosity; I saw the heavy metal bars that supported the pack. I could almost feel it digging into Chris's back, its relentless inertia pushing him towards the ground, holding us back. As Chris's boyfriend, I couldn't just leave him behind as I did with other slow hikers. For the next few days, I would only be as fast as Chris was slow. I dreaded the thought of letting Mojo and my friends pass me. I knew I could just skip any extra miles that were left between me and my friends when Chis went home, but according to purist hiking guidelines, this was cheating. Any amount of trail untrod would mean that I had not truly hiked the Appalachian Trail. I recalled the words of the Wayside man in the Shenandoah's; many people would not consider me to be a thru-hiker if I skipped miles, even if it were only fifteen or twenty. According to purists, hiking was an all-or-nothing endeavor. No shortcuts, no excuses. If I fell behind or skipped miles, I would be less of a hiker than my friends. Than Mojo. With this in the back of my mind, I shook hands with Chris's father, hugged his mother, and set off.

He struggled almost immediately. At the far end of the parking lot where the Trail resumed, a hill rose up before leveling off on a far ridge. Chris's confidence drained as he trudged upwards. Where I strode up the hill with over a thousand miles of experience and cardio under my belt, Chris's steps were labored. He breathed heavily. We could still see the parking lot and Chris was supposed to hike forty miles in two days. I asked what was in his pack. He rattled off a list. He packed far too many clothes, his mother sent him with a Tupperware of homemade brownies (both thoughtful and utterly thoughtless) and his father insisted that he fill a CamelBak pouch with water; a tube ran from Chris's pack and next to his mouth for him to sip while walking, as if he were an overgrown hamster. I removed my pack and told him to do the same.

"Let's take a look," I said, opening his pack. My hiker-self was appalled. In addition to the water in Chris's bottles, Chris's CamelBak held five liters of water, more than ten pounds of

dead weight on top of his already behemoth pack load. It was no wonder Chris labored up our first hill. I unscrewed the pouch's stopper and poured the water onto the Trail, which trickled down the hill in a small deluge of dust and pebbles. As we continued our hike to camp, Chris's boots gouged holes in his heels and toes. For the next four hours, we labored to camp. My friends were already eating when we arrived.

Chris's demeanor at camp was off. I tried to include him in camp activities. We followed my trail guide to an unmarked stream to fill my friends' water pouches. We cooked our noodle dinner and ate around the fire pit. We explored camp in Crocs. The May evening was balmy, the sky fading to orange and deep blue. Although Chris moved through camp he did not seem to engage. He rarely spoke, he seemed disinterested and distracted. Above all, he seemed deeply tired. When we sat together on the shelter's roof, I asked what was wrong.

"Do you remember what I told you about my Scout leader in high school?" I remembered. "Being here reminds me of him. I haven't been camping since then."

I knew Chris had been abused by a Scout leader in his tent. I wanted to talk to him about it, work things through, but Chris told me nothing more and insisted he was fine. I knew his abuse must have been extremely difficult to talk about, but I didn't know how else to help. I would rather he sobbed and told me everything right there on the Trail: how the leader came into his tent one night, how it left him with enduring trauma, how he had not gone camping since, and how he was trying to hold things together for me but couldn't do it anymore. Breaking down would have been a relief. At least then everything would be out in the open. Instead, Chris said nothing. His unspoken words hung in the air like mines suspended in water. I knew he didn't want to ruin the trip, but the silence made me tense. Although my hiking buddies tried to make

conversation, he responded curtly, and after a while they seemed to assume he did not want to talk to them.

Camp was my haven. The Trail brought motion and beautiful scenery, but it also brought pain, exposure to wind and rain, and impermanence. At the end of the day, I could always rely on camp: shelter, food, fire, and friends. I could finally remove my feet from their sweaty cage, indulge in candy bars, and laugh with my friends about the tears shed or the blisters popped on-trail. For Chris, camp was a terrible memory that I only now understood from looking at him. He was in pain, exhausted from hiking, hurting from his Dad's shitty boots, and tormented by his past abuse. I ached for him, but part of me resented what Chris had made of my safe place. It was no longer my respite, but for a couple of days at least, our shared hell.

Later in the night, I took a walk around camp while Chris was in the shelter. Hugh sat nearby on his phone, planning our agenda, reading the news.

"How are things with Chris?" he asked.

"They're fine," I lied. Hugh considered me over his phone screen.

"He's not what I thought you'd be into," he told me. What did that mean? Hugh was my friend, and he was queer. I could talk to him about things I couldn't always bring up to Ricky or Bronco. But Hugh could also poke at our shared insecurities in a way that Ricky and Bronco could not.

"What do you mean?" I asked, half-laughing.

"Nothing. Just that he's different from how you'd described him."

The next day Hugh, Ricky, and Erik left camp at our usual time, shortly after the sun peeked over the horizon. They hit the trail, leaving me and Chris to take our time. My friends were planning to hike over twenty miles, so I knew I would fall behind with Chris. We'd hiked

less than ten the day before, and I didn't think Chris had much more than that in him. This was all fine, though. I had expected Chris to tire out. I hadn't begun hiking near-marathons until weeks after starting in Georgia. Expecting him to keep up with our pace would be unrealistic. He was my priority, and I was happy he was visiting. I told him so, and I meant it. Chris, however, seemed preoccupied with the idea that he was getting in the way.

"I'm slowing you down," he told me as we packed up camp, the sun already high in the sky. "I'm going to hike the whole way today; I can make it to your friends."

This was not true. Even if he stuck it through all twenty-plus miles, we would arrive at camp well after dark. Chris's pace was slow and halting. He could not motor up hills in the machine-like way that my friends and I were able to after a thousand miles and eight states of hiking. He would not ask for breaks, but whenever I suggested we pause, he removed his pack and grasped for his water.

We were only about five miles to Bear Mountain where my friend Jerry, who lived nearby, was driving to Bear Mountain to visit me and Chris. Chris and I set off. Our progress was even slower than the day before. Even though his pack was lighter, the previous days' miles had rubbed blisters into Chris's feet, slowing his steps on our second day.

"I didn't think there would be so many hills," he gasped.

"You thought the Appalachian Trail would be flat?" I asked, slightly irked. I worked hard to get where I was. By the time I reached New York, I was missing five toenails, including both big ones. The miles behind me had not been easy and they had certainly not been flat.

"I knew it was long," he said, "but I just thought it was straight and flat the whole way. Like a road up the coast."

Whatever Chris assumed the Trail would be, it was not a straight shot from Georgia to Maine. It wound and sinewed and zigzagged through national forests and wildernesses. Its makers had not carved its path through mountains, but rather laid it like a ribbon on top of them, taking hikers relentlessly up, down, and up again. By the time Chris visited, I understood the challenge of the Trail. I could fathom the difficulty of what I had already faced, and I knew I had a thousand more grueling miles ahead of me. It was clear that, whatever Chris had conceived of the Trail, he underestimated what he was getting himself into.

By the time we neared the summit of Bear Mountain, Chris knew he wouldn't be able to keep up. He decided to call his parents when we regained signal closer to the top. He planned to get picked up early, saying he would get out of my hair and let me catch up to my friends. I told Chris that it wasn't any trouble, but part of me would be glad to resume my old pace without the burden of Chris.

Chris and I trudged past the summit's stone watchtower (closed to the public, due to the pandemic) and settled onto a viewing bench overlooking the Hudson Valley. The sky was cloudless and startlingly blue. To our left, the Hudson River carved its way through the mountains. Ahead of us, the New York City skyline was vaguely visible, glinting silver and geometric in the high sun, about fifty miles away. My home in New Jersey was just a few dozen miles beyond that. I considered how only two months ago, my dad and I flew from Newark to Atlanta for me to start my hike. Looking at the City, I realized that I had walked back. Georgia to New Jersey, and now farther.

I tried to enjoy the moment and the view, but Chris was on the phone with his parents. He wanted them to pick him up a few miles north of Bear Mountain, a day early. I couldn't hear anything from the other end of the phone, but Chris's face was stony and tense. They were not

happy. I knew Chris's father wanted him to be more of a man. Chris's father liked me, and I think he wanted me to shape his son into someone more rugged. I found Chris's dad arrogant and short-tempered, but as I watched Chris take his father's shit without retort, part of me wanted him to be more rugged, too.

"They're coming," he said, steely faced, after he hung up.

"What did they say?" I asked.

"My mom told me to keep my voice down because I was in public, and my dad said we would speak about it when he arrives."

That summed up Chris's parents. His father laying down the law, and his mother concerned with appearances. We waited atop the mountain, watching tourists drop quarters into pay-per-view binoculars directed at the skyline. Soon after, Jerry spotted us on our bench. He wore a floral Hawaiian button-down with sunglasses. I laughed and hugged my college friend, introduced him to Chris. Jerry wanted to know everything about the Trail, and I wanted to tell him. As the three of us descended Bear Mountain, I told Jerry about the Great Smoky Mountains where my friend saw wild boars, and the Roan Highlands in Virginia where I hiked past wild ponies in the snow.

Chris was quiet, stewing in the anticipation of his parents' arrival. I was cognizant of his worry, but I didn't want to engage with it. When Chris arrived, he brought a barrage of off-trail emotions. As I hiked north, it was critical to put up blinders. I could not have distractions. Whenever it rained all day or I hiked twenty-seven miles two days in a row, I needed all my focus. If I was going to make it to Maine, I needed to conserve my fortitude. When I ran track in middle school, my coach told me not to look behind me as I approached the finish line.

“Just run like hell,” he told me. “Looking back slows you down. You’ll get to the finish line faster if you keep your head in your lane.”

That was why, even though I knew Chris was worried, I focused on Jerry, putting Chris on the back burner.

“Jason’s lake house was awesome,” Jerry told me. Although by May I’d been out on the Trail since February 27, my friends had only just finished their semester. Jerry and our other buddies, Jason and Kevin, took an end-of-semester trip to Jason’s vacation home on Lake Michigan.

“Kevin drank three beers at a brewery and was sloshed,” Jerry told me.

“I wish I could've been there,” I said, laughing. “How was graduation?” Jerry was in my year but graduated a year early and would start law school in the fall. He told me about getting his diploma and about his preparations for his next three years of study. He was reading books written by current lawyers about what to expect in law school and how to get through on top.

“I’m looking forward to the challenge. Undergrad was too easy.”

This was what I wanted from my visitors. I wanted an escape from my own challenge, a blip of distraction from the monotonous days in the woods. Jerry came with good news and enthusiasm; Chris arrived and piled more weight on my back. I couldn’t help but think that Jerry would fit right in with my trail-friends. Like me, Jerry enjoyed distance running. I didn’t doubt his ability to crank out forty miles in two days.

When we reached the bottom of the mountain, we were greeted by sprawling lawns and crowds of picnickers. It was May 12, Eid al-Fitr, the last day of Ramadan. Hundreds of families gathered to break their fasts on the balmy spring afternoon in Bear Mountain State Park. Picnickers sat around a pond, playing soccer, barbecuing meats and vegetables on skewers,

pumping vibrant music from speakers. In a way, I could relate to their cause for celebration; on the Trail, I had come to live in a near constant state of caloric depletion. I understood the pure joy that good food, and lots of food, brought. The picnickers' happiness was contagious, but along with their joy came a twang of sadness. The families celebrating Eid al-Fitr looked happy, at least outwardly, but Chris's family was cold and fractured. As we watched the picnickers, his parents were driving north to berate him for not being tough enough.

Jerry left us at a trail head. A few hours earlier, we'd driven to a deli for egg salad sandwiches, pickles, and iced tea. After I'd finished off my two sandwiches and taken a walk around the park with Jerry, Chris and I decided to hike our remaining miles. Chris's parents were picking him up at a trailhead parking lot a few miles north. The hike to the parking lot was short, only about two miles, and we walked in silence. Chris was too anxious to say much of anything, and his nervousness made me tense. I was afraid if I spoke, my anger would show through. Eventually we reached a road gap. It was a paved road. Cars tore past. Chris surmised from a map on his phone that the parking lot was up the road, slightly off-trail. When we reached the gravel lot, we sat on top of our packs, waiting for Chris's parents to arrive. I didn't look at Chris because I couldn't stand looking into his worried face.

"Don't be mad," he said. "Please don't be mad."

I *was* mad, but his conciliatory pleas made me even more angry. I was being a cranky jerk and I wanted him to stand up to me. I wanted him to stand up to his father. I wanted him to stand up to the people that had hurt him. Chris did not stand up to me. He sat in the gravel lot, blistered, tired, small. I was tired, too. I wanted my stint on the Trail with Chris to be over. I wanted the Trail back to myself. It hurt me to realize he didn't belong there.

"I don't care that you were slowing me down," was all I could think to say. I didn't care that he couldn't keep up. Or maybe I did care, a little. But who would I be if I got mad at Chris for failing to keep up with seasoned hikers? My friends and I were faster than most other thru-hikers; hardly anyone we knew on-trail was pushing the miles we were. This is what drew me to the group in the first place. For better or worse, big miles were our specialty. Even if I was a little frustrated about falling behind, no reasonable person would fault Chris for his pace. I was more frustrated that his slowness turned into such a debacle. Chris couldn't help being slow, but he *could* toughen up and tell his dad to screw off. Eventually, Chris's parents arrived. Their white Mazda crunched into the gravel lot.

"It'll be fine," I whispered in Chris's ear. Chris's father got out of the car.

"He didn't set you back too much did he?" He laughed humorlessly. I hated how he talked like Chris wasn't right next to him, like he was talking man-to-man with me, and Chris was not a part of the conversation.

"Not at all," I said coldly. I wanted to somehow convey to Chris's father that I was not on his side. I also wanted to convey to Chris that I was rooting for him. His dad was a bully, the villain, and Chris should tell *him* to get out here and try hiking forty miles. However, Chris's dad did all the talking. After Chris and I loaded our packs into the car and took seats in the back, Chris's parents drove me about fifteen miles north to where my friends were camping for the night. The drive was mostly silent, punctuated by Mr. Malone's outbursts.

"I raised you to be more hardworking than this," he said ruthlessly. "You have no work ethic."

In addition to being the receiver of his father's abuse, Chris was in charge of directing his dad to my destination on the GPS. We reached a freeway entrance ramp, and his father asked if we were going north or south. Chris hesitated, unsure. This set his father off again.

"You're a driver, you have to know the difference between north and south!"

Again, he laughed in the same humorless way that made me want to hit him. He never cursed, but I wish he did. My dad also has a short fuse, but his outbursts are punched with "Motherfuckers" and "Sons of bitches!" The expletives make his anger cartoonish. My brother, my mom, and I laugh at his outbursts, and eventually he laughs too.

"What are you sons of bitches laughing at?" he'll say, smiling, and we know that even in his rage he was never a different person. Chris's father changed completely when he was angry. He spoke softly but his voice filled the car. Mrs. Malone sat lamely in the passenger seat. When her husband lambasted Chris, she kept her eyes fixed on the road. She never came to her son's rescue.

"You're twenty, you should be in better shape," Mr. Malone said.

I realized that Chris could never be good enough for his father. He was small, shy, and, most unforgivably, he was gay. Chris sat next to me in the car, silently enduring his father's abuse. He was exactly the things I hated most about myself. I was skinny, shy, and I was gay. They were the things I hoped I could hike out of myself. I couldn't change my stature or sexuality, but I hoped that walking two thousand miles would distance me from my insecurities. I wanted to hike myself to someone I could respect. It seemed like my efforts were working, at least for some people. Chris's father saw a respectable young man in me. In his eyes, the Trail made me rugged and masculine and all the things he valued. By failing the test of the Trail, Chris was none of these things.

After dark, we reached Clarence Fahnestock State Park. Mr. Malone pulled onto the shoulder next to a gated-off ranger road, down which was the park. We were not alone on the shoulder. Another family was pulled over, a Hasidic family in a minivan. The father sat in the front seat with the door open, speaking stern Yiddish into a cell phone. A young boy sat next to him in the passenger seat. Next to the car, a woman in a paisley head covering juggled three more children. A baby lay in a car seat. The woman held a second baby in her arms. A third child, maybe three or four years old, stood next to her mother on the shoulder, getting air while the man in the driver's seat spoke on the phone.

"Thank you for bringing him," I said to Chris's parents. "It was great to see him."

I got out with Chris to get my pack. I heaved the pack onto my back and buckled the hip belt. It felt heavier than ever. I hugged Chris goodbye and then he did something that surprised me. He kissed me quickly on the mouth, then got back in the car. Normally, Chris prohibited physical affection in front of his parents, but the peck was in full view of them. It felt like a small act of defiance, but after everything, it wasn't enough for me. It wasn't clear to Chris, but I knew from his visit that the relationship was over. It was not because he couldn't hike the miles. It was because he didn't stand up for himself. In a way, I felt like he also hadn't stood up for me. Even though Mr. Malone's anger wasn't directed at me, it *was*. He was mad at Chris for the same reasons I didn't like myself.

"Are we in your way?" The Hasidic woman asked, baby in arms.

"No, you're good," I told her. "I'm just getting dropped off."

"Okay, we're pit stopping," she laughed tiredly.

Mr. Malone pulled off the shoulder as I began walking down the road past the other family's car.

"Is that a hiking trail?" the woman asked. She nodded in the direction I was headed, looking from my pack and muddy boots to the gloomy path beyond the barrier.

"It is," I replied. "I'm hiking the Appalachian Trail."

"Oh," she said, shifting the baby in her arms. "Good luck."

The young girl clung to her mother's dress, staring after me as I walked down the road with my pack and dirty face. Her hair was pulled into pigtails, but eventually she would shave her head like her mother, wrap herself in a head covering, and juggle four children on the side of a busy road. I left the family there in their pit-stopped minivan and I left Chris to endure his father on the car ride home.

Chapter 7: Hills Like White Elephants

On May 19, I sat in the back seat of a sedan driven by a middle-aged woman named Clare, an English teacher at a Massachusetts community college. She was a part-time teacher, part-time shuttle driver, bussing hikers to and from the Trail near Great Barrington, Massachusetts. I was tired. I leaned my head against the window as Clare drove. My pack sat heavily on the opposite seat, its inertia daunting and inevitable. Houses ticked away until we drove on a stretch of highway bracketed by nothing but trees and high, clear sky. Although I had met Clare a few days earlier when she drove me to the hospital, I had not done much talking then. Now, I asked her about her job.

"What kind of English do you teach?" I asked.

"Short stories," she said. "We read Hemingway, Flannery O' Connor, all the important ones."

Clare and I shared the same favorite Hemingway short, "Hills Like White Elephants," about a conversation between a man who wants his lover to get an abortion that she doesn't want.

"I like how he communicates what's happening, but he never says it explicitly," I said.

I had read the short story in high school and loved it. I suddenly wanted more than anything to read it again, but it would have to wait until I completed the Trail. Sometimes, it felt like my journey got in the way of my real life. I knew I had nothing else to do but hike, but it was hard not to feel like I was missing out on things, even small ones like reading a book.

"There are two types of short stories," Clare explained, excitedly. I guessed that hikers didn't normally broach conversation about her curriculum.

"One, a stranger comes to town or, two, a person goes on a trip or journey."

I could think of several short stories that didn't fit the stranger-journey binary, but it was fun to think about, anyway. I wondered what type of story my hike on the Trail fell under. I was constantly entering new towns, where I was a stranger, and then I moved on to continue my journey. I guessed both types of stories were just about a journey, but the distinction came from two different perspectives: that of the journeyer and that of someone in the town, observing the journey. In Clare's sedan, there were two stories playing out concurrently: me, the person going on a trip; and Clare, acting as shuttle driver for the stranger who came to town. I asked Clare where she'd gone to school before becoming a teacher.

"I got my MFA in creative writing from Brooklyn College," she said, pithier than when she had been discussing Hemingway.

She said it in a sad sort of way, like there was a failed screenplay or an unfulfilled dream involved. I wondered if she wanted to be more like a journeyer rather than an observer, and I wondered if she knew how much I was beginning to envy observers.

Three days earlier, on May 16, I felt sick while hiking my first day through Connecticut. I felt fatigued, and I could detect the telltale scratch in the back of my throat that signaled a cold, or worse. In the early afternoon, I pitched my tent and took a nap. When I woke up, the sun was tickling the horizon, threatening to set, but I hiked some more miles anyway to catch up with the group. I didn't make it; again I pitched my tent on the side of the Trail after dark, a few miles away from my friends. The next morning, my throat throbbed feverishly. It burned to swallow or talk, and even crying made my throat constrict painfully, so I didn't cry. I hiked about two miles to the nearest road where I called a shuttle. Clare arrived wearing a mask. She drove me across the Massachusetts border to a hospital in Great, Barrington. An hour later, I left with a negative

COVID test and a positive strep test. I walked out the hospital doors, blinking in the high sun with my pack on my back. A nurse had pointed me in the direction of a nearby Quality Inn; my throat aching with infection, I walked a mile through a neighborhood in full Massachusetts spring bloom, eventually checking myself into a single room at the motel.

"You hit a wall," my dad said when I told him where I was. "You hit a wall of exhaustion."

I was slightly irked; I didn't want to think of this as a failing of my strength. I had just crossed paths with a microbe, picked it up from drinking stream water, or from sharing shelters with rats. My immune system had failed, not my resolve. But maybe he was right. Once I was showered and sitting in the luxuriously large and expansive hotel bed (as opposed to my blow-up camping pad), I rifled through my notebook to see when I had last taken a day off.

I flipped back four weeks in the calendar before I found it: April 19, our zero-day in Waynesboro, Virginia at mile 864. It was now May 17, almost a month later at mile 1502. I had not taken a day off in 638 miles.

Maybe my body welcomed strep — whatever it took to get me off the Trail and in a bed with some Gatorade. Even though my body was wracked with fever aches, and it was agony to swallow, I was grateful for the opportunity to sit still.

I was surprised when Mojo texted me as I laid in bed resting.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

I was touched, but also skeptical. Was he not ashamed of my weakness? Mojo had taken only one day off when he had Lyme, and I had left the Trail for a far less serious ailment. Suddenly I felt foolish for thinking so poorly of my friend. I decided to take his concern at face value. I cared about Hugh, too. Was it not too much to expect that he felt the same?

"Doing alright," I said. "Thanks for asking."

Two days passed before I was back in hiking shape. On May 19, I called Clare back and asked if she could drive me north to where my friends had hiked. She agreed to drop me off where I could intercept Ricky, Bronco, and Mojo. By now, I was fine with yellow blazing (skipping miles by car) to catch up. I'd already done it after Chris visited, and it hardly felt like I was cheating myself. Unless I skipped more miles before reaching Katahdin, I would only have bypassed about eighty miles, less than 4% of the entire Trail.

Two days later, on May 22, we crossed the Massachusetts border into Vermont. On Instagram, I posted a photo of Mojo and Ricky posing on the border line, with the caption, "Home stretch! (Sort of)." Although we were just three states away from the finish line, there were also 560 miles left to hike, some of it through the White Mountains, the most challenging terrain on the Appalachian Trail. Hikers say that by the time you reach Vermont, you've hiked 80% of the Trail but only done 20% of the work.

On my first day in Vermont, the Trail threw at us our first taste of the home stretch: miles-long climbs, sticky northern heat, and bugs. Lots of bugs. Mosquitos and gnats and black flies, which took bites out of my exposed arms and legs and neck as I trekked onwards.

It was a relief when we ran into Fresh Grounds at a road gap. Fresh Grounds was a professional trail angel, someone who supplies hikers with food and services. Throughout my journey, he drove up and down the Trail, avoiding the bubble and following small trail families like me and my friends. That day, Fresh Grounds had set up alongside the Trail with his stove to make us burgers and grilled cheeses. He carved a watermelon and mixed a greens salad. He set up folding chairs and offered us chips and Gatorade. On days like my first in Vermont, Fresh Grounds felt like true deliverance.

“Where’s the rest of you?” he asked, referencing our missing three group members.

“Strega Nona and Kimchi are taking it slower,” Bronco replied, through mouthfuls of watermelon. “And Nasa fractured his foot and had to fly home.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Fresh Grounds said. “You always lose a few along the way.”

Onto his griddle he deposited a pad of butter, which puddled like a drop of mercury. Then he added a pile of shredded American cheese. It spat and popped as it melted together with the butter. Two slices of bread sat ready on the griddle. Fresh Grounds scooped the buttery mess onto the bread slices, snapped them shut, and offered the sandwich to me on a paper plate. I inhaled it gratefully.

“Y’all need the calories,” he said, eyeing my stick-like legs.

Fresh Grounds was portly with a graying stubble beard. He wore an apron but carried wrenches in the pockets to adjust things around his van. He was at once motherly and fatherly, a comforting yet commanding figure. He cared about us but regarded us with the detachment of an adult whose own children were not present. He would appear suddenly on the side of the Trail at random; sometimes he would coordinate times to feed us, but he was fundamentally elusive, as nomadic as us hikers.

“I think what you do is amazing,” he mused, plopping heavily into a folding chair once he was satisfied that we’d all had seconds.

“What y’all don’t realize is that your trip affects people aside from you. Everyone who knows about your hike gets inspired, too.”

In my opinion, Fresh Grounds held an idealized image of us hikers. He was a rare case: he altered the course of his life and career to be a hiker roadie. Maybe *he* was inspired by us, but

I couldn't imagine my friends or family feeling the same. Lately, I had been feeling like I was letting people down by hiking.

The day prior on May 21 was my brother's senior prom. My parents sent me photos of Christian with his date, our neighborhood friend, Sarah, posing on the deck in our backyard. Christian arrived late to pre-prom because of baseball practice, so I received snapshots of Christian offering Sarah a corsage in his black-and-orange catcher's uniform. He went inside to change and when Christian emerged in a tux with his hair gelled, Sarah had said, "You clean up nice."

"Look at this!" I exclaimed when I received the photos, passing my phone around to my friends. I felt like a soldier in the trenches opening a letter containing a photo of his newborn baby. I wished I could be present for my brother's milestones and felt guilty for being absent. In just seven more days, I would miss his eighteenth birthday.

As I sat at Fresh Grounds' van with my friends, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I checked my phone and saw that my friend Tara had texted me:

"Hey, we should talk tonight. Will you be free?"

I knew I would be free, but I was less sure if I would have cell service at our shelter. I told her that I wasn't sure what kind of reception I would have later that night. Better to relay a message now when I had signal.

"Laur is pregnant," she texted. "She's getting an abortion after she takes her MCAT."

Laur and Tara were my two closest friends from high school. Laur had been struggling with self-image for a while, and I knew she wasn't making the best decisions at school, having unsafe sex with guys who talked her into bad decisions. I felt like I'd missed a beat: I was receiving news not just of Laur's pregnancy, but of her decision to terminate it. I assumed they

had waited to tell me until it was all sorted out. I was on-trail, and they didn't want to burden me. I felt hopelessly detached from the people I cared about and wracked with guilt that I couldn't be there for Laur.

"How is she?" I asked stupidly.

"Not great," Tara said. "She's trying to focus on studying."

Laur was trying to go to medical school. Laur was by far the smartest of our trio, which made it hard to imagine how she could act so self-destructive. I guess people do different things when they're unhappy. Some people develop sexual dependencies, and some go on a hike.

Eventually we trickled out of Fresh Grounds' camp, parting with full stomachs and profuse thank-yous. I hiked the remaining miles to the Melville Nauheim Shelter. We were the only hikers at the shelter that night. We hardly met other thru-hikers anymore. Either we had passed them all, or they were so far ahead of us that we only read their names in trail logs.

In the corner of the shelter, we found a pair of brochures tucked between the pages of a bible, like a pile of fresh linens, folded and waiting. They depicted a blonde Jesus with a golden nimbus encircling his head. One was titled, "Dealing with Muslims." It encouraged people to pray that Muslims convert. Another brochure was called "The Sanctity of Life," preaching that abortion is murder. This was not the first time I had discovered pro-Christian literature on the Trail. Once while hiking, I found a booklet called, "How to Know Him Better: Steps to Christ," propped up against a tree. It was enclosed in a Ziploc bag, on which someone had written, "Free," in Sharpie, as if hikers would appreciate evangelist literature as much as a hamburger or a Gatorade.

I lay on the muggy shelter floor and propped my feet up against the wall, so I was positioned like an "L," my feet elevated above my heart. I could feel the blood draining from my

swollen feet, their throbbing gloriously alleviated. In the thickening darkness, I directed the orb of my headlamp onto one of the pamphlets and cracked it open. I craved words that weren't texted to me from a thousand miles away or pressed between the pages of my trail guide. As much as the pamphlets disturbed me, they were all I had to read until I finished hiking. Real books, just like my brother, friends, and their lives, would have to wait until I returned.

Chapter 8: Home

On May 26, eighty-eight days and 1704 miles into my hike, me and my friends reached U.S. Route 4. We needed to resupply, so we called a shuttle to Rutland, Vermont, the nearest town. Over the past three days, we hiked at least twenty-seven miles per day. On the third day, I camped with Ricky, Bronco, and Mojo on the summit of Mount Killington. We were rewarded with sweeping panoramic views, but the wind howled all night and none of us got much sleep. Since reaching Vermont, I found myself more and more often on high peaks, looking out over the Green Mountains and still, glassy lakes, and feeling nothing. I was too tired to feel something.

The night before, Mojo had researched places to eat in Rutland. He suggested we swing by the Yellow Deli, which is known on the Trail as a culty tourist attraction. The Deli in Rutland is one of many Yellow Delis and farm communities that span the globe, all purses of the Twelve Tribes, a religious organization that sprang out of the Jesus movement in the 1970s.[i] Its first community began in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1973, but expanded to more than fifty communities, farms, and delis in fifteen states, with over twenty-six locations in eight countries.[i] Twelve Tribes members live together on the organization's farms and communes.[i] At the Yellow Delis, they work for free, cooking and serving sandwiches in regular cities, like Rutland, to rake in money for the organization. Because of its placement along the Appalachian Trail, Rutland's Yellow Deli also operated a hiker hostel.

Although we had decided to eat at the Deli, we were unsure about staying the night. We were exhausted, but it was Wednesday, and we wanted to reach Hanover, New Hampshire by

Friday, and we were still about forty-seven miles away. When our shuttle driver arrived and we told her that we were headed to the Deli, she raved about the menu.

"Their sandwiches are out of sight," she fawned. "And you have to get their maté."

I didn't know what maté was, but my hiker-hunger made just about anything palatable. By the time we were in Vermont, I could easily consume upwards of 5000 calories in town. I had lost about fifteen pounds and my sweat began to smell like ammonia, which meant that my body had exhausted its supply of fat and was breaking down muscle for energy instead. Whatever the Deli was serving, I was sure to eat my fill, even if it was served by a cult.

We arrived at ten in the morning. The Deli sat in the middle of a Rutland city block, its bricks painted sunny yellow. A hippie flower-shaped sign proclaimed "Yellow Deli" in spindly font, reminding me of the Mystery Machine in Scooby Doo. The interior was rustic to the point of medieval: thatched-roof sitting huts, thick wooden beams running the length of the ceiling, wood-paneled walls, wood-shaded lamps dangling above wooden tables. Chamber music pumped through hidden speakers; waitstaff wore bonnets and breaches and blue-striped collared shirts. The men all had beards and long hair secured in a bun behind the neck. The women had high foreheads and center-parted brown hair. They reminded me of the woman in *American Gothic*. The food was amazing.

We started with sweet maté, which turns out is a type of tea that the Tribe grows and sells in bulk from its cafes in Manitou Springs, Colorado, and Savannah, Georgia. I ordered the homemade bread to preface my meal. It was manna, warm and herby, clearly hand-kneaded, and fresh. I chased the bread with waffles and real Vermont maple syrup, a garden salad, egg sandwich, and black bean burger. I was beginning to warm up to the Twelve Tribes.

Our appearance at the Deli seemed to cause a stir among the employees. During our meal, four or five separate Tribe members approached our table to make conversation. Each was white, dressed in pseudo-colonial garb, and somewhat mangy. They had the air of people who have been tilling soil and raising sheep for a decade or two.

"Are you hikers?" they would ask hospitably. "We love hikers!"

One employee asked where we were all from. In turn, we shared our hometowns.

"Massachusetts," Bronco said.

"Boston," said Ricky.

"New Jersey," I told him.

Mojo hit gold. "Louisiana," he said. The Tribesman's face lit up with recognition.

"Abel's from Louisiana," he said. "Hey, Abel!" he called to a man wiping down tables. "We have a guest from Louisiana!"

Our meal was intermittently interrupted by more Tribe Members inquiring about our hike, our hometowns, our schools. And they always asked if we were staying the night.

"We would love to have you," they said.

When there was a break in the tide of Deli staff, I whispered over the table to my friends, half joking and half dead serious.

"They're trying to bring us into the fold," I whispered. "Why would they keep asking if we're staying?" I asked.

"Maybe they're trying to drum up business," said Mojo.

"Why aren't they asking anyone else to stay?" I countered.

"No one else in here are hikers," said Mojo.

It was true that we were ahead of the pack. There were very few northbound hikers as far north as we were. I could count on my fingers the number of hikers ahead of us, and there was a chance that none of them had passed through Rutland. It was also too early in the season for southbound hikers to have reached Vermont from Maine, so we might have been the first few hikers to arrive at the Yellow Deli that season.

"They might kidnap us," I suggested. "Everyone sleep with their Garmins."

After we'd eaten our fill, another Tribe member asked if we wanted to settle up or open a tab for an extended stay. We told him we would think about it. We needed to decide if we would take a short day, or if we would push on.

Despite my half-fear of the Deli, I was a proponent of staying. I had a morbid fascination with the place, and part of me wanted desperately to be able to say I'd stayed overnight at a cult's hostel. There was also the objective fact that I was exhausted, and the Yellow Deli had beds right upstairs. I recalled the days leading up to Rutland, the twelve-hour days where I could feel every step I took, my feet raw and swollen, the muscles of my legs breaking down and seeping through my pores. As much as it was creepy, the Deli was also comfortable and hospitable. The Twelve Tribes was extending an eager hand, and I was desperate for someone to shoulder my pack for the night.

"Alright," said Mojo, persuaded.

We were all feeling the hurt, even Mojo, though I don't think he wanted to admit it. Plus, the forecast showed thunderstorms with high winds for the rest of the day, and none of us wanted to hike through a downpour.

"We'll stay at the hostel and leave early tomorrow. As long as we get to Hanover by Friday."

When we told our waiter we were staying, he was ecstatic.

“That’s great!” he said. “When you come down for dinner, the entree is on us.”

The rest of the night, we got settled. We chose bunks in the men’s bunkhouse, which overlooked the Rutland city block. The rain began, arriving in sheets and claps of thunder. Ricky and I sat in the windowsills journaling and listening to the hiss of the tarmac as rain shattered onto the road and evaporated. We changed, took turns showering, doing laundry, calling home, and eating snacks from our grocery-run. Beside our beds, our packs were emptied onto the floors, the content of our nomadic lives in disarray on the tile.

At some point, a Tribe member appeared in the threshold of the bunkhouse, a man. Women were not allowed in the men’s bunkhouse.

“Would you like some work-stay?” he offered.

Work-stay was offered by some hostels, an agreement where hikers worked around the hostel in exchange for free lodging. I met a hiker in Hot Springs, North Carolina who’d lived at the Laughing Heart hostel for months on work-stay. He was only sixteen and had not finished high school. When the Yellow Deli offered work-stay, I didn’t particularly want to. I wanted to rest.

“It would only be for half an hour or so,” the Tribe member continued. “We just need help moving some furniture down to the kitchen, and the beds in the women’s bunkhouse need new linens.”

It’s hard to say no to someone’s face when you don’t have any good reason to. Plus, he was offering free stay for hardly any work. It would be rude to refuse the offer. We agreed, and he showed us to a long, wooden bench that needed moving. Bronco and I each took an end. We descended staircases until we were in what appeared to be the basement that housed the Deli’s

kitchen. We were directed to place the bench in a storage room. Afterwards, an older Tribe couple greeted us.

"Thanks for all your help," said the woman in a faint accent. "Every little bit adds up. We all help each other out in our community."

Her husband put his arm around her. I asked how long they had been in the Twelve Tribes.

"About twenty years," she replied. "I'm from Germany originally, but now I'm here."

She smiled brightly.

Afterwards, we climbed the stairs to the women's bunkhouse, where we changed the sheets and made the beds. We were awarded with free stay and free dinner. I was surprised by their generosity since hostels usually run a tight operation without much room for handouts. The Tribe extended their hospitality further when they offered us free breakfast in the morning.

"Just let us know when you're getting up, and everything will be ready," the German woman said.

I was confused because the community members seemed genuinely bright and forthcoming in their generosity. I wondered if I had pegged them wrong. The following morning, we rose early and packed our bags, donned our freshly cleaned hiking clothes, laced up our shoes, and descended the staircase from the hostel to the Deli.

The Deli wasn't even open to the public that early, but a bonneted woman unlocked the doors for us, and led us to a table spread with orange slices, freshly baked cranberry muffins, scrambled eggs, and rice. I had assumed that we would eat alone as a group, as we had for lunch and dinner the day before. But I was surprised when a young man and woman from the Tribe joined us at the circular table. When my friends and I filled our plates, so did the man and

woman. The man and woman exchanged glances as they sat down with us, tucking into their own eggs, making four into six. Afterwards, when I replayed the scene in my head, the words that jumped to mind were "Places, everyone!"

The young woman did most of the talking. She was bright-faced and friendly and vivacious. She told me her name, but it was a name I hadn't heard before, and it quickly slipped from my mind. I'll call her V. V asked each of us in turn why we were hiking the Trail. She encouraged open discussion, offering the floor to anyone who spoke.

We all had versions of the same story: COVID hit, school changed, we felt unsatisfied. I hated the question. Whenever I was asked about my motivation, I felt like people wanted to hear some version of "I was so lost, I needed to hike myself to my identity!" I guess that was true, but it sounded corny.

V herself had hiked part of the Appalachian Trail, or so she said. She was originally from the Midwest with plans to go to law school, but she ended up hiking south on the Trail from Mount Katahdin.

"I felt so lost. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life," she said. She used to cry at night knowing that her time on the Trail would be over.

"I would miss the Trail's community so much," she said. "I had a revelation on a mountaintop in the Whites. I realized that the world was beautiful, but I knew that I couldn't stay on the Trail."

V said that the peak of the mountain is where you receive revelations, but you can't live up there. It's exposed, and there's no food or water. You have to go back down into the valley where the people are. That's where you can set up a life for yourself with what you learned in the mountains.

It was a nice metaphor, but I wondered where she was going with her story. I didn't believe in revelations, or not the kind she seemed to be talking about.

When V reached Rutland, she discovered the Twelve Tribes, and had been there ever since. V was very eloquent, but I noticed she used the word "fallen" in place of "selfish" when describing the values of our broader society, and "revelation" instead of "idea" or "realization" when talking about the path that led her to the Twelve Tribes. In between her story of discovery, she asked us about our own feelings. How did *we* feel about our journey coming to a close? Were we satisfied with school? Did we feel lost?

Between my bites of eggs and swigs of juice, I felt my temperature being taken.

I couldn't help but note that V was not at the Deli yesterday. We'd met most of the employees on Wednesday; they'd all approached us during our meals and in the hostel. I felt sure that if V had been working at the Deli the day before, she would have been sent to our table, as good a salesperson as she was. I wondered if she'd been brought in from the Tribes' local farm community to host our breakfast. If anyone was perfect for the job, V was a stellar recruiter.

On our way out, I grabbed one of the Tribe's free pamphlets, a literary mag called "One Short Life." Inside was information about the organization's lifestyle with headlines like "We All Live Together!" or religious articles like "The Fatal Flaw of Man," and "Prepare for Eternity." In the latter article, a line caught my eye. It read, "Even when they look at the intricacies of nature they deny the existence of God." [ii] I didn't know who "they" was, but I wondered what made the Twelve Tribes see God in nature. Recently, nature was feeling less and less restorative to me. I feared days with rain or cold or high peaks, even though it was all beautiful. Although I knew the pamphlet was Tribe propaganda, I felt a little jealous. Whoever wrote the article at least wanted to give the appearance that they found something divine in

nature. For me, nature was losing its glimmer. It felt strange to be in a beautiful place that I no longer wanted to be in.

Beyond the pamphlet, the Twelve Tribes' rhetoric was very entertaining. On the organization's website, they asserted vehemently that they were not a cult:

"To 'the-powers-that-be,' the use of the word 'cult' seemed to be the perfect weapon to dismantle our Movement and send us back to the pews. That weapon did not work." [iii]

I found a video where a man named Netsach sat in the middle of a room singing an original song called "One Short Life" surrounded by chopped wood and a wagon wheel.

The irony lies, of course, in the fact that the Twelve Tribes is an evangelist cult-like organization with a history of abuse scandals and aggressive recruitment. After we left the Yellow Deli, Mojo told me that he read on The Trek, a popular hiker blog, that the Deli is virulently intolerant against women and minorities. On the Reddit page for Savannah, Georgia, home to a Twelve Tribe community and café, a user asked why the broader Savannah community accepts the Tribe's presence:

"I get that their muffins are rad but they are a legit cult." Other users commented that "They are really into trying to attract young women of child-bearing age . . . they have perfected their approach, and work together as a team to get you comfortable so they can pounce." Another said that the Twelve Tribes "have a history of indoctrinating college students. They make easy targets, away from family for the first time, feeling isolated, overwhelmed." [iv]

It all added up. My friends and I were of the same demographic: young, impressionable, able-bodied. More than that, we were alone and far from home, undertaking a journey that was sure to overwhelm us, make us hungry for a home. The Deli was the perfect ruse. Just at the

moment when our journey was coming to a close, when we would be lamenting the loss of the Trail's community, they offered us food, warm beds, and a replacement community.

Although I had come to the Trail looking for something within myself, I wasn't sure if I was finding it. V spoke about the sublimity of the Trail; I recognized that my surroundings were objectively beautiful, but they never made me feel full, like I thought they would. Instead, I felt drained. No amount of bread or kinship from the Tribe could fill me all the way up. Even though I was traveling with the Gap Year guys, was hiking faster than anyone else on the Trail, and felt more like a hiker than ever, I wasn't sure I had found what I was looking for. I still felt like the same person who started hiking in Georgia. At that point, all I knew was that I wanted to go home.

The day after I left Rutland, we camped in the backyard of a man who allowed hikers to stay on his property. The house stood between a stream and a paved road, but I can't remember many cars driving by. Cool green mountains reared up around us and barns stood sentinel along the road, humming with quiet life: a cat creeping through clovers, a barred owl that I heard but could not see, two children walking down the road with backpacks. I wished I could stay there longer, but night was already falling over the mountains and I had to hike twenty-three miles to the New Hampshire border the following morning at dawn.

Then there was a pickup truck in the driveway and a man stepped out, mustached and dressed in denim. He pointed in our direction.

"Have any of you seen two children?" he asked. We had.

"Yeah," said Ricky. "Not too long ago. They were walking that way." He pointed in the direction the kids had walked.

“Fuck,” the man said. He wiped a hand over his mustached mouth like this was all a big bother. His plaid shirt was tucked into his jeans and he wore black leather boots. His hands were on his hips. He didn’t seem all that worried, just annoyed. I couldn’t tell if I trusted him.

“They’re my kids. They’ve run away again,” he said. “You know where Dave’s at?”

Dave was the man who let us camp in his backyard.

“He’s inside,” Bronco shrugged.

The man walked up the steps to the back porch and let himself into Dave’s house. A few moments later, they both walked out the door, talking fast. The mustached man got into his pickup and Dave got into his own. Both men backed out of Dave’s driveway and drove off in the direction the kids went.

“I wonder why they keep running away,” Mojo said.

It felt odd that both would run away together. I wondered what they were running from and if it was the stern man with the mustache. Whatever it was, they were bound to get caught soon with the mustached guy and Dave on their tails.

I couldn’t imagine wanting to leave home. Home was the only thing I wanted these days. Especially here, in rural Vermont, the kids’ home was like paradise. I would do anything to spend more time here. But the kids had chosen to do what I was doing: packing their lives onto their backs and walking away from home. Maybe their home wasn’t safe, and braving the elements was safer to them than staying home. Or maybe they were like me and just wanted a change of pace, but were too young to do something like hike the Trail. The two kids had seemed very young, no older than ten or twelve.

Soon, the two runaways faded from my mind as we lounged in Dave’s soft lawn in our camp clothes, eating yellow rice and chocolate bars. Dave returned to his house sometime after

we'd gone to bed, and I never found out if they'd found the kids or not. The next morning, I packed up my tent and headed up the Trail, leaving the runaways behind me, my mind fixed on getting myself home.

Chapter 9: Endings

On May 28, I crossed the border into New Hampshire, and two days later began the trek through the White Mountains. The Whites pose the greatest challenge to hikers on the Trail, with miles-long uphill climbs and thousands of feet of rocky elevation gain. The Presidential Traverse takes hikers across seven of the White's highest peaks, including the 6000-foot Mount Washington. For about twenty-five miles, hikers negotiate loose rocks and progress slows to a crawl. On June 4 when I hiked the Presidential Range, it took me nearly fourteen hours to hike less than twenty miles. Under normal conditions, twenty miles was an easy day, taking less than eight hours. That night, I set up camp in a clearing of pines when the sun set, still a mile and a half away from where my friends camped.

I was falling behind my group more and more often. On June 7, my one-hundredth day on the Trail, I crossed the border into Maine, the final state of the Appalachian Trail. A sign was nailed to a pine tree. One arrow pointed north, proclaiming "Mt. Katahdin, 281.4." Another arrow pointed in the direction I'd come from, indicating "Springer Mtn, 1877.8."

"Fuck," I said out loud. I was cursing aloud a lot lately. It was how I felt, and no one was around to hear me.

Over the next two weeks, my desire to reach Katahdin grew stronger, almost desperate. As I thrust myself forward, I grew reckless. I did whatever it took to get from point A to point B, even if it was something I would not have done just a few months ago.

On the way back from a Walmart in Gorham, Maine, me and my friends hitched a ride with a twenty-year-old guy named Jameson, who drove a red pickup. He was tan, wearing a t-shirt with the sleeves and sides cut off. He'd folded a red bandana into a strip and tied it around

his head. On his center console was a tray spilling over with ash and half-smoked joints. He flicked a lighter to life, held the tip of a joint to the flame, and exhaled its skunky haze.

"Want a hit?" he took the joint from his lips and offered it to me.

"No, thanks," I told him. "I have to hike out after this."

Jameson shrugged and returned the joint to his lips, tearing out of the Walmart parking lot and onto the traffic of NH Route 16, his eyes bloodshot, red like lips. By the time I was well into Maine, I began hitchhiking to town alone.

Although only 280 miles remained, a fraction of the 1900 miles I had already traversed, the finish line felt impossibly distant. I began to distrust myself. What if I decided to quit at the threshold of success? It wasn't such an outlandish thought. I wanted to quit. Or maybe not quit - I still wanted to succeed - I just wanted to stop moving.

Whenever I moved, my body screamed protest. My feet were perpetually swollen. Whenever I looked at them, they did not register as my own. They were larger than I remembered them being. When probed with my thumb, they felt plump, like how a burn blister fills with fevery yellow fluid. The pain in my legs had graduated from the post-workout soreness I was accustomed to from athletics. Now, pain took up permanent residence in my joints and muscles. It would not go away. When I looked at my body in hostel mirrors, the person I saw hardly looked like someone who could stand up, let alone shoulder a forty-pound pack and hike from dawn till dusk. The weight I had lost was painfully visible in my pointy shoulders and stick-thin legs. The skin on my shoulders and hips was rubbed raw from my pack straps. The hair on my thighs had chafed off months ago from the constant swishing of my shorts.

The weariness was suffocating. No amount of on-trail sleep or stasis would reverse it. I needed to stay still for a long time. I needed to wash myself of the Trail. But to not move meant to quit. There was no way to reach Katahdin other than to slog relentlessly forward.

On June 13 we camped at Pierce Pond. We set up our tents on the forest floor beside the pond. We all stripped nude and jumped from a rocky crag into the lake. The water was cool and deep and oddly heavy. I was used to the salty buoyancy of the Atlantic; the pond's fresh water pulled down on my emaciated body, but I loved the feeling of moving through the water. I could not see the pond's bottom through the crystalline surface and for once my feet met no resistance, no longer burdened with the weight of my body and pack. I could feel the sweat and grime being rinsed from my pores.

Early the next morning on June 14, Bronco broke his nose. His shoe was falling apart and it caught on a root. He fell faster than he could react, landing face-first on a rock, his pack slamming him into the ground with thirty extra pounds of assurance.

"Does it look broken?" he asked, inspecting his face on his phone's camera.

I exchanged a look with Ricky. Ricky saw it too.

"Yes," I said.

I didn't want to sugarcoat. His nose was crooked. It had not been crooked last night.

"There's nothing you can do," I said, "except finish the hike."

It was true. We were less than a week away from Katahdin. Our parents had booked flights. We could not make detours if we didn't need to. Bronco's broken nose would not keep him from walking, so we did not need to stop for it. Within a few hours, he looked like a raccoon. His nose stayed tilted to the left for the remainder of the trip. His eyes turned purple, reminding us that we would fight our way to Katahdin until the last mile.

Five days later, on June 19, I was the first of my group to arrive at the base of Mt. Katahdin, the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. Behind me was the 100-Mile-Wilderness, the final hurdle before Katahdin itself. We had cleared the Wilderness in a four-day blur: twenty-six miles, then twenty-nine miles, then thirty-three, then twenty. The Wilderness behind me was like a painting: beautiful, but unknowable, not for touching. I granted it my gaze momentarily, but I inevitably parted with it, like I was rushing myself through a museum tour. I hardly remembered it. I felt numb. On mountain peaks, I saw verdant forests dotted with blue lakes, like pieces of sky fallen to earth. I saw a moose bathing herself in a river. All of it was sublime, for someone.

And then I was there. I wanted badly to feel the magnitude of what I had accomplished. I walked over 2000 miles to Maine from Georgia. It was amazing. I had done it. But it just felt like something I had done, not something that was amazing.

The base of Mt. Katahdin was the first taste of civilization I'd had since before the 100-Mile-Wilderness. It was a Saturday in late June, so weekend campers had pitched tents beside their pickup trucks in rented plots. I smelled barbeque. Behind them, Katahdin reared. We would hike the five remaining miles to the summit the next morning.

I waited at the Ranger Station, a log cabin with a screened-in porch, for a ranger to return. There, I could register to hike up Katahdin and secure a spot at the nearby hiker-only campgrounds, the Birches. More than that, I wanted to receive my permit number. When hikers register at Katahdin, they receive a hiker permit with their name, trail name, and registry number. The number on my permit would tell me how many hikers had reached Katahdin before me that season. Me and my friends speculated what numbers we would be. We knew we were at the

front of the pack, but we weren't sure exactly how far ahead we were. From Instagram, we knew that our friend Two Tents had summitted on June 13, a week before our summit on June 20. Two Tents had been the fourth hiker to reach Katahdin that year. We did the trail-math: if Two Tents was fourth a week ago, we guessed that we would clock in around the late-twenties, early-thirties. We weren't sure how many solo or pair-hikers were ahead of us, but we were sure that our group was ahead of all the other trail families: we were ahead of our friend Pickles' group, the Strawbridge family, and the Flying Circus, the only other trail families so far north so early in the season.

On our last day hiking through the 100-Mile Wilderness, I left camp earlier than my friends, arriving first at the base of Katahdin. I might not have lead the pack on the way to Katahdin, but I wanted to be the first to arrive there. Whatever permit number I received, I wanted it to be lower than Mojo's.

I sat listening to the buzz of cicadas. A nearby creek gurgled; I filled my water bottles there as I waited. Soon, a ranger rounded the corner of the cabin.

"Are you a thru-hiker?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Let me get set up," the man said.

He walked up the steps to the porch where he unlocked the front door and rifled around in a desk for a clipboard. He grabbed a pen and a stack of blue plastic cards the size of a driver's license.

"Alrighty," he said, slipping one of the cards from the top of the pile and positioning it next to his clipboard.

"Trail name?"

"ID," I said, reciting my now-familiar name like a mantra.

"Given name?"

"Nicholas Malizia," I said. "M-A-L-I-Z-I-A."

The ranger jotted my information onto his clipboard, then transcribed it onto the plastic card, my hiker permit.

"NoBo?" he posed.

He was asking if I had hiked northbound (NoBo) from Georgia. I was a NoBo. There were southbounders (SoBos), who began their hike at Mount Katahdin in Maine and hiked south to Springer Mountain in Georgia. There were also flip-floppers, who began hiking wherever they wanted, reached their destination, then returned to their original starting point and hiked in the opposite direction.

"Yeah, I'm NoBo."

"You're early," he commented, circling "NoBo" on my permit.

"What number am I?" I asked eagerly.

"Let's see." The ranger glanced at the clipboard. There was just a short numbered list of names written there. "Thirteen. You're number thirteen."

Thirteen? *Thirteen*. One-three. I was the thirteenth person to complete a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail in 2021. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy estimates that more than three million people visit the Trail each year, and that over 3000 people attempt a thru-hike annually. Thirteen was not all that different from twenty or thirty, or even fifty, but discovering that I was number thirteen was almost jarring. My group had emerged at the forefront of the northbound thru-hikers that year. I realized that maintaining our pace was not nearly impossible for just me.

There was a reason I was falling behind and apart at the seams; my group had walked faster than thousands of others. Only a dozen people, out of thousands, had beaten me to Katahdin.

That night at the Birches, I met five other thru-hikers who had arrived at Katahdin just a few hours before us. Three of them were a trio of older guys. The other two were fresh out of high school, like Mojo and Bronco. A trail angel was there. He brought boxes of pizza and a cooler of iced teas and beers and White Claws. I cracked open one of the Claws and sipped it rebelliously, hoping that some psychic force in the universe was delivering an eerie feeling to the owner of the Standing Bear hostel that she couldn't quite place. Me, Mojo, Bronco, and Ricky spent the night munching pizza with the five other hikers, celebrating the end of our journeys. I felt a strong sense of camaraderie but also an odd detachment. The reality of leaving the Trail had not sunk in. For weeks, I had envisioned reaching this point: arriving at the base of Katahdin, the threshold of success and deliverance. I imagined feeling overwhelmed by the realization of what I had done. Now that I was here, I didn't feel much of anything. I hoped that maybe the reality would set in when I reached the summit. The famous Appalachian Trail sign waited there. Before the Trail, I had seen photos of nameless hikers standing atop it, anonymous Maine mountains dwarfed in the distance. Just a week ago, I had seen Two Tents photographed there, triumphant. Alive. Tomorrow, I hoped to be as triumphant and alive and singular as all the hikers I had seen before me. I had gone through the motions. I had done the work and walked the miles. I was due to receive exactly what they had. Wasn't I?

On the morning of June 20, I rose and packed for the last time. The climb to Katahdin's summit was just five miles, but my trail guide showed a steep vertical line like an exponential curve representing the climb's elevation gain. We set out as the sun was still rising. Our pace was harried. We had never hiked so fast, but it didn't matter. We didn't have to risk tiring

ourselves out at this point. We were already as tired as we could get. Besides, all of us were ready to claim our ending.

My trail guide's exponent curve proved drawn to scale: the climb up Katahdin was the steepest portion of trail I had yet encountered. The Trail went nearly straight up, like I was ascending a jagged, rocky beanstalk. As I climbed, cold wind battered me. I was hiking into a cloud. The views I had expected were nowhere to be seen through the haze. Sometimes, the fog would momentarily clear, and a cloud would sail past, like some behemoth stirring as I entered its domain, revealing a shattered glimpse of the ground below. But then the fog would return and obscure my view again. After about an hour and a half, the bulk of the upward climb was behind me, and I reached a sloping, rocky plateau. With the dense fog, I could not see far ahead of me or gauge how far I was from the summit. I staggered. The wind was like cold hands clutching my own raw, red ones. My eyes watered. Eerily, the sun was not visible beyond the wall of cloud. All was watery, blustery, anonymous gray. I guided myself by the white Appalachian Trail marks intermittently blazed on stones at my feet. And then amidst the fog, I saw the steps and the sign, and I was there.

Whenever people asked me and my friends why we were hiking the Trail, Ricky told the same story. He had climbed Mount Katahdin years ago and seen a thru-hiker reach the peak, completing his hike. The man swayed, as if the legs that carried him up the coast had reached their final limit. He was bedraggled, windswept, his shirt clinging to his chest like a second skin. He was crying. He fell to his knees and the man's pack seemed to drive him into the ground as if it were a cross. He cried and clutched his wife who cried with him, but the occasion was happy because the man's journey was over. He could hobble home to recover with the eternal, primordial self-assurance of one who has conquered. I always expected to feel the same way.

Now, I stood on the same ground, hallowed and sought, almost obscenely, by so many. After thousands of miles, my feet had carried me north and I had arrived at my destination. The summit's panoramic views were shuttered by freezing clouds, like Asphodel: gray, blinding, envious. I looked into the mass of vapor surrounding me and saw nothing. I was eyeless. What had it all meant? My hair clung to my head and I swayed in my shoes. I did not cry.

Epilogue

I finished hiking the Trail on June 20, 2021. It took me 113 days to walk from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine.

Our families met us at the base of Katahdin and the journey was over. Ricky's parents greeted him in their thick Boston accents, Erik's in Russian, Hugh's parents in a faint Louisiana southern drawl. Hugh hugged his parents, but the embrace looked stiff, like physical affection wasn't part of their relationship, even though the occasion warranted it.

I wanted to somehow express to them all, especially Hugh, how much they meant to me, even after just three months. Even though the summit had not afforded me a sense of finality, I hoped to receive acknowledgement from my friends that we had been through something amazing together: a tight embrace, a promise to reunite, something to assure me that our trail family would persist beyond just the Trail. The acknowledgement did not come; we were far too tired. We did not have the energy to muster profound farewells.

Before getting in the car with my parents and brother, I dropped my shoes into a garbage can near a ranger hut. They were my second pair of Lone Peaks, overall, my third pair of shoes chewed to threads by the Trail. My shoes, the vehicle of my journey north, had expired. I got in the car with my family, and we drove away. When I hiked through Maine, Mount Katahdin had loomed nearer and nearer in the distance for days, slowly reeled into my grasp through my own weary determination. Now, it faded impossibly fast in the car's rear window.

Immediately after returning home, I was busy with the slow work of recovery. I weighed 140 pounds and my feet had taken a beating: they were a mess of missing or jagged, half-peeled toenails. My feet remained swollen for weeks. It took a month before I could stand up in the

morning without pain in my feet and hamstrings. There was also the work of parsing through my emotions about my completed journey. When I got back, my friends and family wanted to hear about everything: the views, stories, the people. I found that I didn't have many stories to tell. I had hoped that the Trail might change me, but whenever asked about the Trail I grasped for words like water running through a cupped hand.

Nearly a year after I finished hiking the Trail, I still had not spoken to Hugh. I wasn't sure where Hugh fit into my life off the Trail. Were we friends? I hoped so, but it was easy to convince myself that our hike was the only thing we had in common. After all, I had come to know Hugh as Mojo; I had no idea who Mojo was when he was Hugh full-time.

Sometime in February of 2022, Hugh and I arranged a phone call. I was anxious to speak to him after so long. But when he answered the phone, his greeting was bright and earnest.

"Hey!" said Hugh's voice.

His greeting dispelled my worries. I knew I could speak to him as openly as I had while we hiked. I wanted to know about his freshman year.

"How is school?" I asked.

"You always have to be 'on' here."

He sounded tired. I got the sense I was someone he could be "off" with, and that he hadn't been off in a long time. Hugh spoke quickly, excitedly, without restraint. I imagined that whenever he spoke about the Trail at school, he gave an abridged, glossed-over version of his experience. A story without the pitfalls and emotional ambiguity and self-doubt. I did the same thing; people don't want to hear that your amazing journey wasn't what you expected it to be.

"I had an idealized sense of self on-trail," said Hugh. "I wanted to see myself as really granola and outdoorsy." He hesitated. "But I think I value stability a lot more than I wanted to think I did, and I'm coming to terms with that."

To be sure, the hiking lifestyle inherently lacks stability, but the last I had heard from him, Hugh was planning to hike the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail, an additional 5600 miles, before graduating college.

"Are you still hiking the PCT this summer?" I asked.

"Probably not," he said. "I think it would be cool, but I can see myself getting to the Mexican border and being, like, 'What am I getting myself into?'"

The Pacific Crest Trail is like the Appalachian Trail of the West Coast. It spans about 2600 miles from the Mexican border to the Canadian border, traversing California, Oregon, and Washington. I was surprised that Hugh expressed hesitancy about undertaking the challenge of the PCT. It betrayed a vulnerability I had never seen in him. He was no longer the mechanically driven hiking machine I remembered. In fact, it seemed like he was grappling with his own conflicting feelings about the Trail.

"How did you feel after finishing? Or what was your takeaway?" he asked.

"Hm," I said.

I could feel myself about to speak more openly with Hugh than I did with other people. I could tell him things that I was reluctant to tell my parents and other friends. I didn't need to worry about sounding ungrateful or pessimistic or mean.

"I wanted to hike the Trail because I wasn't in the best place, and I thought I would feel different about myself after hiking. But then I got to the end, and I felt the same."

"*Yes*," Hugh interjected.

As with our conversation about Brendan, I couldn't imagine saying these things to Bronco or Ricky and hope they would understand.

"Which makes sense," I continued, laughing. "I think about it now, and it's, like, I was the same person before and after hiking, why would I have expected anything different?"

I told him how I felt badly afterwards for about a month. I felt like the trip was a waste and like I was stuck with the same, self-critical self-image. But I realized that if I couldn't feel good about myself after hiking the Appalachian Trail, it would never happen. I started cutting myself more of a break.

"It's a weird paradox, because it wasn't the Trail itself that made me realize that" I said. "The realization came from that initial emptiness, then my reaction to the emptiness. But I had to hike the Trail to have the realization in the first place."

Somehow it had taken months to parse through those thoughts on my own, but now they spilled cleanly from my mouth into the receiver.

"I've been feeling really good," I said.

"I'm happy for you," said Hugh.

"What about you?" I asked.

Hugh felt the same, but he was having more trouble at school. Unlike me, he wasn't returning to school as a senior. This year was not his victory lap. Hugh was a freshman. The transition to college is rocky, riddled with career uncertainty and identity diffusion; Hugh seemed to feel like he needed to be immune to those pitfalls for having hiked the Trail, or that he was supposed to have learned something profound in the wilderness that would buoy him through the social politics of being a freshman at Harvard.

Among other things, Hugh was grappling with the decision to either get a high-powered summer internship like most of his classmates, or to enjoy the summer before he needed to start seriously considering his career.

"Sometimes I just want to work in an ice cream shop," he laughed.

I was reminded of our disagreement over pace while we were on-trail. Hugh wanted to go fast, I wanted to slow down. Now, it seemed like part of Hugh wanted to slow down, too.

When it came to achievement, I related to Hugh's dilemma: that sinking feeling of worrying that you are not doing enough while wanting nothing more than to do nothing at all. That worry was what brought me to the Trail in the first place. As I spoke with Hugh, I thought how maybe there was as much danger to high achievement as there is to doing nothing. Being a hiker allowed me to shed the skin of my old self and assume a completely new persona. I pushed my limits and succeeded in walking over 2000 miles. At the same time, hiking became inextricably tied to other things: my relationship with masculinity, my self-worth, my idea of what it means to be tough and cool and good enough. It was complicated, but I was glad to have Hugh in my corner to pick it all apart.

After an hour, Hugh said he needed to get going.

"It was great to talk to you," he said. "I miss you."

Before we hung up, we agreed to catch up in the summer, maybe I would come to Boston to visit. After the call, I exhaled, long and deep. Hugh was confused, but I wasn't that worried about him. He had already hiked the Appalachian Trail. He could handle Harvard. For me, our conversation had affirmed in me the purpose of my entire journey. It was not what I expected, but I had done what I had set out to do. More than that, I could finally say that I was doing well.

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Mojo

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ACADEMIC VITAE

Nicholas Malizia

Education

- The Pennsylvania State University (2018-2022)
  - Bachelor of Arts in English
  - Bachelor of Arts in Psychology
- Schreyer Honors Scholar (2019-2022)

Awards, Recognitions, and Publications

- Published in *Kalliope* (2022)
  - "A Maltipoo, Jesus, and Trail Magic"
- Phi Beta Kappa (2021)
- Bole Award (2021)
  - Recipient of grant awarded to liberal arts students for research
  - Awarded for research on the Appalachian Trail for my honors thesis
- Schreyer Grant (2021)
  - Received funding from the Schreyer Honors College to conduct field research on the Appalachian Trail for my honors thesis
- Ann Good Moore Undergraduate Scholarship in English (2021)
- Dean's List (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021)
- President's Freshman Award (2019)
  - Earned 4.0 GPA after completing freshman year

Leadership

- Kalliope – Nonfiction Editor (2021-2022)
  - Led discussions with 15-person committee about nonfiction submissions to Kalliope, the Penn State undergraduate literary magazine
  - Managed the selection and editing process for nonfiction submissions
  - Performed formatting and review of final editorial
- Penn State Crew – Men's Team Captain, Fundraising Coordinator (2018-2020)
  - Recruited 50 rowers and integrated novice rowers into the team
  - Served as representative for novice team on executive board
  - Organized and managed all team fundraising events
  - Spearheaded team's Giving Tuesday fundraiser, raising over $6000 through outreach and social media
  - Practiced 6 days per week as a rower and competed in 5-7 regattas on weekends each semester
- Resident Assistant (2020)
  - Managed a floor of 35 freshmen
  - Facilitated community-building activities to integrate undergrads into community
- Teaching Assistant – Anthropology 216: Sex and Evolution (2019)
  - One of two undergrad TAs for course with over 300 students

  - Led weekly discussion sections with 30 students and graded weekly assignments
  - Held office hours weekly for students who needed assistance in the course
  - Coordinated and led exam review sessions for over 100 students before exams
  - Assisted in development of course exams and material

Volunteering

- Centre Helps – Crisis Hotline Operator (2020-2022)
  - Trained for 8 weeks to provide short term emotional counseling on hotline for domestic abuse, suicide, mental health problems, and basic needs
  - Over 300 hours of logged counseling experience at National Suicide Prevention Lifeline organization
  - Worked as trainer for new hotline counselors: taught lectures about suicide intervention and agency policy
  - Personally supervised new counselors for their first shifts on the line

Undergraduate Research

- Emotional Regulation Psychology Lab (2020-2021)
  - Coded audio data 10 hours per week to analyze verbal prosody and its effect on childhood emotional regulation in Dr. Pamela Cole's lab
  - Presented weekly update on progress to research team
- Sex Lab: Anthropology Research (2019-2020)
  - Coded audio data for studies on vocal masculinity in Dr. David Puts' lab
  - Received certification for wet lab procedures to analyze biological samples for menstrual cycle study