Not long after I moved with my family to a small town in New Hampshire I happened upon a path that vanished into a wood on the edge of town.

A sign announced that this was no ordinary footpath but the celebrated Appalachian Trail. Running more than 2,100 miles along America’s eastern seaboard, through the serene and beckoning Appalachian Mountains, the AT is the granddaddy of long hikes. From Georgia to Maine, it wanders across fourteen states, through plump, comely hills whose very names—Blue Ridge, Smokies, Cumberland, Green Mountains, White Mountains—seem an invitation to amble. Who could say the words “Great Smoky Mountains” or “Shenandoah Valley” and not feel an urge, as the naturalist John Muir once put it, to “throw a loaf of bread and a pound of tea in an old sack and jump over the back fence”?

And here it was, quite unexpectedly, meandering
in a dangerously beguiling fashion through the pleasant New England community in which I had just settled. It seemed such an extraordinary notion—that I could set off from home and walk 1,800 miles through woods to Georgia, or turn the other way and clamber over the rough and stony White Mountains to the fabled prow of Mount Katahdin, floating in forest 450 miles to the north in a wilderness few have seen. A little voice in my head said: “Sounds neat! Let’s do it!”

I formed a number of rationalizations. It would get me fit after years of waddlesome sloth. It would be an interesting and reflective way to reacquaint myself with the scale and beauty of my native land after nearly twenty years of living abroad. It would be useful (I wasn’t quite sure in what way, but I was sure nonetheless) to learn to fend for myself in the wilderness. When guys in camouflage pants and hunting hats sat around in the Four Aces Diner talking about fearsome things done out-of-doors, I would no longer have to feel like such a cupcake. I wanted a little of that swagger that comes with being able to gaze at a far horizon through eyes of chipped granite and say with a slow, manly sniff, “Yeah, I’ve shit in the woods.”

And there was a more compelling reason to go. The Appalachians are the home of one of the world’s great hardwood forests—the expansive relic of the richest, most diversified sweep of woodland ever to grace the temperate world—and that forest is in trouble. If the global temperature rises by 4°C over the next fifty years, as is evidently possible, the whole of the Appalachian wilderness below New England could become savanna. Already trees are dying in frightening numbers. The elms and chestnuts are long gone, the stately hemlocks and flowery dogwoods are going, and the red spruces, Fraser firs, mountain ashes, and sugar maples may be about to follow. Clearly, if ever there was a time to experience this singular wilderness, it was now.

So I decided to do it. More rashly, I announced my intention—told friends and neighbors, confidently informed my publisher, made it common knowledge among those who knew me. Then I bought some books and talked to people who had done the trail in whole or in part and came gradually to realize that this was way beyond—way beyond—anything I had attempted before.

Nearly everyone I talked to had some gruesome story involving a guileless acquaintance who had gone off hiking the trail with high hopes and new boots and come stumbling back two days later with a bobcat attached to his head or dripping blood from an armless sleeve and whispering in a hoarse voice, “Bear!” before sinking into a troubled unconsciousness.

The woods were full of peril—rattlesnakes and water moccasins and nests of copperheads; bobcats, bears, coyotes, wolves, and wild boar; loony hillbillies destabilized by gross quantities of impure corn
liquor and generations of profoundly unbiblical sex; rabies-crazed skunks, raccoons, and squirrels; merciless fire ants and ravening blackfly; poison ivy, poison sumac, poison oak, and poison salamanders; even a scattering of moose lethally deranged by a parasitic worm that burrows a nest in their brains and befuddles them into chasing hapless hikers through remote, sunny meadows and into glacial lakes.

Literally unimaginable things could happen to you out there. I heard of a man who had stepped from his tent for a midnight pee and was swooped upon by a short-sighted hoot owl—the last he saw of his scalp it was dangling from talons prettily silhouetted against a harvest moon—and of a young woman who was woken by a tickle across her belly and peered into her sleeping bag to find a copperhead bunking down in the warmth between her legs. I heard four separate stories (always related with a chuckle) of campers and bears sharing tents for a few confused and lively moments; stories of people abruptly vaporized (“tweren’t nothing left of him but a scorch mark”) by body-sized bolts of lightning when caught in sudden storms on high ridgelines; of tents crushed beneath falling trees, or eased off precipices on ball bearings of beaded rain and sent paragliding on to distant valley floors, or swept away by the watery wall of a flash flood; of hikers beyond counting whose last experience was of trembling earth and the befuddled thought “Now what the—?”

It required only a little light reading in adventure books and almost no imagination to envision circumstances in which I would find myself caught in a tightening circle of hunger-emboldened wolves, staggering and shredding clothes under an onslaught of pincered fire ants, or dumbly transfixed by the sight of enlivened undergrowth advancing towards me, like a torpedo through water, before being bowled backwards by a sofa-sized boar with cold beady eyes, a piercing squeal, and a slaverous, chomping appetite for pink, plump, city-softened flesh.

Then there were all the diseases one is vulnerable to in the woods—giardiasis, eastern equine encephalitis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Lyme disease, ehrlichiosis, schistosomiasis, brucellosis, and shigellosis, to offer but a sampling. Eastern equine encephalitis, caused by the prick of a mosquito, attacks the brain and central nervous system. If you’re lucky you can hope to spend the rest of your life propped in a chair with a bib around your neck, but generally it will kill you. There is no known cure. No less arresting is Lyme disease, which comes from the bite of a tiny deer tick. If undetected, it can lie dormant in the human body for years before erupting in a positive fiesta of maladies. This is a disease for the person who wants to experience it all. The symptoms include, but are not limited to, headaches, fatigue, fever, chills, shortness of breath, dizziness, shooting pains in the extremities, cardiac irregularities, facial paralysis, muscle spasms, severe mental impairment,
loss of control of body functions, and—hardly surprising, really—chronic depression.

Then there is the little-known family of organisms called hantaviruses, which swarm in the micro-haze above the feces of mice and rats and are hoovered into the human respiratory system by anyone unlucky enough to stick a breathing orifice near them—by lying down, say, on a sleeping platform over which infected mice have recently scampered. In 1993 a single outbreak of hantavirus killed thirty-two people in the southwestern United States, and the following year the disease claimed its first victim on the AT when a hiker contracted it after sleeping in a “rodent-infested shelter.” (All AT shelters are rodent-infested.) Among viruses, only rabies, ebola, and HIV are more certainly lethal. Again, there is no treatment.

Finally, this being America, there is the constant possibility of murder. At least nine hikers (the actual number depends on which source you consult and how you define a hiker) have been murdered along the trail since 1974. Two young women would die while I was out there.

For various practical reasons, principally to do with the long, punishing winters of northern New England, there are only so many available months to hike the trail each year. If you start at the northern end, at Mount Katahdin in Maine, you must wait for the snows to clear in late May or June. If, on the other hand, you start in Georgia and head north, you must time it to finish before mid-October, when the snows blow back in. Most people hike from south to north with spring, ideally keeping one step ahead of the worst of the hot weather and the more irksome and infectious of insects. My intention was to start in the south in early March. I put aside six weeks for the first leg.

The precise length of the Appalachian Trail is a matter of interesting uncertainty. The U.S. National Park Service, which constantly distinguishes itself in a variety of ways, manages in a single leaflet to give the length of the trail as 2,155 miles and 2,200 miles. The official Appalachian Trail Guides, a set of eleven books each dealing with a particular state or section, variously give the length as 2,144 miles, 2,147 miles, 2,159 miles, and “more than 2,150 miles.” The Appalachian Trail Conference, the governing body, in 1993 put the trail length at exactly 2,146.7 miles, then changed for a couple of years to a hesitantly vague “more than 2,150 miles,” but has recently returned to confident precision with a length of 2,160.2 miles. In 1993, three people rolled a measuring wheel along its entire length and came up with a distance of 2,164.9 miles. At about the same time, a careful measure based on a full set of U.S. Geological Survey maps put the distance at 2,118.3 miles.

What is certain is that it is a long way, and from either end it is not easy. The peaks of the Appalachian Trail are not particularly formidable as mountains go—the highest, Clingmans Dome in
Tennessee, tops out at a little under 6,700 feet—but they are big enough and they go on and on. There are more than 350 peaks over 5,000 feet along the AT, and perhaps a thousand more in the vicinity. Altogether, it takes about five months, and five million steps, to walk the trail from end to end.

And of course on the AT you must lug on your back everything you need. It may seem obvious, but it came as a small shock to me to realize that this wasn’t going to be even remotely like an amble through the English Cotswolds or Lake District, where you head off for the day with a haversack containing a packed lunch and a hiking map and at day’s end retire from the hills to a convivial inn for a hot bath, a hearty meal, and a soft bed. Here you sleep outdoors and cook your own food. Few people manage to carry less than forty pounds, and when you’re hauling that kind of weight, believe me, never for a moment does it escape your notice. It is one thing to walk 2,000 miles, quite another to walk 2,000 miles with a wardrobe on your back.

My first inkling of just how daunting an undertaking it was to be came when I went to our local outfitters, the Dartmouth Co-Op, to purchase equipment. My son had just gotten an after-school job there, so I was under strict instructions of good behavior. Specifically, I was not to say or do anything stupid, try on anything that would require me to expose my stomach, say “Are you shitting me?” when informed of the price of a product, be conspicuously inattentive when a sales assistant was explaining the correct maintenance or aftercare of a product, and above all don anything inappropriate, like a woman’s ski hat, in an attempt to amuse.

I was told to ask for Dave Mengle because he had walked large parts of the trail himself and was something of an encyclopedia of outdoor knowledge. A kindly and deferential sort of fellow, Mengle could talk for perhaps four days solid, with interest, about any aspect of hiking equipment.

I have never been so simultaneously impressed and bewildered. We spent a whole afternoon going through his stock. He would say things to me like: “Now this has a 70-denier high-density abrasion-resistant fly with a ripstop weave. On the other hand, and I’ll be frank with you here”—and he would lean to me and reduce his voice to a low, candid tone, as if disclosing that it had once been arrested in a public toilet with a sailor—“the seams are lap felled rather than bias taped and the vestibule is a little cramped.”

I think because I mentioned that I had done a bit of hiking in England, he assumed some measure of competence on my part. I didn’t wish to alarm or disappoint him, so when he asked me questions like “What’s your view on carbon fiber stays?” I would shake my head with a rueful chuckle, in recognition of the famous variability of views on this perennially thorny issue, and say, “You know, Dave, I’ve never
been able to make up my mind on that one—what do you think?"

Together we discussed and gravely considered the relative merits of side compression straps, spindrift collars, crampon patches, load transfer differentials, air-flow channels, webbing loops, and something called the occipital cutout ratio. We went through that with every item. Even an aluminum cookset offered considerations of weight, compactness, thermal dynamics, and general utility that could occupy a mind for hours. In between there was lots of discussion about hiking generally, mostly to do with hazards like rockfalls, bear encounters, cookstove explosions, and snakebites, which he described with a certain misty-eyed fondness before coming back to the topic at hand.

With everything, he talked a lot about weight. It seemed to me a trifle overfastidious to choose one sleeping bag over another because it weighed three ounces less, but as equipment piled up around us I began to appreciate how ounces accumulate into pounds. I hadn’t expected to buy so much—I already owned hiking boots, a Swiss army knife, and a plastic map pouch that you wear around your neck on a piece of string, so I had felt I was pretty well there—but the more I talked to Dave the more I realized that I was shopping for an expedition.

The two big shocks were how expensive everything was—each time Dave dodged into the store-room or went off to confirm a denier rating, I stole looks at price tags and was invariably appalled—and how every piece of equipment appeared to require some further piece of equipment. If you bought a sleeping bag, then you needed a stuff sack for it. The stuff sack cost $29. I found this an increasingly difficult concept to warm to.

When, after much solemn consideration, I settled on a backpack—a very expensive Gregory, top-of-the-range, no-point-in-stinting-here sort of thing—he said, “Now what kind of straps do you want with that?”

“I beg your pardon?” I said, and recognized at once that I was on the brink of a dangerous condition known as retail burnout. No more now would I blithely say, “Better give me half a dozen of those, Dave. Oh, and I’ll take eight of these—what the heck, make it a dozen. You only live once, eh?” The mound of provisions that a minute ago had looked so pleasingly abundant and exciting—all new! all mine!—suddenly seemed burdensome and extravagant.

“Straps,” Dave explained. “You know, to tie on your sleeping bag and lash things down.”

“It doesn’t come with straps?” I said in a new, level tone.

“Oh, no.” He surveyed a wall of products and touched a finger to his nose. “You’ll need a raincover too, of course.”
I blinked. "A raincover? Why?"
"To keep out the rain."
"The backpack’s not rainproof?"

He grimaced as if making an exceptionally delicate distinction. "Well, not a hundred percent . . ."

This was extraordinary to me. "Really? Did it not occur to the manufacturer that people might want to take their packs outdoors from time to time? Perhaps even go camping with them? How much is this pack anyway?"

"Two hundred and fifty dollars."
"Two hundred and fifty dollars! Are you shi—,"

I paused and put on a new voice. "Are you saying, Dave, that I pay $250 for a pack and it doesn’t have straps and it isn’t waterproof?"

He nodded.

"Does it have a bottom in it?"

Mengle smiled uneasily. It was not in his nature to grow critical or weary in the rich, promising world of camping equipment. "The straps come in a choice of six colors," he offered helpfully.

I ended up with enough equipment to bring full employment to a vale of sherpas—a three-season tent, self-inflating sleeping pad, nested pots and pans, collapsible eating utensils, plastic dish and cup, complicated pump-action water purifier, stuff sacks in a rainbow of colors, seam sealer, patching kit, sleeping bag, bungee cords, water bottles, waterproof poncho, waterproof matches, pack cover, a rather nifty compass/thermometer key ring, a little collapsible stove that looked frankly like trouble, gas bottle and spare gas bottle, a hands-free flashlight that you wore on your head like a miner’s lamp (this I liked very much), a big knife for killing bears and hillbillies, insulated long johns and undershirts, four bandannas, and lots of other stuff, for some of which I had to go back again and ask what it was for exactly. I drew the line at buying a designer groundcloth for $59.95, knowing I could acquire a lawn tarp at Kmart for $5. I also said no to a first-aid kit, sewing kit, anti-snakebite kit, $12 emergency whistle, and small orange plastic shovel for burying one’s poop, on the grounds that these were unnecessary, too expensive, or invited ridicule. The orange spade in particular seemed to shout: "Greenhorn! Sissy! Make way for Mr. Buttercup!"

Then, just to get it all over and done with at once, I went next door to the Dartmouth Bookstore and bought books—The Thru-Hiker’s Handbook, Walking the Appalachian Trail, several books on wildlife and the natural sciences, a geological history of the Appalachian Trail by the exquisitely named V. Collins Chew, and the complete, aforementioned set of official Appalachian Trail Guides, consisting of eleven small paperback books and fifty-nine maps in different sizes, styles, and scales covering the whole trail from Springer Mountain to Mount Katahdin and ambitiously priced at $233.45 the set. On the way out I noticed a volume called Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance, opened it up at ran-
dom, found the sentence “This is a clear example of the general type of incident in which a black bear sees a person and decides to try to kill and eat him,” and tossed that into the shopping basket, too.

I took all this home and carried it down to the basement in several trips. There was such a lot, nearly all of it technologically unfamiliar to me, which made it both exciting and daunting, but mostly daunting. I put the hands-free flashlight on my head, for the heck of it, and pulled the tent from its plastic packaging and erected it on the floor. I unfurled the self-inflating sleeping pad and pushed it inside and followed that with my fluffy new sleeping bag. Then I crawled in and lay there for quite a long time trying out for size the expensive, confined, strangely new-smelling, entirely novel space that was soon to be my home away from home. I tried to imagine myself lying not in a basement beside the reassuring, cozily domesticated roar of the furnace, but rather outside, in a high mountain pass, listening to wind and tree noise, the lonely howl of doglike creatures, the hoarse whisper of a Georgia mountain accent saying: “Hey, Virgil, there’s one over here. Y’all remember the rope?” But I couldn’t really.

I hadn’t been in a space like this since I stopped making dens with blankets and card tables at about the age of nine. It was really quite snug and, once you got used to the smell, which I naively presumed would dissipate with time, and the fact that the fabric gave everything inside a sickly greenish pallor, like the glow off a radar screen, it was not so bad. A little claustrophobic perhaps, a little odd smelling, but cozy and sturdy even so.

This wouldn’t be so bad, I told myself. But secretly I knew that I was quite wrong.
chapter 2

On the afternoon of July 5, 1983, three adult supervisors and a group of youngsters set up camp at a popular spot beside Lake Canimina in the fragrant pine forests of western Quebec, about eighty miles north of Ottawa, in a park called La Vérendrye Provincial Reserve. They cooked dinner and, afterwards, in the correct fashion, secured their food in a bag and carried it a hundred or so feet into the woods, where they suspended it above the ground between two trees, out of the reach of bears.

About midnight, a black bear came prowling around the margins of the camp, spied the bag, and brought it down by climbing one of the trees and breaking a branch. He plundered the food and departed, but an hour later he was back, this time entering the camp itself, drawn by the lingering smell of cooked meat in the campers' clothes and hair, in their sleeping bags and tent fabric. It was to be a long night for the Canimina party. Three times between midnight and 3:30 A.M. the bear came to the camp.

Imagine, if you will, lying in the dark alone in a little tent, nothing but a few microns of trembling nylon between you and the chill night air, listening to a 400-pound bear moving around your campsite. Imagine its quiet grunts and mysterious snuffings, the clatter of upended cookware and sounds of moist gawings, the pad of its feet and the heaviness of its breath, the singing brush of its haunch along your tent side. Imagine the hot flood of adrenaline, that unwelcome tingling in the back of your arms, at the sudden rough bump of its snout against the foot of your tent, the alarming wild wobble of your frail shell as it roots through the backpack that you left casually propped by the entrance—with, you suddenly recall, a Snickers in the pouch. Bears adore Snickers, you've heard.

And then the dull thought—oh, God—that perhaps you brought the Snickers in here with you, that it's somewhere in here, down by your feet or underneath you or—oh, shit, here it is. Another bump of grunting head against the tent, this time near your shoulders. More crazy wobble. Then silence, a very long silence, and—wait, shhhhhhh . . . yes!—the unutterable relief of realizing that the bear has withdrawn to the other side of the camp or shambled back into the woods. I tell you right now, I couldn't stand it.

So imagine then what it must have been like for poor little David Anderson, aged twelve, when at
3:30 A.M., on the third foray, his tent was abruptly rent with a swipe of claw and the bear, driven by distraction by the rich, unfixable, everywhere aroma of hamburger, bit hard into a flinching limb and dragged him shouting and flailing through the camp and into the woods. In the few moments it took the boy's fellow campers to unzip themselves from their accoutrements—and imagine, if you will, trying to swim out of suddenly voluminous sleeping bags, take up flashlights and makeshift cudgels, undo tent zips with helplessly fumbling fingers, and give chase—in those few moments, poor little David Anderson was dead.

Now imagine reading a nonfiction book packed with stories such as this—true tales soberly related—just before setting off alone on a camping trip of your own into the North American wilderness. The book to which I refer is *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*, by a Canadian academic named Stephen Herrero. If it is not the last word on the subject, then I really, really, really do not wish to hear the last word. Through long winter nights in New Hampshire, while snow piled up outdoors and my wife slumbered peacefully beside me, I lay saucer-eyed in bed reading clinically precise accounts of people gnawed pulpy in their sleeping bags, plucked whimpering from trees, even noiselessly stalked (I didn't know this happened!) as they sauntered unawares down leafy paths or cooled their feet in mountain streams. People whose one fatal mistake

was to smooth their hair with a dab of aromatic gel, or eat juicy meat, or tuck a Snickers in their shirt pocket for later, or have sex, or even, possibly, menstruate, or in some small, inadvertent way pique the olfactory properties of the hungry bear. Or, come to that, whose fatal failing was simply to be very, very unfortunate—to round a bend and find a moody male blocking the path, head rocking appraisingly, or wander unwittingly into the territory of a bear too slowed by age or idleness to chase down fleeter prey.

Now it is important to establish right away that the possibility of a serious bear attack on the Appalachian Trail is remote. To begin with, the really terrifying American bear, the grizzly—*Ursus horribilis*, as it is so vividly and correctly labeled—doesn't range east of the Mississippi, which is good news because grizzlies are large, powerful, and ferociously bad tempered. When Lewis and Clark went into the wilderness, they found that nothing unnerved the native Indians more than the grizzly, and not surprisingly since you could riddle a grizzly with arrows—positively porcupine it—and it would still keep coming. Even Lewis and Clark with their big guns were astounded and unsettled by the ability of the grizzly to absorb volleys of lead with barely a wobble.

Herrero recounts an incident that nicely conveys the near indestructibility of the grizzly. It concerns a professional hunter in Alaska named Alexei Pitka, who stalked a large male through snow and finally
felled it with a well-aimed shot to the heart from a large-bore rifle. Pitka should probably have carried a card with him that said: “First make sure bear is dead. Then put gun down.” He advanced cautiously and spent a minute or two watching the bear for movement, but when there was none he set the gun against a tree (big mistake!) and strode forward to claim his prize. Just as he reached it, the bear sprang up, clapped its expansive jaws around the front of Pitka’s head, as if giving him a big kiss, and with a single jerk tore off his face.

Miraculously, Pitka survived. “I don’t know why I set that durn gun against the tree,” he said later. (Actually, what he said was, “Mrfff mmmmpg nnnmmm mfffffffn,” on account of having no lips, teeth, nose, tongue, or other vocal apparatus.)

If I were to be pawed and chewed—and this seemed to me entirely possible, the more I read—it would be by a black bear, *Ursus americanus*. There are at least 500,000 black bears in North America, possibly as many as 700,000. They are notably common in the hills along the Appalachian Trail (indeed, they often *use* the trail, for convenience), and their numbers are growing. Grizzlies, by contrast, number no more than 35,000 in the whole of North America, and just 1,000 in the mainland United States, principally in and around Yellowstone National Park. Of the two species, black bears are generally smaller (though this is a decidedly relative condition; a male black bear can still weigh up to 650 pounds) and unquestionably more retiring.

Black bears rarely attack. But here’s the thing. Sometimes they do. All bears are agile, cunning, and immensely strong, and they are always hungry. If they want to kill you and eat you, they can, and pretty much whenever they want. That doesn’t happen often, but—and here is the absolutely salient point—once would be enough. Herrero is at pains to stress that black bear attacks are infrequent, relative to their numbers. For 1900 to 1980, he found just twenty-three confirmed black bear killings of humans (about half the number of killings by grizzlies), and most of these were out West or in Canada. In New Hampshire there has not been an unprovoked fatal attack on a human by a bear since 1784. In Vermont, there has never been one.

I wanted very much to be calmed by these assurances but could never quite manage the necessary leap of faith. After noting that just 500 people were attacked and hurt by black bears between 1960 and 1980—twenty-five attacks a year from a resident population of at least half a million bears—Herrero adds that most of these injuries were not severe. “The typical black bear-inflicted injury,” he writes blandly, “is minor and usually involves only a few scratches or light bites.” Pardon me, but what exactly is a light bite? Are we talking a playful wrestle and gummy nips? I think not. And is 500 certified at-
tacks really such a modest number, considering how few people go into the North American woods? And how foolish must one be to be reassured by the information that no bear has killed a human in Vermont or New Hampshire in 200 years? That’s not because the bears have signed a treaty, you know. There’s nothing to say that they won’t start a modest rampage tomorrow.

So let us imagine that a bear does go for us out in the wilds. What are we to do? Interestingly, the advised stratagems are exactly opposite for grizzly and black bear. With a grizzly, you should make for a tall tree, since grizzlies aren’t much for climbing. If a tree is not available, then you should back off slowly, avoiding direct eye contact. All the books tell you that if the grizzly comes for you, on no account should you run. This is the sort of advice you get from someone who is sitting at a keyboard when he gives it. Take it from me, if you are in an open space with no weapons and a grizzly comes for you, run. You may as well. If nothing else, it will give you something to do with the last seven seconds of your life. However, when the grizzly overtakes you, as it most assuredly will, you should fall to the ground and play dead. A grizzly may chew on a limp form for a minute or two but generally will lose interest and shuffle off. With black bears, however, playing dead is futile, since they will continue chewing on you until you are considerably past caring. It is also foolish to climb a tree because black bears are adroit climbers and, as Herrero dryly notes, you will simply end up fighting the bear in a tree.

To ward off an aggressive black bear, Herrero suggests making a lot of noise, banging pots and pans together, throwing sticks and rocks, and “running at the bear.” (Yeah, right. You first, Professor.) On the other hand, he then adds judiciously, these tactics could “merely provoke the bear.” Well, thanks. Elsewhere he suggests that hikers should consider making noises from time to time—singing a song, say—to alert bears of their presence, since a startled bear is more likely to be an angry bear, but then a few pages later he cautions that “there may be danger in making noise,” since that can attract a hungry bear that might otherwise overlook you.

The fact is, no one can tell you what to do. Bears are unpredictable, and what works in one circumstance may not work in another. In 1973, two teenagers, Mark Seeley and Michael Whitten, were out for a hike in Yellowstone when they inadvertently crossed between a female black bear and her cubs. Nothing worries and antagonizes a female bear more than to have people between her and her brood. Furious, she turned and gave chase—despite the bear’s lolloping gait, it can move at up to thirty-five miles an hour—and the two boys scrambled up trees. The bear followed Whitten up his tree, clamped her mouth around his right foot, and slowly and patiently tugged him from his perch. (Is it me, or can you feel your fingernails scraping through the
bark?) On the ground, she began mauling him extensively. In an attempt to distract the bear from his friend, Seeley shouted at it, whereupon the bear came and pulled him out of his tree, too. Both young men played dead—precisely the wrong thing to do, according to all the instruction manuals—and the bear left.

I won’t say I became obsessed by all this, but it did occupy my thoughts a great deal in the months while I waited for spring to come. My particular dread—the vivid possibility that left me staring at tree shadows on the bedroom ceiling night after night—was having to lie in a small tent, alone in an inky wilderness, listening to a foraging bear outside and wondering what its intentions were. I was especially riveted by an amateur photograph in Herrero’s book, taken late at night by a camper with a flash at a campground out West. The photograph caught four black bears as they puzzled over a suspended food bag. The bears were clearly startled but not remotely alarmed by the flash. It was not the size or demeanor of the bears that troubled me—they looked almost comically unaggressive, like four guys who had gotten a Frisbee caught up in a tree—but their numbers. Up to that moment it had not occurred to me that bears might prowl in parties. What on earth would I do if four bears came into my camp? Why, I would die, of course. Literally shit myself lifeless. I would blow my sphincter out my backside like one of those unrolling paper streamers you get at children’s parties—I dare-

say it would even give a merry toot—and bleed to a messy death in my sleeping bag.

Herrero’s book was written in 1985. Since that time, according to an article in the *New York Times*, bear attacks in North America have increased by 25 percent. The *Times* article also noted that bears are far more likely to attack humans in the spring following a bad berry year. The previous year had been a very bad berry year. I didn’t like the feel of any of this.

Then there were all the problems and particular dangers of solitude. I still have my appendix, and any number of other organs that might burst or sputter in the empty wilds. What would I do then? What if I fell from a ledge and broke my back? What if I lost the trail in blizzard or fog, or was nipped by a venomous snake, or lost my footing on moss-slickened rocks crossing a stream and cracked my head a concussive blow? You could drown in three inches of water on your own. You could die from a twisted ankle. No, I didn’t like the feel of this at all.

At Christmas, I put notes in lots of cards inviting people to come with me on the trail, if only part of the way. Nobody responded, of course. Then one day in late February, with departure nigh, I got a call. It was from an old school friend named Stephen Katz. Katz and I had grown up together in Iowa, but I had pretty well lost touch with him. Those of you—the six of you—who have read *Neither Here nor There* will recall Katz as my traveling companion
around Europe in that tale of youthful adventure. In the twenty-five years since, I had run into him three or four times on visits home but hadn't seen him otherwise. We had remained friends in a kind of theoretical sense, but our paths had diverged wildly.

"I've been hesitating to call," he said slowly. He seemed to be searching for words. "But this Appalachian Trail deal—do you think maybe I could come with you?"

I couldn't believe it. "You want to come with me?"

"If it's a problem, I understand."

"No," I said. "No, no, no. You're very welcome. You are extremely welcome."

"Really?" He seemed to brighten.

"Of course." I really could not believe it. I wasn't going to have to walk alone. I did a little jig. I wasn't going to have to walk alone. "I can't tell you how welcome you would be."

"Oh, great," he said in a flood of relief, then added in a confessional tone, "I thought maybe you might not want me along."

"Why ever not?"

"Because, you know, I still owe you $600 from Europe."

"Hey, jeez, certainly not. . . . You owe me $600?"

"I still intend to pay you back."

"Hey," I said. "Hey." I couldn't remember any $600. I had never released anyone from a debt of this magnitude before, and it took me a moment to get the words out. "Listen, it's not a problem. Just come hiking with me. Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Absolutely."

"What kind of shape are you in?"

"Real good. I walk everywhere these days."

"Really?" This is most unusual in America.

"Well, they repossessed my car, you see."

"Ah."

We talked a little more about this and that—his mother, my mother, Des Moines. I told him what little I knew about the trail and the wilderness life that awaited us. We settled that he would fly to New Hampshire the next Wednesday, we would spend two days making preparations, and then we'd hit the trail. For the first time in months I felt positively upbeat about this enterprise. Katz seemed remarkably upbeat, too, for someone who didn't have to do this at all.

My last words to him were, "So, how are you with bears?"

"Hey, they haven't got me yet!"

That's the spirit, I thought. Good old Katz. Good old anyone with a pulse and a willingness to go walking with me. After he hung up, it occurred to me I hadn't asked him why he wanted to come. Katz was the one person I knew on earth who might be on the run from guys with names like Julio and Mr. Big. Anyway, I didn't care. I wasn't going to have to walk alone.
I found my wife at the kitchen sink and told her the good news. She was more reserved in her enthusiasm than I had hoped.

“You’re going into the woods for weeks and weeks with a person you have barely seen for twenty-five years. Have you really thought this through?” (As if I have ever thought anything through.) “I thought you two ended up getting on each other’s nerves in Europe.”

“No.” This was not quite correct. “We started off on each other’s nerves. We ended up despising each other. But that was a long time ago.”

She gave me a look of some dubiety. “You have nothing in common.”

“We have everything in common. We’re forty-four years old. We’ll talk about hemorrhoids and lower back pain and how we can’t remember where we put anything, and the next night I’ll say, ‘Hey, did I tell you about my back problems?’ and he’ll say, ‘No, I don’t think so,’ and we’ll do it all over again. It’ll be great.”

“It’ll be hell.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said.

And so I found myself, six days later, standing at our local airport watching a tin commuter plane containing Katz touch down and taxi to a halt on the tarmac twenty yards from the terminal. The hum of the propellers intensified for a moment then gradually stut-
tered to a halt, and the plane’s door-cum-stairway fell open. I tried to remember the last time I had seen him. After our summer in Europe, Katz had gone back to Des Moines and had become, in effect, Iowa’s drug culture. He had partied for years, until there was no one left to party with, then he had partied with himself, alone in small apartments, in T-shirt and boxer shorts, with a bottle and a Baggie of pot and a TV with rabbit ears. I remembered now that the last time I had seen him was about five years earlier in a Denny’s restaurant where I was taking my mother for breakfast. He was sitting in a booth with a haggard fellow who looked like his name would be Virgil Starkweather, tucking into pancakes and taking occasional illicit nips from a bottle in a paper bag. It was eight in the morning and Katz looked very happy. He was always happy when he was drunk, and he was always drunk.

Two weeks after that, I later heard, police found him in an upended car in a field outside the little town of Mingo, hanging upside down by his seatbelt, still clutching the steering wheel and saying, “Well, what seems to be the problem, officers?” There was a small quantity of cocaine in the glove box and he was dispatched to a minimum security prison for eighteen months. While there, he started attending AA meetings. To everyone’s surprise, not least his own, he had not touched alcohol or an illegal substance since.

After his release, he got a little job, went back to
college part-time, and settled down for a while with a hairdresser named Patty. For the past three years he had devoted himself to rectitude and—I instantly saw now as he stooped out the door of the plane—growing a stomach. Katz was arresting larger than when I had last seen him. He had always been kind of fleshy, but now he brought to mind Orson Welles after a very bad night. He was limping a little and breathing harder than one ought to after a walk of twenty yards.

“Man, I’m hungry,” he said without preamble, and let me take his carry-on bag, which instantly jerked my arm to the floor.

“What have you got in here?” I gasped.

“Ah, just some tapes and shit for the trail. There a Dunkin’ Donuts anywhere around here? I haven’t had anything to eat since Boston.”

“Boston? You’ve just come from Boston.”

“Yeah, I gotta eat something every hour or so or I have, whaddayacallit, seizures.”

“Seizures?” This wasn’t quite the reunion scenario I had envisioned. I imagined him bouncing around on the Appalachian Trail like some wind-up toy that had fallen on its back.

“Ever since I took some contaminated phenylthi- amines about ten years ago. If I eat a couple of doughnuts or something I’m usually OK.”

“Stephen, we’re going to be in the wilderness in three days. There won’t be doughnut stores.”

He beamed proudly. “I thought of that.” He indi-
cated his bag on the carousel—a green army surplus duffel—and let me pick it up. It weighed at least seventy-five pounds. He saw my look of wonder. “Snickers,” he explained. “Lots and lots of Snickers.”

We drove home by way of Dunkin’ Donuts. My wife and I sat with him at the kitchen table and watched him eat five Boston cream doughnuts, which he washed down with two glasses of milk. Then he said he wanted to go and lie down a while. It took him whole minutes to get up the stairs.

My wife turned to me with a look of serene blankness.

“Please just don’t say anything,” I said.

In the afternoon, after Katz had rested, he and I visited Dave Mengle and got him fitted with a backpack and a tent and sleeping bag and all the rest of it, and then went to Kmart for a groundsheet and thermal underwear and some other small things. After that he rested some more.

The following day, we went to the supermarket to buy provisions for our first week on the trail. I knew nothing about cooking, but Katz had been looking after himself for years and had a repertoire of dishes (principally involving peanut butter, tuna, and brown sugar stirred together in a pot) that he thought would transfer nicely to a camping milieu, but he also piled lots of other things into the shopping cart—four large pepperoni sausages, five pounds of
rice, assorted bags of cookies, oatmeal, raisins, M&Ms, Spam, more Snickers, sunflower seeds, graham crackers, instant mashed potatoes, several sticks of beef jerky, a couple of bricks of cheese, a canned ham, and the full range of gooey and evidently imperishable cakes and doughnuts produced under the Little Debbie label.

"You know, I don't think we'll be able to carry all this," I suggested uneasily as he placed a horse-collar-shaped bologna in the shopping cart.

Katz surveyed the cart grimly. "Yeah, you're right," he agreed. "Let's start again."

He abandoned the cart there and went off for another one. We went around again, this time trying to be more intelligently selective, but we still ended up with clearly too much.

We took everything home, divvied it up, and went off to pack—Katz to the bedroom where all his other stuff was, I to my basement HQ. I packed for two hours, but I couldn't begin to get everything in. I put aside books and notebooks and nearly all my spare clothes, and tried lots of different combinations, but every time I finished I would turn to find something large and important left over. Eventually I went upstairs to see how Katz was doing. He was lying on the bed, listening to his Walkman. Stuff was scattered everywhere. His backpack was limp and unattended. Little percussive hisses of music were leaking from his ears.

"Aren't you packing?" I said.

"Yeah."

I waited a minute, thinking he would bound up, but he didn't move. "Forgive me, Stephen, but you give the impression that you are lying down."

"Yeah."

"Can you actually hear what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, in a minute."

I sighed and went back down to the basement.

Katz said little during dinner and afterwards returned to his room. We heard nothing more from him throughout the evening, but about midnight, as we lay in bed, noises began to float to us through the walls—clompings and mutterings, sounds like furniture being dragged across the floor, and brief enraged outbursts, interspersed with long periods of silence. I held my wife's hand and couldn't think of anything to say. In the morning, I tapped on Katz's door and eventually put my head in. He was asleep, fully dressed, on top of a tumult of bedding. The mattress was part way off the bed, as if he had been engaged in the night in some scuffle with intruders. His pack was full but unsecured, and personal effects were still liberally distributed around the room. I told him we had to leave in an hour to catch our plane.

"Yeah," he said.

Twenty minutes later, he came downstairs, laboriously and with a great deal of soft cursing. Without even looking, you could tell he was coming down sideways and with care, as if the steps were glazed with ice. He was wearing his pack. Things were tied
to it all over—a pair of grubby sneakers and what looked like a pair of dress boots, his pots and pans, a Laura Ashley shopping bag evidently appropriated from my wife’s wardrobe and filled now with God knows what. “This is the best I could do,” he said. “I had to leave a few things.”

I nodded. I’d left a few things, too—notably, the oatmeal, which I didn’t like anyway, and the more disgusting looking of the Little Debbie cakes, which is to say all of them.

My wife drove us to the airport in Manchester, through blowing snow, in the kind of awkward silence that precedes a long separation. Katz sat in back and ate doughnuts. At the airport, she presented me with a knobbly walking stick the children had bought me. It had a red bow on it. I wanted to burst into tears—or, better still, climb in the car and speed off while Katz was still frowning over his new, unfamiliar straps. She squeezed my arm, gave a weak smile, and left.

I watched her go, then went into the terminal with Katz. The man at the check-in desk looked at our tickets to Atlanta and our packs and said—quite alertly, I thought, for a person wearing a short-sleeve shirt in winter—“You fellows hiking the Appalachian Trail?”

“Sure are,” said Katz proudly.

“Lot of trouble with wolves down in Georgia, you know.”

“Really?” Katz was all ears.

“Oh, yeah. Coupla people been attacked recently. Pretty savagely, too, from what I hear.” He messed around with tickets and luggage tags for a minute. “Hope you brought some long underwear.”

Katz screwed up his face. “For wolves?”

“No, for the weather. There’s gonna be record cold down there over the next four or five days. Gonna be well below zero in Atlanta tonight.”

“Oh, great,” Katz said and gave a ruptured, disconsolate sigh. He looked challengingly at the man. “Any other news for us? Hospital call to say we got cancer or anything?”

The man beamed and slapped the tickets down on the counter. “No, that’s about it, but you have a real good trip. And hey”—he was addressing Katz now, in a lower voice—“you watch out for those wolves, son, because between you and me you look like pretty good eating.” He gave a wink.

“Jesus,” said Katz in a low voice, and he looked deeply, deeply gloomy.

We took the escalator up to our gate. “And they won’t feed us on this plane either, you know,” he announced with a curious, bitter finality.
It started with Benton MacKaye, a mild, kindly, infinitely well-meaning visionary who in the summer of 1921 unveiled an ambitious plan for a long-distance hiking trail to his friend Charles Harris Whitaker, editor of a leading architectural journal. To say that MacKaye’s life at this point was not going well would be to engage in careless understatement. In the previous decade he had been let go from jobs at Harvard and the National Forest Service and eventually, for want of a better place to stick him, given a desk at the U.S. Labor Department with a vague assignment to come up with ideas to improve efficiency and morale. There, he dutifully produced ambitious, unworkable proposals that were read with amused tolerance and promptly binned. In April 1921 his wife, a well-known pacifist and suffragette named Jessie Hardy Stubbs, flung herself off a bridge over the East River in New York and drowned.

It was against this background, just ten weeks later, that MacKaye offered Whitaker his idea for an Appalachian Trail, and the proposal was published in the somewhat unlikely forum of Whitaker’s *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* the following October. A hiking trail was only part of MacKaye’s grand vision. He saw the AT as a thread connecting a network of mountaintop work camps where pale, depleted urban workers in the thousands would come and engage in healthful toil in a selfless spirit and refresh themselves on nature. There were to be hostels and inns and seasonal study centers, and eventually permanent woodland villages—“self-owning” communities whose inhabitants would support themselves with cooperative “non-industrial activity” based on forestry, farming, and crafts. The whole would be, as MacKaye ecstatically described it, “a retreat from profit”—a notion that others saw as “smacking of Bolshevism,” in the words of one biographer.

At the time of MacKaye’s proposal there were already several hiking clubs in the eastern United States—the Green Mountain Club, the Dartmouth Outing Club, the venerable Appalachian Mountain Club, among others—and these mostly patrician organizations owned and maintained hundreds of miles of mountain and woodland trails, mainly in New England. In 1925, representatives of the leading clubs met in Washington and founded the Appalachian Trail Conference with a view to construct-
ing a 1,200-mile-long trail connecting the two highest peaks in the east: 6,684-foot Mount Mitchell in North Carolina and the slightly smaller (by 396 feet) Mount Washington in New Hampshire. In fact, however, for the next five years nothing happened, largely because MacKaye occupied himself with refining and expanding his vision until he and it were only tangentially connected to the real world.

Not until 1930, when a young Washington admiralty lawyer and keen hiker named Myron Avery took over the development of the project, did work actually begin, but suddenly it moved on apace. Avery was not evidently a lovable fellow. As one contemporary put it, he left two trails from Maine to Georgia: “One was of hurt feelings and bruised egos. The other was the AT.” He had no patience with MacKaye and his “quasi-mystical epigrams,” and the two never got along. In 1935, they had an acrimonious falling-out over the development of the trail through Shenandoah National Park (Avery was willing to accommodate the building of a scenic highway through the mountains; MacKaye thought it a betrayal of founding principles) and they never spoke again.

MacKaye always gets the credit for the trail, but this is largely because he lived to be ninety-six and had a good head of white hair; he was always available in his later years to say a few words at ceremonies on sunny hillsides. Avery, on the other hand, died in 1952, a quarter-century before MacKaye and when the trail was still little known. But it was really Avery’s trail. He mapped it out, bullied and cajoled clubs into producing volunteer crews, and personally superintended the construction of hundreds of miles of path. He extended its planned length from 1,200 miles to well over 2,000, and before it was finished he had walked every inch of it. In under seven years, using volunteer labor, he built a 2,000-mile trail through mountain wilderness. Armies have done less.

The Appalachian Trail was formally completed on August 14, 1937, with the clearing of a two-mile stretch of woods in a remote part of Maine. Remarkably, the building of the longest footpath in the world attracted almost no attention. Avery was not one for publicity, and by this time MacKaye had retired in a funk. No newspapers noted the achievement. There was no formal celebration to mark the occasion.

The path they built had no historical basis. It didn’t follow any Indian trails or colonial post roads. It didn’t even seek out the best views, highest hills, or most notable landmarks. In the end, it went nowhere near Mount Mitchell, though it did take in Mount Washington and then carried on another 350 miles to Mount Katahdin in Maine. (Avery, who had grown up in Maine and done his formative hiking there, was most insistent on this.) Essentially, it went where access could be gained, mostly high up on the hills, over lonely ridges and forgotten hollows that
no one had ever used or coveted, or sometimes even named. It fell short of the actual southern end of the Appalachian Mountain chain by 150 miles and of the northern end by nearer 700. The work camps and chalets, the schools and study centers, were never built.

Still, quite a lot of the original impulse behind MacKaye’s vision survives. All 2,100 miles of the trail, as well as side trails, footbridges, signs, blazes, and shelters, are maintained by volunteers—indeed, the AT is said to be the largest volunteer-run undertaking on the planet. It remains gloriously free of commercialism. The Appalachian Trail Conference didn’t hire its first paid employee until 1968, and it retains the air of a friendly, accessible, dedicated outfit. The AT is no longer the longest hiking trail—the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide trails, both out West, are slightly longer—but it will always be the first and greatest. It has a lot of friends. It deserves them.

Almost from the day of its opening, the trail has had to be moved around. First, 118 miles in Virginia were rerouted to accommodate the construction of Skyline Drive through Shenandoah National Park. Then, in 1958, overdevelopment on and around Mount Oglethorpe in Georgia necessitated lopping twenty miles off the trail’s southern end and moving the start to Springer Mountain, in the protected wilderness of the Chattahoochee National Forest. Ten years later, the Maine Appalachian Trail Club rerouted 263 miles of trail—half its total length across the state—removing the trail from logging roads and putting it back in the wilds. Even now the trail is never quite the same from one year to the next.

Perhaps the hardest part about hiking the Appalachian Trail is getting onto it, nowhere more than at its ends. Springer Mountain, the launching-off point in the south, is seven miles from the nearest highway, at a place called Amicalola Falls State Park, which in turn is a good way from anywhere. From Atlanta, the nearest outlet to the wider world, you have a choice of one train or two buses a day to Gainesville, and then you’re still forty miles short of being seven miles short of the start of the trail, as it were. (To and from Katahdin in Maine is even more problematic.)

Fortunately, there are people who will pick you up in Atlanta and take you to Amicalola for a fee. Thus it was that Katz and I delivered ourselves into the hands of a large, friendly guy in a baseball cap named Wes Wisson, who had agreed to take us from the airport in Atlanta to Amicalola Falls Lodge, our setting-off point for Springer, for $60.

Every year between early March and late April, about 2,000 hikers set off from Springer, most of them intending to go all the way to Katahdin. No more than 10 percent actually make it. Half don’t make it past central Virginia, less than a third of the way. A quarter get no farther than North Carolina,
the next state. As many as 20 percent drop out the first week. Wisson has seen it all.

"Last year, I dropped a guy off at the trailhead," he told us as we tooled north through darkening pine forests towards the rugged hills of north Georgia. "Three days later he calls me from the pay phone at Woody Gap—that's the first pay phone you come to. Says he wants to go home, that the trail wasn't what he expected it to be. So I drive him back to the airport. Two days after that he's back in Atlanta. Says his wife made him come back because he'd spent all this money on equipment and she wasn't going to let him quit so easy. So I drop him off at the trailhead. Three days later he phones from Woody Gap again. He wants to go to the airport. 'Well, what about your wife?' I says. And he says, 'This time I'm not going home.'"

"How far is it to Woody Gap?" I asked.

"Twenty-one miles from Springer. Doesn't seem much, does it? I mean, he'd come all the way from Ohio."

"So why did he quit so soon?"

"He said it wasn't what he expected it to be. They all say that. Just last week I had three ladies from California—middle-aged gals, real nice, kind of giggly but, you know, nice—I dropped them off and they were in real high spirits. About four hours later they called and said they wanted to go home. They'd come all the way from California, you understand, spent God knows how much on airfares and equipment—I mean, they had the nicest stuff you ever saw, all brand new and top of the range—and they'd walked maybe a mile and a half before quitting. Said it wasn't what they expected."

"What do they expect?"

"Who knows? Escalators maybe. It's hills and rocks and woods and a trail. You don't got to do a whole lot of scientific research to work that out. But you'd be amazed how many people quit. Then again, I had a guy, oh about six weeks ago, who shoulda quit and didn't. He was coming off the trail. He'd walked from Maine on his own. It took him eight months, longer than it takes most people, and I don't think he'd seen anybody for the last several weeks. When he came off he was just a trembling wreck. I had his wife with me. She'd come to meet him, and he just fell into her arms and started weeping. Couldn't talk at all. He was like that all the way to the airport. I've never seen anybody so relieved to have anything done with, and I kept thinking, 'Well, you know, sir, hiking the Appalachian Trail is a voluntary endeavor,' but of course I didn't say anything."

"So can you tell when you drop people off whether they're gonna make it?"

"Pretty generally."

"And do you think we'll make it?" said Katz.

He looked at us each in turn. "Oh, you'll make it all right," he replied, but his expression said otherwise.
Amicalola Falls Lodge was an aerie high on a mountainside, reached up a long, winding road through the woods. The man at the airport in Manchester had certainly seen the right weather forecast. It was piercingly, shockingly cold when we stepped from the car. A treacherous, icy wind seemed to dart around from every angle and then zip up sleeves and pant legs. "Jee-zuss!" Katz cried in astonishment, as if somebody had just thrown a bucket of ice water over him, and scooted inside. I paid up and followed.

The lodge was modern and very warm, with an open lobby dominated by a stone fireplace, and the sort of anonymously comfortable rooms you would find in a Holiday Inn. We parted for our rooms and agreed to rendezvous at seven. I got a Coke from a machine in the corridor, had a lavish steamy shower involving many towels, inserted myself between crisp sheets (how long would it be till I enjoyed this kind of comfort again?) watched discouraging reports by happy, mindless people on the Weather Channel, and slept hardly at all.

I was up before daybreak and sat by the window watching as a pale dawn grudgingly exposed the surrounding landscape—a stark and seemingly boundless expanse of thick, rolling hills covered in ranks of bare trees and the meagerest dusting of snow. It didn't look terribly forbidding—these weren't the Himalayas—but it didn't look like anything you would particularly want to walk out into.

On my way to breakfast, the sun popped out, filling the world with encouraging brightness, and I stepped outside to check out the air. The cold was startling, like a slap to the face, and the wind was still bitter. Dry little pellets of snow, like tiny spheres of polystyrene, chased around in swirls. A big wall thermometer by the entrance read 11°F.

"Coldest ever for this date in Georgia," a hotel employee said with a big pleased smile as she hurried in from the parking lot, then stopped and said: "You hiking?"

"Yeah."

"Well, better you'n me. Good luck to ya. Brrrrrrrr!" And she dodged inside.

To my surprise, I felt a certain springy keenness. I was ready to hike. I had waited months for this day, after all, even if it had been mostly with foreboding. I wanted to see what was out there. All over America today people would be dragging themselves to work, stuck in traffic jams, wreathed in exhaust smoke. I was going for a walk in the woods. I was more than ready for this.

I found Katz in the dining room and he was looking laudably perky, too. This was because he had made a friend—a waitress named Rayette, who was attending to his dining requirements in a distinctly coquettish way. Rayette was six feet tall and had a face that would frighten a baby, but she seemed good-natured and was diligent with the coffee. She could not have signaled her availability to Katz more clearly if she had thrown her skirt over her head and
lain across his Hungry Man Breakfast Platter. Katz in consequence was pumping testosterone.

“Ooh, I like a man who appreciates pancakes,” Rayette cooed.

“Well, honey, I sure appreciate these pancakes,” Katz responded, face agleam with syrup and early-morning happiness. It wasn’t exactly Hepburn and Tracy, but it was strangely touching nonetheless.

She went off to deal with a distant customer, and Katz watched her go with something like paternal pride. “She’s pretty ugly, isn’t she?” he said with a big, incongruous beam.

I sought for tact. “Well, only compared with other women.”

Katz nodded thoughtfully, then fixed me with a sudden fearful look. “You know what I look for in a female these days? A heartbeat and a full set of limbs.”

“I understand.”

“And that’s just my starting point, you realize. I’m prepared to compromise on the limbs. You think she’s available?”

“I believe you might have to take a number.”

He nodded soberly. “Probably be an idea if we ate up and got out of here.”

I was very happy with that. I drained a cup of coffee and we went off to get our things. But when we met up outside ten minutes later, tagged up and ready to go, Katz was looking miserable. “Let’s stay here another night,” he said.

— a walk in the woods —

“What? Are you kidding?” I was completely taken aback by this. “Why?”

“Because it’s warm in there and it’s cold out here.”

“We’ve gotta do it.”

He looked to the woods. “We’ll freeze out there.”

I looked to the woods, too. “Yeah, probably. We’ve still gotta do it.”

I hoisted my pack and took a backward stagger under the weight (it would be days before I could do this with anything approaching aplomb), jerked tight the belt, and trudged off. At the edge of the woods, I glanced back to make sure Katz was following. Ahead of me spread a vast, stark world of winter-dead trees. I stepped portentously onto the path, a fragment of the original Appalachian Trail from the days when it passed here en route from Mount Oglethorpe to Springer.

The date was March 9, 1996. We were on our way.

The route led down into a wooded valley with a chuckling stream edged with brittle ice, which the path followed for perhaps half a mile before taking us steeply up into denser woods. This was, it quickly became evident, the base of the first big hill, Frosty Mountain, and it was immediately taxing. The sun was shining and the sky was a hearty blue, but everything at ground level was brown—brown trees, brown earth, frozen brown leaves—and the cold was unyielding. I trudged perhaps a hundred feet up the hill, then stopped, bug-eyed, breathing hard, heart
that the topmost trees are as remote, as unattainable, as before. Still you stagger on. What else can you do?

When, after ages and ages, you finally reach the telltale world of truly high ground, where the chilled air smells of pine sap and the vegetation is gnarled and tough and wind bent, and push through to the mountain’s open pinnacle, you are, alas, past caring. You sprawl facedown on a sloping pavement of gneiss, pressed to the rock by the weight of your pack, and lie there for some minutes, reflecting in a distant, out-of-body way that you have never before looked this closely at lichen, not in fact looked this closely at anything in the natural world since you were four years old and had your first magnifying glass. Finally, with a weary puff, you roll over, unhook yourself from your pack, struggle to your feet, and realize—again in a remote, light-headed, curiously not-there way—that the view is sensational: a boundless vista of wooded mountains, unmarked by human hand, marching off in every direction. This really could be heaven. It’s splendid, no question, but the thought you cannot escape is that you have to walk this view, and this is the barest fraction of what you will traverse before you’ve finished.

You compare your map with the immediate landscape and note that the path ahead descends into a steep valley—a gorge really, not unlike the gorges the coyote is forever plunging into in Roadrunner cartoons, gorges that have actual vanishing points—
which will deliver you to the base of a hill even more steep and formidable than this, and that when you scale that preposterously taxing peak you will have done 1.7 miles since breakfast, while your schedule (blithely drawn up at a kitchen table and jotted down after perhaps three seconds’ consideration) calls for 8.9 miles by lunch, 16.8 by supper, and even greater distances tomorrow.

But perhaps it is also raining, a cold, slanting, merciless rain, with thunder and lightning playing on the neighboring hills. Perhaps a troop of Eagle Scouts comes by at a depressing trot. Perhaps you are cold and hungry and smell so bad that you can no longer smell yourself. Perhaps you want to lie down and be as the lichen: not dead exactly but just very still for a long, long time.

But of course I had all that ahead of me. Today I had nothing to do but traverse four middling mountains over seven miles of well-marked trail in clear, dry weather. It didn’t seem too much to ask. It was hell.

I don’t know exactly when I lost track of Katz, but it was in the first couple of hours. At first I would wait for him to catch up, bitching every step of the way and pausing after each three or four shuffling paces to wipe his brow and look sourly at his immediate future. It was painful to behold in every way. Eventually I waited to see him pull into view, just to confirm that he was still coming, that he wasn’t lying on the path palpitating or hadn’t thrown down his pack in disgust and gone looking for Wes Wisson. I would wait and wait, and eventually his shape would appear among the trees, breathing heavily, moving with incredible slowness, and talking in a loud, bitter voice to himself. Halfway up the third big hill, the 3,400-foot-high Black Mountain, I stood and waited a long while, and thought about going back, but eventually turned and struggled on. I had enough small agonies of my own.

Seven miles seems so little, but it’s not, believe me. With a pack, even for fit people it is not easy. You know what it’s like when you’re at a zoo or an amusement park with a small child who won’t walk another step? You hoist him lightly onto your shoulders and for a while—for a couple of minutes—it’s actually kind of fun to have him up there, pretending like you’re going to tip him off or cruising his head towards some low projection before veering off (all being well) at the last instant. But then it starts to get uncomfortable. You feel a twinge in your neck, a tightening between your shoulder blades, and the sensation seeps and spreads until it is decidedly uncomfortable, and you announce to little Jimmy that you’re going to have to put him down for a while.

Of course, Jimmy bawls and won’t go another step, and your partner gives you that disdainful, I-should-have-married-the-quarterback look because you haven’t gone 400 yards. But, hey, it hurts. Hurts a lot. Believe me, I understand.

OK, now imagine two little Jimmies in a pack on
your pack, or, better still, something inert but weighty, something that doesn’t want to be lifted, that makes it abundantly clear to you as soon as you pick it up that what it wants is to sit heavily on the ground—say, a bag of cement or a box of medical textbooks—in any case, forty pounds of profound heaviness. Imagine the jerk of the pack going on, like the pull of a down elevator. Imagine walking with that weight for hours, for days, and not along level asphalt paths with benches and refreshment booths at thoughtful intervals but over a rough trail, full of sharp rocks and unyielding roots and staggering ascents that transfer enormous amounts of strain to your pale, shaking thighs. Now tilt your head back until your neck is taut, and fix your gaze on a point two miles away. That’s your first climb. It’s 4,682 steep feet to the top, and there are lots more like it. Don’t tell me that seven miles is not far. Oh, and here’s the other thing. You don’t have to do this. You’re not in the army. You can quit right now. Go home. See your family. Sleep in a bed.

Or, alternatively, you poor, sad shmuck, you can walk 2,169 miles through mountains and wilderness to Maine. And so I trudged along for hours, in a private little world of weariness and woe, up and over imposing hills, through an endless cocktail party of trees, all the time thinking: “I must have done seven miles by now, surely.” But always the wandering trail ran on.

At 3:30, I climbed some steps carved into granite and found myself on a spacious rock overlook: the summit of Springer Mountain. I shed my pack and slumped heavily against a tree, astounded by the scale of my tiredness. The view was lovely—the rolling swell of the Cohutta Mountains, brushed with a bluish haze the color of cigarette smoke, running away to a far-off horizon. The sun was already low in the sky. I rested for perhaps ten minutes, then got up and had a look around. There was a bronze plaque screwed into a boulder announcing the start of the Appalachian Trail, and nearby on a post was a wooden box containing a Bic pen on a length of string and a standard spiral notebook, its pages curled from the damp air. The notebook was the trail register (I had somehow expected it to be leather bound and funereal) and it was filled with eager entries, nearly all written in a youthful hand. There were perhaps twenty-five pages of entries since the first of January—eight entries on this day alone. Most were hurried and cheery—“March 2nd. Well, here we are and man it’s cold! See y’all on Katahdin! Jaimie and Spud”—but about a third were longer and more carefully reflective, with messages along the lines of “So here I am at Springer at last. I don’t know what the coming weeks hold for me, but my faith in the Lord is strong and I know I have the love and support of my family. Mom and Pookie, this trip is for you,” and so on.

I waited for Katz for three-quarters of an hour, then went looking for him. The light was fading and
the air was taking on an evening chill. I walked and walked, down the hill and through the endless groves of trees, back over ground that I had gratefully put behind me forever, or so I had thought. Several times I called his name and listened, but there was nothing. I walked on and on, over fallen trees I had struggled over hours before, down slopes I could now only dimly recall. My grandmother could have got this far, I kept thinking. Finally, I rounded a bend and there he was stumbling towards me, wild-haired and one-gloved and nearer hysteria than I have ever seen a grown person.

It was hard to get the full story out of him in a coherent flow, because he was so furious, but I gathered he had thrown many items from his pack over a cliff in a temper. None of the things that had been dangling from the outside were there any longer.

“What did you get rid of?” I asked, trying not to betray too much alarm.

“Heavy fucking shit, that’s what. The pepperoni, the rice, the brown sugar, the Spam, I don’t know what all. Lots. Fuck.” Katz was almost cataleptic with displeasure. He acted as if he had been deeply betrayed by the trail. It wasn’t, I guess, what he had expected.

I saw his glove lying in the path thirty yards back and went to retrieve it.

“OK,” I said when I returned, “you haven’t got too far to go.”

“How far?”

“Maybe a mile.”

“Shit,” he said bitterly.

“I’ll take your pack.” I lifted it onto my back. It wasn’t exactly empty now, but it was decidedly moderate in weight. God knows what he had thrown out.

We trudged up the hill to the summit in the enveloping dusk. A few hundred yards beyond the summit was a campsite with a wooden shelter in a big grassy clearing against a backdrop of dark trees. There were a lot of people there, far more than I’d expected this early in the season. The shelter—a basic, three-sided affair with a sloping roof—looked crowded, and a dozen or so tents were scattered around the open ground. Nearly everywhere there was the hiss of little campstoves, threads of rising food smoke, and the movements of lanky young people.

I found us a site on the edge of the clearing, almost in the woods, off by ourselves.

“I don’t know how to put up my tent,” Katz said in a petulant tone.

“Well, I’ll put it up for you then.” You big soft flabby baby. Suddenly I was very tired.

He sat on a log and watched me put up his tent. When I finished, he pushed in his pad and sleeping bag and crawled in after. I busied myself with my tent, fussily made it into a little home. When I completed my work and straightened up, I realized there was no sound or movement from within his.

“Have you gone to bed?” I said, aghast.

“Yump.”

I stood for a minute, speechless and flummoxed, too tired to be indignant. Too tired to be hungry either, come to that. I crawled into my tent, brought in a water bottle and book, laid out my knife and flashlight for purposes of nocturnal illumination and defense, and finally shimmed into the bag, more grateful than I have ever been to be horizontal. I was asleep in moments. I don’t believe I have ever slept so well.

When I awoke, it was daylight. The inside of my tent was coated in a curious flaky rime, which I realized after a moment was all my nighttime snores, condensed and frozen and pasted to the fabric, as if into a scrapbook of respiratory memories. My water bottle was frozen solid. This seemed gratifyingly macho, and I examined it with interest, as if it were a rare mineral. I was surprisingly snug in my bag and in no hurry at all to put myself through the foolishness of climbing hills, so I just lay there as if under grave orders not to move. After a while I became aware that Katz was moving around outside, grunting softly as if from aches and doing something that sounded improbably industrious.

After a minute or two, he came and crouched by my tent, his form a dark shadow on the fabric. He didn’t ask if I was awake or anything, but just said in a quiet voice: “Was I, would you say, a complete asshole last night?”

“Yes you were, Stephen.”

He was quiet a moment. “I’m making coffee.” I gathered this was his way of an apology.

“That’s very nice.”

“Damn cold out here.”

“And in here.”

“My water bottle froze.”

“Mine, too.”

I unzipped myself from my nylon womb and emerged on creaking joints. It seemed very strange—very novel—to be standing outdoors in long johns. Katz was crouched over the campstove, boiling a pan of water. We seemed to be the only campers awake. It was cold, but perhaps just a trifle warmer than the day before, and a low dawn sun burning through the trees looked cautiously promising.

“How do you feel?” he said.

I flexed my legs experimentally. “Not too bad, actually.”

“Me either.”

He poured water into the filter cone. “I’m going to be good today,” he promised.

“Good.” I watched over his shoulder. “Is there a reason,” I asked, “why you are filtering the coffee with toilet paper?”
“I, oh . . . I threw out the filter papers.”
I gave a sound that wasn’t quite a laugh. “They couldn’t have weighed two ounces.”
“I know, but they were great for throwing. Fluttered all over.” He dribbled on more water. “The toilet paper seems to be working OK, though.”
We watched it drip through and were strangely proud. Our first refreshment in the wilderness. He handed me a cup of coffee. It was swimming in grounds and little flecks of pink tissue, but it was piping hot, which was the main thing.
He gave me an apologetic look. “I threw out the brown sugar too, so there won’t be any sugar for the oatmeal.”
Ah. “Actually, there won’t be any oatmeal for the oatmeal. I left it in New Hampshire.”
He looked at me. “Really?” then added, as if for the record: “I love oatmeal.”
“What about some of that cheese?”
He shook his head. “Flung.”
“Peanuts?”
“Flung.”
“Spam?”
“Really flung.”
This was beginning to sound a trifle grave. “What about the baloney?”
“Oh, I ate that at Amicalola,” he said, as if it had been weeks ago, then added in a tone of sudden magnificent concession, “Hey, I’m happy with a cup of coffee and a couple of Little Debbies.”

I gave a small grimace. “I left the Little Debbies, too.”
His face expanded. “You left the Little Debbies?”
I nodded apologetically.
“All of them?”
I nodded.
He breathed out hard. This really was grave—a serious challenge, apart from anything else, to his promised equanimity. We decided we had better take inventory. We cleared a space on a groundsheet and pooled our commissary. It was startlingly austere—some dried noodles, one bag of rice, raisins, coffee, salt, a good supply of candy bars, and toilet paper. That was about it.
We breakfasted on a Snickers bar and coffee, packed up our camp, hoisted our packs with a sideways stagger, and set off once again.
“I can’t believe you left the Little Debbies,” Katz said, and immediately began to fall behind.
Woods are not like other spaces. To begin with, they are cubic. Their trees surround you, loom over you, press in from all sides. Woods choke off views and leave you muddled and without bearings. They make you feel small and confused and vulnerable, like a small child lost in a crowd of strange legs. Stand in a desert or prairie and you know you are in a big space. Stand in a woods and you only sense it. They are a vast, featureless nowhere. And they are alive.

So woods are spooky. Quite apart from the thought that they may harbor wild beasts and armed, genetically challenged fellows named Zeke and Festus, there is something innately sinister about them, some ineffable thing that makes you sense an atmosphere of pregnant doom with every step and leaves you profoundly aware that you are out of your element and ought to keep your ears pricked.

Though you tell yourself it’s preposterous, you can’t quite shake the feeling that you are being watched. You order yourself to be serene (it’s just a woods for goodness sake), but really you are jumper than Don Knotts with pistol drawn. Every sudden noise—the crack of a falling limb, the crash of a bolting deer—makes you spin in alarm and stifle a plea for mercy. Whatever mechanism within you is responsible for adrenaline, it has never been so sleek and polished, so keenly poised to pump out a warming squirt of adrenal fluid. Even asleep, you are a coiled spring.

The American woods have been unnerving people for 300 years. The inestimably priggish and tiresome Henry David Thoreau thought nature was splendid, splendid indeed, so long as he could stroll to town for cakes and barley wine, but when he experienced real wilderness, on a visit to Katahdin in 1846, he was unnerved to the core. This wasn’t the tame world of overgrown orchards and sun-dappled paths that passed for wilderness in suburban Concord, Massachusetts, but a forbidding, oppressive, primeval country that was “grim and wild ... savage and dreary,” fit only for “men nearer of kin to the rocks and wild animals than we.” The experience left him, in the words of one biographer, “near hysterical.”

But even men far tougher and more attuned to the wilderness than Thoreau were sobered by its strange and palpable menace. Daniel Boone, who not only wrestled bears but tried to date their sisters, de-
scribed corners of the southern Appalachians as "so wild and horrid that it is impossible to behold them without terror." When Daniel Boone is uneasy, you know it's time to watch your step.

When the first Europeans arrived in the New World, there were perhaps 950 million acres of woodland in what would become the lower forty-eight states. The Chattahoochee Forest, through which Katz and I now trudged, was part of an immense, unbroken canopy stretching from southern Alabama to Canada and beyond, and from the shores of the Atlantic to the distant grasslands of the Missouri River.

Most of that forest is now gone, but what survives is more impressive than you might expect. The Chattahoochee is part of four million acres—6,000 square miles—of federally owned forest stretching up to the Great Smoky Mountains and beyond and spreading sideways across four states. On a map of the United States it is an incidental smudge of green, but on foot the scale of it is colossal. It would be four days before Katz and I crossed a public highway, eight days till we came to a town.

And so we walked. We walked up mountains and through high, forgotten hollows, along lonesome ridges with long views of more ridges, over grassy balds and down rocky, twisting, jarring descents, and through mile after endless mile of dark, deep, silent woods, on a wandering trail eighteen inches wide and marked with rectangular white blazes (two inches wide, six long) slapped at intervals on the gray-barked trees. Walking is what we did.

Compared with most other places in the developed world, America is still to a remarkable extent a land of forests. One-third of the landscape of the lower forty-eight states is covered in trees—728 million acres in all. Maine alone has 10 million uninhabited acres. That's 15,600 square miles, an area considerably bigger than Belgium, without a single permanent resident. Altogether, just 2 percent of the United States is classified as built up.

About 240 million acres of America's forests are owned by the government. The bulk of this—191 million acres, spread over 155 parcels of land—is held by the U.S. Forest Service under the designations of National Forests, National Grasslands, and National Recreation Areas. All this sounds soothingly untrampled and ecological, but in fact a great deal of Forest Service land is designated "multiple-use," which is generously interpreted to allow any number of boisterous activities—mining, oil, and gas extraction; ski resorts (137 of them); condominium developments; snowmobiling; off-road vehicle scrambling; and lots and lots and lots of logging—that seem curiously incompatible with woodland serenity.

The Forest Service is truly an extraordinary institution. A lot of people, seeing that word forest in the title, assume it has something to do with looking after trees. In fact, no—though that was the original
plan. It was conceived a century ago as a kind of woodland bank, a permanent repository of American timber, when people grew alarmed at the rate at which American forests were falling. Its mandate was to manage and protect these resources for the nation. These were not intended to be parks. Private companies would be granted leases to extract minerals and harvest timber, but they would be required to do so in a restrained, intelligent, sustainable way.

In fact, mostly what the Forest Service does is build roads. I am not kidding. There are 378,000 miles of roads in America’s national forests. That may seem a meaningless figure, but look at it this way—it is eight times the total mileage of America’s interstate highway system. It is the largest road system in the world in the control of a single body. The Forest Service has the second highest number of road engineers of any government institution on the planet. To say that these guys like to build roads barely hints at their level of dedication. Show them a stand of trees anywhere and they will regard it thoughtfully for a long while, and say at last, “You know, we could put a road here.” It is the avowed aim of the U.S. Forest Service to construct 580,000 miles of additional forest road by the middle of the next century.

The reason the Forest Service builds these roads, quite apart from the deep pleasure of doing noisy things in the woods with big yellow machines, is to allow private timber companies to get to previously inaccessible stands of trees. Of the Forest Service’s 150 million acres of loggable land, about two-thirds is held in store for the future. The remaining one-third—49 million acres, or an area roughly twice the size of Ohio—is available for logging. It allows huge swaths of land to be clear-cut, including (to take one recent but heartbreaking example) 209 acres of thousand-year-old redwoods in Oregon’s Umpqua National Forest.

In 1987, it casually announced that it would allow private timber interests to remove hundreds of acres of wood a year from the venerable and verdant Pisgah National Forest, next door to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and that 80 percent of that would be through what it delicately calls “scientific forestry”—clear-cutting to you and me—which is not only a brutal visual affront to any landscape but brings huge, reckless washoffs that gully the soil, robbing it of nutrients and disrupting ecologies farther downstream, sometimes for miles. This isn’t science. It’s rape.

And yet the Forest Service grinds on. By the late 1980s—this is so extraordinary I can hardly stand it—it was the only significant player in the American timber industry that was cutting down trees faster than it replaced them. Moreover, it was doing this with the most sumptuous inefficiency. Eighty percent of its leasing arrangements lost money, often vast amounts. In one typical deal, the Forest Service sold hundred-year-old lodgepole pines in the Targhee Na-
tional Forest in Idaho for about $2 each after spend-
ing $4 per tree surveying the land, drawing up con-	racts, and, of course, building roads. Between 1989
and 1997, it lost an average of $242 million a year—
almost $2 billion all told, according to the Wilder-
ness Society. This is all so discouraging that I think
we’ll leave it here and return to our two lonely he-
to the lost world of the Chatta-

The forest we walked through now was really just
a strapping adolescent. In 1890, a railroad man from
Cincinnati named Henry C. Bagley came to this part
of Georgia, saw the stately white pines and poplars,
and was so moved by their towering majesty and
abundance that he decided to chop them all down.
They were worth a lot of money. Besides, freighting
the timber to northern mills would keep his railroad
cars puffing. In consequence, over the next thirty
years, nearly all the hills of northern Georgia were
turned into sunny groves of stumps. By 1920,
foresters in the South were taking away 15.4 billion
board feet of timber a year. It wasn’t until the 1930s,
when the Chattahoochee Forest was officially
formed, that nature was invited back in.

There is a strange frozen violence in a forest out of
season. Every glade and dale seemed to have just
completed some massive cataclysm. Downed trees
lay across the path every fifty or sixty yards, often
with great bomb craters of dirt around their splayed
roots. Dozens more lay rotting on the slopes, and
every third or fourth tree, it seemed, was leaning
steeply on a neighbor. It was as if the trees couldn’t
wait to fall over, as if their sole purpose in the univer-
sal scheme of things was to grow big enough to topple
with a really good, splintering crash. I was
forever coming up to trees so precariously and
weightily tipped over the path that I would waver,
then scoot under, fearing the crush of really unfortu-
nate timing and imagining Katz coming along a few
minutes later, regarding my wriggling legs and say-
ing, “Shit, Bryson, what’re you doing under there?”
But no trees fell. Everywhere the woods were still
and preternaturally quiet. Except for the occasional
gurgle of running water and the tiny shuffle of wind-
stirred leaves along the forest floor, there was almost
never a sound.

The woods were silent because spring had not yet
come. In a normal year we would be walking into the
zestful bounty of a southern mountain spring,
through a radiant, productive, newborn world alive
with the zip of insects and the fussy twitter of birds—
a world bursting with fresh wholesome air and that
rich, velvety, lung-filling smell of chlorophyll you get
when you push through low, leafy branches. Above
all, there would be wildflowers in dazzling profu-
sion, blossoming from every twig, pushing valiantly
through the fertile litter on the forest floor, carpeting
every sunny slope and stream bank—trillium and
trailing arbutus, Dutchmen’s breeches, jack-in-the-
pulpit, mandrake, violets, snowy bluets, buttercups
and bloodroot, dwarf iris, columbine and wood sorrel, and other cheerful, nodding wonders almost beyond counting. There are 1,500 types of wildflower in the southern Appalachians, 40 rare types in the northern Georgia woods alone. They are a sight to lift the hardest heart. But they were not to be seen in the woods this grim March. We trudged through a cold, silent world of bare trees, beneath pewter skies, on ground like iron.

We fell into a simple routine. Each morning we rose at first light, shivering and rubbing arms, made coffee, broke down camp, ate a couple of fistfuls of raisins, and set off into the silent woods. We would walk from about half past seven to four. We seldom walked together—our paces didn’t match—but every couple of hours I would sit on a log (always surveying the surrounding undergrowth for the rustle of bear or boar) and wait for Katz to catch up, to make sure everything was OK. Sometimes other hikers would come along and tell me where Katz was and how he was progressing, which was nearly always slowly but gamely. The trail was much harder for him than for me, and to his credit he tried not to bitch. It never escaped me for a moment that he didn’t have to be there.

I had thought we would have a jump on the crowds, but there was a fair scattering of other hikers—three students from Rutgers University in New Jersey; an astoundingly fit older couple with tiny packs hiking to their daughter’s wedding in far-off Virginia; a gawky kid from Florida named Jonathan—perhaps two dozen of us altogether in the same general neck of the woods, all heading north. Because everyone walks at different rates and rests at different times, three or four times a day you bump into some or all of your fellow hikers, especially on mountaintops with panoramic views or beside streams with good water, and above all at the wooden shelters that stand at distant intervals, ostensibly but not always actually, a day’s hike apart in clearings just off the trail. In consequence you get to know your fellow hikers at least a little, quite well if you meet them nightly at the shelters. You become part of an informal clump, a loose and sympathetic affiliation of people from different age groups and walks of life but all experiencing the same weather, same discomforts, same landscapes, same eccentric impulse to hike to Maine.

Even at busy times, however, the woods are great providers of solitude, and I encountered long periods of perfect aloneness, when I didn’t see another soul for hours; many times when I would wait for Katz for a long spell and no other hiker would come along. When that happened, I would leave my pack and go back and find him, to see that he was all right, which always pleased him. Sometimes he would be proudly bearing my stick, which I had left by a tree when I had stopped to tie my laces or adjust my pack. We seemed to be looking out for each other. It was very nice. I can put it no other way.
Around four we would find a spot to camp and pitch our tents. One of us would go off to fetch and filter water while the other prepared a sludge of steamy noodles. Sometimes we would talk, but mostly we existed in a kind of companionable silence. By six o’clock, dark and cold and weariness would drive us to our tents. Katz went to sleep instantly, as far as I could tell. I would read for an hour or so with my curiously inefficient little miner’s lamp, its beam throwing quirky, concentric circles of light onto the page, like the light of a bicycle lamp, until my shoulders and arms grew chilly out of the bag and heavy from tilting the book at awkward angles to catch the nervous light. So I would put myself in darkness and lie there listening to the peculiarly clear, articulated noises of the forest at night, the sighs and fidgets of wind and leaves, the weary groan of boughs, the endless murmurings and stirrings, like the noises of a convalescent ward after lights out, until at last I fell heavily asleep. In the morning we would rise shivering and rubbing arms, wordlessly repeat our small chores, fill and hoist our packs, and venture into the great entangling forest again.

On the fourth evening, we made a friend. We were sitting in a nice little clearing beside the trail, our tents pitched, eating our noodles, savoring the exquisite pleasure of just sitting, when a plumpish, bespectacled young woman in a red jacket and the customary outsized pack came along. She regarded us with the crinkled squint of someone who is either chronically confused or can’t see very well. We exchanged hellos and the usual banalities about the weather and where we were. Then she squinted at the gathering gloom and announced she would camp with us.

Her name was Mary Ellen. She was from Florida, and she was, as Katz forever after termed her in a special tone of awe, a piece of work. She talked non-stop, except when she was clearing out her eustachian tubes (which she did frequently) by pinching her nose and blowing out with a series of violent and alarming snorts of a sort that would make a dog leave the sofa and get under a table in the next room. I have long known that it is part of God’s plan for me to spend a little time with each of the most stupid people on earth, and Mary Ellen was proof that even in the Appalachian woods I would not be spared. It became evident from the first moment that she was a rarity.

“So what are you guys eating?” she said, plonking herself down on a spare log and lifting her head to peer into our bowls. “Noodles? Big mistake. Noodles have got like no energy. I mean like zero.” She unblocked her ears. “Is that a Starship tent?”

I looked at my tent. “I don’t know.”

“Big mistake. They must have seen you coming at the camping store. What did you pay for it?”

“I don’t know.”
"Too much, that's how much. You should have got a three-season tent."
"It is a three-season tent."
"Pardon me saying so, but it is like seriously dumb to come out here in March without a three-season tent." She unblocked her ears.
"It is a three-season tent."
"You're lucky you haven't froze yet. You should go back and like punch out the guy that sold it to you because he's been like, you know, negligible selling you that."
"Believe me, it is a three-season tent."

She unblocked her ears and shook her head impatiently. "That's a three-season tent." She indicated Katz's tent.
"That's exactly the same tent."
She glanced at it again. "Whatever. How many miles did you do today?"
"About ten." Actually we had done eight point four, but this had included several formidable escarpments, including a notable wall of hell called Preaching Rock, the highest eminence since Springer Mountain, for which we had awarded ourselves bonus miles, for purposes of morale.
"Ten miles? Is that all? You guys must be like really out of shape. I did fourteen-two."
"How many have your lips done?" said Katz, looking up from his noodles.
She fixed him with one of her more severe squints.
"Same as the rest of me, of course." She gave me a private look as if to say, "Is your friend like seriously weird or something?" She cleared her ears. "I started at Gooch Gap."
"So did we. That's only eight point four miles."
She shook her head sharply, as if shooing a particularly tenacious fly. "Fourteen-two."
"No, really, it's only eight point four."
"Excuse me, but I just walked it. I think I ought to know." And then suddenly: "God, are those Timberland boots? Mega mistake. How much did you pay for them?"
And so it went. Eventually I went off to swill out the bowls and hang the food bag. When I came back, she was fixing her own dinner but still talking away at Katz.
"You know what your problem is?" she was saying. "Pardon my French, but you're too fat."
Katz looked at her in quiet wonder. "Excuse me?"
"You're too fat. You should have lost weight before you came out here. Shoulda done some training, 'cause you could have like a serious, you know, heart thing out here."
"Heart thing?"
"You know, when your heart stops and you like, you know, die."
"Do you mean a heart attack?"
"That's it."
Mary Ellen, it should be noted, was not short on flesh herself, and unwisely at that moment she leaned over to get something from her pack, displaying an
expanse of backside on which you could have projected motion pictures for, let us say, an army base. It was an interesting test of Katz’s forbearance. He said nothing but rose to go for a pee, and out of the side of his mouth as he passed me he rendered a certain convenient expletive as three low, dismayed syllables, like the call of a freight train in the night.

The next day, as always, we rose chilled and feeling wretched, and set about the business of attending to our small tasks, but this time with the additional strain of having our every move examined and rated. While we ate raisins and drank coffee with flecks of toilet paper in it, Mary Ellen gorged on a multicourse breakfast of oatmeal, Pop Tarts, trail mix, and a dozen small squares of chocolate, which she lined up in a row on the log beside her. We watched like orphaned refugees while she plumped her jowls with food and enlightened us as to our shortcomings with regard to diet, equipment, and general manliness.

And then, now a trio, we set off into the woods. Mary Ellen walked sometimes with me and sometimes with Katz, but always with one of us. It was apparent that for all her bluster she was majestically inexperienced and untrustworthy (she hadn’t the faintest idea how to read a map, for one thing) and ill at ease on her own in the wilderness. I couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for her. Besides, I began to find her strangely entertaining. She had the most extraordinarily redundant turn of phrase. She would say things like “There’s a stream of water over there” and “It’s nearly ten o’clock A.M.” Once, in reference to winters in central Florida, she solemnly informed me, “We usually get frosts once or twice a winter, but this year we had ’em a couple of times.” Katz for his part clearly dreaded her company and winced beneath her tireless urgings to smarten his pace.

For once, the weather was kindly—more autumnal than springlike in feel, but gratifyingly mild. By ten o’clock, the temperature was comfortably in the sixties. For the first time since Amicalola I took off my jacket and realized with mild perplexity that I had absolutely no place to put it. I tied it to my pack with a strap and trudged on.

We labored four miles up and over Blood Mountain—at 4,461 feet the highest and toughest eminence on the trail in Georgia—then began a steep and exciting two-mile descent towards Neels Gap. Exciting because there was a shop at Neels Gap, at a place called the Walasi-Yi Inn, where you could buy sandwiches and ice cream. At about half past one, we heard a novel sound—motor traffic—and a few minutes later we emerged from the woods onto U.S. Highway 19 and 129, which despite having two numbers was really just a back road through a high pass between wooded nowhere. Directly across the road was the Walasi-Yi Inn, a splendid stone building constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (a kind of army of the unemployed) during the Great Depression and now a combination hiking outfitters, grocery, bookshop, and youth hostel. We hastened
across the road—positively scurried across—and went inside.

Now it may seem to stretch credibility to suggest that things like a paved highway, the whoosh of passing cars, and a proper building could seem exciting and unfamiliar after a scant five days in the woods, but in fact it was so. Just passing through a door, being inside, surrounded by walls and a ceiling, was novel. And the Walasi-Yi’s stuff was, well, I can’t begin to describe how wonderful it was. There was a single modest-sized refrigerator filled with fresh sandwiches, soft drinks, cartons of juice, and perishables like cheese, and Katz and I stared into it for ages, dumbly captivated. I was beginning to appreciate that the central feature of life on the Appalachian Trail is deprivation, that the whole point of the experience is to remove yourself so thoroughly from the conveniences of everyday life that the most ordinary things—processed cheese, a can of pop gorgeously beaded with condensation—fill you with wonder and gratitude. It is an intoxicating experience to taste Coca-Cola as if for the first time and to be conveyed to the very brink of orgasm by white bread. Makes all the discomfort worthwhile, if you ask me.

Katz and I bought two egg salad sandwiches each, some potato chips, chocolate bars, and soft drinks and went to a picnic table in back, where we ate with greedy smackings and expressions of rapture, then returned to the refrigerator to stare in wonder some more. The Walasi-Yi, we discovered, provided other services to bona fide hikers for a small fee—laundry center, showers, towel rental—and we greedily availed ourselves of all those. The shower was a dribbly, antiquated affair, but the water was hot and I have never, and I mean never, enjoyed a grooming experience more. I watched with the profoundest satisfaction as five days of grime ran down my legs and out the drainhole, and noticed with astonished gratitude that my body had taken on a noticeably svelter profile. We did two loads of laundry, washed out our cups and food bowls and pots and pans, bought and sent postcards, phoned home, and stocked up liberally on fresh and packaged foods in the shop.

The Walasi-Yi was run by an Englishman named Justin and his American wife, Peggy, and we fell into a running conversation with them as we drifted in and out through the afternoon. Peggy told me that already they had had a thousand hikers through since January 1, with the real start of the hiking season still to come. They were a kindly couple, and I got the sense that Peggy in particular spends a lot of her time talking people into not quitting. Only the day before, a young man from Surrey had asked them to call him a cab to take him to Atlanta. Peggy had almost persuaded him to persevere, to try for just another week, but in the end he had broken down and wept quietly and asked from the heart to be let go home.

My own feeling was that for the first time I really
wanted to keep going. The sun was shining. I was clean and refreshed. There was ample food in our packs. I had spoken to my wife by phone and knew that all was well. Above all, I was starting to feel fit. I was sure I had lost nearly ten pounds already. I was ready to go. Katz, too, was aglow with cleanliness and looking chipper. We packed our purchases on the porch and realized, together in the same instant, with joy and amazement, that Mary Ellen was no longer part of our retinue. I put my head in the door and asked if they had seen her.

“Oh, I think she left about an hour ago,” Peggy said.

Things were getting better and better.

It was after four o’clock by the time we set off again. Justin had said there was a natural meadow ideal for camping about an hour’s walk farther on. The trail was warmly inviting in late afternoon sunlight—there were long shadows from the trees and expansive views across a river valley to stout, charcoal-colored mountains—and the meadow was indeed a perfect place to camp. We pitched our tents and had the sandwiches, chips, and soft drinks we had bought for dinner.

Then, with as much pride as if I had baked them myself, I brought out a little surprise—two packets of Hostess cupcakes.

Katz’s face lit up like the birthday boy in a Norman Rockwell painting.

“Oh, wow!”

“They didn’t have any Little Debbies,” I apologized.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey.” He was lost for greater eloquence. Katz loved cakes.

We ate three of the cupcakes between us and left the last one on the log, where we could admire it, for later. We were lying there, propped against logs, burping, smoking, feeling rested and content, talking for once—in short, acting much as I had envisioned it in my more optimistic moments back home—when Katz let out a low groan. I followed his gaze to find Mary Ellen striding briskly down the trail towards us from the wrong direction.

“I wondered where you guys had got to,” she scolded. “You know, you are like really slow. We could’ve done another four miles by now easy. I can see I’m going to have to keep my eyes on you from now—say, is that a Hostess cupcake?” Before I could speak or Katz could seize a log with which to smite her dead, she said, “Well, I don’t mind if I do,” and ate it in two bites. It would be some days before Katz smiled again.