Not long after | moved with my family to a small town in New Hampshire | 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 i the granddady of long hikes. From Georgia to Maine, it wanders across fourteen states, through plump, comely hils' whose very names--Blue Ridge, Smokies, Cumberlands, Green Mountains, White Mountains - seem an invitation to amble. Who could say the words “Great Smoky Mountains’ or *Shenandoah Velley" 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 dangerously beguiing fashion through the pleasant New England community in which | had just settied. 1t seemed such an extraordinary notion-tha | could set offfrom home and walk 1,800 miles through woods to Georgla, or turn the other way and clamber over the rough and stony White Mountains to the fabled prow of Mount Katahdin, | bating in forest 450 miles to the north in a wildemess few have seen. A litle voice in my head said: “Sounds neat! Let's do it

1 formed a number of rationalzations. It would get me [t after years of waddlesome sloth. It would be an interesting and ref ective way to reacquaint myself with the scale and beauty of my native land after nearly twenty years of iving abroad. It would be useul (1 wasn't quite sure in what way, but | was sure nonetheless) o learn to fend for myself in the widerness. When guys in camou age pants and hunting hats sat around in the Four Aces Diner talking about fearsome things done out-of-doors, | would no fonger have to feel ke such a cupcake. | wanted a it 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 snif, "Yeah, ['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 diversited sweep of woodland ever to grace the temperate world--and that forest i in trouble. If the global temperature rises by 4°C over the next fty years, as is evidently possible, the whole of the Appalachian wiideness below New England could become savanna. Already trees are dying in frightening numbers. The elms and chestnuts are long gone, the stately hemlocks and { bwery dogwoods are going, and the red spruces, Fraser s, mountain ashes, and sugar maples may be about o follow. Clearly, if ever there was a time to experience this singuiar wilderness, i was now.

S0 | decided 10 do it. More rashly, | announced my intention- told friends and neighbors, conl dently informed my publisher, made it common knowledge among those who knew me. Then | bought some books and talked 1o people who had done the trail in whole or n part and came gradually to realize that this was way beyond--way beyond-- anything | had attempted before.

Nearly everyone | talked 10 had some gruesome story invoiving & guieless acquaintance who had gone off hiking the tral with high hopes and new boots and come stumbling back two days later with a bobeat 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 profoundiy unbiblical sex; rabies-

crazed skunks, raccoons, and squirrels; merciless f re ants and ravening blacki); 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. | 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 f ind a copperhead bunking down in the warmth between her legs. | 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 abruptiy 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 balibearings of beaded rain and sent paragliding on to distant valley í bors, or swept away by the watery wall of a (lash f bod; of hikers beyond counting whose last experience was of trembling earth and the befuddled thought "Now what the------?"

It required only a litle light reading in adventure books and almost no imagination to envision circumstances in which | would f ind myself caught in a tightening circle of hunger-emboldened wolves, staggering and shredding clothes under an onslaught of pincered f re ants, or dumbly transí ixed 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 f lesh.

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. 1f you're lucky you can hope to spend the rest of your life propped in a chair with 1 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. 1f 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 irregularíties, facial paralysis, muscle spasms, severe mental impairment, loss of control of body functions, and--hardly surprising, really-- chronic depression,

Then there is the lítle-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 orif ce 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 f rst 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 deí ne a hiker) have been murdered along the trail since 1974. Two young women would die while | 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. 1f, on the other hand, you start in Georgia and head north, you must time it to f nish 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 f the hot weather and the more irksome and infectious of insects. My intention was to start in the south in early March. | 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 constantiy distinguishes itself in a variety of ways, manages in a single leaf t to give the length of the trail as 2,155 miles and 2,200 miles. The o fcial 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 retumed to conf dent 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 itis 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 litle 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 vicínity. Altogether, it takes about ! ve months, and f ive miliion 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 convívial 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.

When, after much solemn consideration, | 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 | was on the brink of a dangerous condition known as retail burnout. No more now would | 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."

| 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 oceur 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------," | paused and put on a new voice. "Are you saying, Dave, that | 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. | ended up with enough equipment to bring full employment to a vale of sherpas--a three-season tent, self-inf ating sleeping pad, nested pots and pans, collapsible eating utensils, plastic dish and cup, complicated pump-action water puri‘ier, 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 keyring, 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 | 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 | had to go back again and ask what it was for exactly. | drew the line at buying a designer groundcloth for $59.95, knowing | could acquire a lawn tarp at Kmart for $5. | also said no to a fist-aid kit, sewing kit, anti-snake-bite 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, | 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 of ficial Appalachian Trail Guides, consisting of eleven small paperback books and f ifty-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 | noticed a volume called Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance, opened it up at random, 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.

1 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. | put the hands-free f lashlight on my head, for the heck of it, and pulled the tent from its plastic packaging and erected it on the floor. | unfurled the self-inf lating sleeping pad and pushed it inside and followed that with my fluffy new sleeping bag. Then | crawled in and lay there for quite a long time trying out for size the expensive, conf ned, strangely new-smelling, entirely novel space that was s00n to be my home away from home. | 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 | couldn't really.

| hadn't been in a space like this since | 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 | 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, | told myself. But secretly | knew that | was quite wrong.

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 Verendrye 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 AM. 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 snu' fings, the clatter of upended cookware and sounds of moist gnawings, the pad of its feet and the heaviness

Herrero recounts an incident that nicely conveys the near indestructibility of the grizzly. 1t concerns a professional hunter in Alaska named Alexei Pitka, who stalked a large male through snow and f inally felled it with a well-aimed shot to the heart from a large-bore rif . Pitka should probably have carried a card with him that said: "First make sure bearis 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. "| don't khnow why | set that durn gun against the tree," he said later. (Actually, what he said was, "Mrffff mmmpg nnnmmm mfffffn," on account of having no lips, teeth, nose, tongue, or other vocal apparatus.)

1f | were to be pawed and chewed--and this seemed to me entirely possible, the more | 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 s 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 conf rmed 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.

| 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-i ve 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-inf lcted 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? | think not. And is 500 certif ied attacks 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. 1f a tree

of its breath, the singing brush of its haunch along your tent side. Imagine the hot í bod 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 às 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, shhhhh . . . yesi--the unutterable relief of realizing that the bear has withdrawn to the other side of the camp or shambled back into the woods. | tell you right now, | 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 to distraction by the rich, un xable, everywhere aroma of hamburger, bit hard into a finching limb and dragged him shouting and (lailing 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 f lashlights and makeshift cudgels, undo tent zips with helplessly fumbling f ngers, and give chase--in those few moments, poor little David Anderson was dead.

Now imagine reading a nonf iction 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 | 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 | 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, | lay saucer-eyed in bed reading clinically precise accounts of people gnawed pulpy in their sleeping bags, plucked whimpering from trees, even noiselessly stalked (| 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 f ind 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 (leeter 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 horríbilis, as it is so vívidly 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.

streamers you get at children's parties--| daresay 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. | didn't like the feel of any ofthis.

Then there were all the problems and particular dangers of solitude. 1 still have my appendix, and any number of other organs that might burst or sputter in the empty wilds. Wihat would | do then? What if | fell from a ledge and broke my back? What if | 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, | didn't like the feel of this at all.

At Christmas, | 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, | got a call. It was from an old school friend named Stephen Katz. Katz and | had grown up together in lowa, but | 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-

f ve years since, | 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 | could come with you?"

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

"Ifit's a problem, | understand."

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

"Really?" He seemed to brighten.

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

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

"Why ever not?"

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

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

" still intend to pay you back."

"Hey," | saíid. "Hey." | couldn't remember any $600. | 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. | 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. | told him what little | knew about the trail and the wilderness life that awaited us. We settled that he would f l to New Hampshire the next Wednesday, we would spend two days making preparations, and then we'd hit the trail. For the f i'st time in months | felt positively positive 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, | 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 | hadn't asked him why he wanted to come. Katz was the one person | knew on earth who might be on the run from guys with names like Julio and Mr. Big. Anyway, | didn't care. | wasn't going to have to walk alone.

| found my wife at the kitchen sink and told her the good news. She was more reserved in her enthusiasm than | had hoped

"You're going into the woods for weeks and weeks with a person you have barely seen for twenty-f ive years. Have you really thought this through?" (As if | 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 say, 'Hey, did | tell you about my back problems?' and he'll say, 'No, 1 don't think so,' and we'll do it all over again. It'll be great."

"Itll be hell."

"Yeah, | know," | said

And so | 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 intensif ied for a moment then gradually stuttered to a halt, and the plane's door-cum-stairway fell open. | tried to remember the last time | had seen him. After our summer in Europe, Katz had gone back to Des Moines and had become, in effect, lowa'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. | remembered now that the last time | had seen him was about Í ve years earlier in a Denny's restaurant where | 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. 1t was eight in the morning and Katz looked very happy. He was always happy when he was drunk, and he was always drunk.

five pounds of rice, assorted bags of cookies, oatmeal, raisins, M&Ms, Spam, more Snickers, sun lower 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, | don't think we'll be able to carry all this," | 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, | to my basement HQ. | packed for two hours, but | couldn't

begin to get everything in. | put aside books and notebooks and nearly all my spare clothes, and tried lots of different combinations, but every time | finished | would turn to find something large and important left over. Eventually | 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?" | said.

"Yeah."

| 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."

| 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 f bat 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. | held my wife's hand and couldn't think of anything to say. In the morning, | 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 scui fe with intruders. His pack was full but unsecured, and personal effects were still liberally distributed around the room. | 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 | could do," he said. "I had to leave a few things.'

1 nodded. 1'd left a few things, too--notably, the oatmeal, which | 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. | 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.

| 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, | thought, for a person wearing a shortsleeve 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 | 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 f ve 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 f inality.

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 MackKaye's life at this point was not going well would be to engage in careless understatement. |n 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 & ficiency and morale. There, he dutífully produced ambitious, unworkable proposals that were read with amused tolerance and promptly binned. In April 1921 his wife, a well-known pacíifist and suffragette named Jessie Hardy Stubbs, f lung 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 selí less 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 constructing 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 í ve years nothing happened, largely because MacKaye occupied himself with reí ning 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 suddeniy 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 khnown. 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. 1t didn't follow any Indian trails or colonial post roads. 1t 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 f irst paid employee until 1968, and it retains the air of a friendly, accessible, dedicated outí t. The AT is no longer the longest hiking trail--the Pacif c Crest and Continental Divide trails, both out West, are slightly longer--but it will always be the first and greatest. |t has a lot of friends. 1t 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 on to 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 | 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, | 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 f irst pay phone you come to. Says he wants to go home, that the trail wasn't what he expected it to be. So | 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 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. 1f 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 shuí fle off. With black bears, however, playing dead is futile, since they will continue chewing on you until you are considerably past caring. Itis also foolish to climb a tree because black bears are adroit climbers and, as Herrero dryly notes, you will simply end up f ighting 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 f irst, 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 f ingernails seraping 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.

| won't say | became obsessed by all this, but it did occupy my thoughts a great deal in the months while | 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. | was especially riveted by an amateur photograph in Herrero's book, taken late at night by a camper with a f lash 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 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 | do if four bears came into my camp? Why, | would die, of course. Literally shit myself lifeless. | would blow my sphincter out my backside like one of those unrolling paper 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, f ling the world with encouraging brightness, and | 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 11ºF.

"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. Brrrrrre!" And she dodged inside.

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

| 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 goodnatured 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, | like a man who appreciates pancakes," Rayette cooed.

"Well, honey, | sure appreciate these pancakes," Katz responded, face agleam with syrup and early-morning happiness. 1t 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.

| sought for tact. “Well, only compared with other women."

Katz nodded thoughtfully, then f xed me with a sudden fearful look. "You know what | look for in a female these days? A heartbeat and a full set of limbs."

*| understand.”

"And that's just my starting point, you realize. '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."

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

"What? Are you kidding?" | 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."

Two weeks after that, | 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, o! fcers?" 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--| instantly saw now as he stooped out the door of the plane-- growing a stomach. Katz was arrestingly larger than when | had last seen him. He had always been kind of f leshy, 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?" | gasped

"Ah, just some tapes and shit for the trail. There a Dunkin Donuts anywhere around here? | haven't had anything to eat since Boston."

"Boston? You've just come from Boston."*

"Yeah, | gotta eat something every hour or so or | have, whaddayacallit, seizures."

"Seizures?" This wasn't quite the reunion scenario | had envisioned. | imagined him bouncing around on the Appalachian Trail like some windup toy that had fallen on its back.

"Ever since | took some contaminated phenylthiamines about ten years ago. If | 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 indicated his bag on the carousel--a green army surplus duffel--and let me pick it up. It weighed at least seventy-! ve 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 | sat with him at the kitchen table and watched him eat f ve Boston cream doughnuts, which he washed down with two glasses of milk. Then he said he wanted to go and lie down a while. 1t 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," | said.

In the afternoon, after Katz had rested, he and | 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. | khnew 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,

1 looked to the woods, too. "Yeah, probably. We've still gotta do it."

| hoisted my pack and took a backward stagger under the weight (it would be days before | could do this with anything approaching aplomb), jerked tight the belt, and trudged off. At the edge of the woods, | glanced back to make sure Katz was following. Ahead of me spread a vast, stark world of winter-dead trees. | stepped portentously on to 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. | trudged perhaps a hundred feet up the hill, then stopped, bug-eyed, breathing hard, heart kabooming alarmingly. Katz was already falling behind and panting even harder. | pressed on.

It was hell. First days on hiking trips always are. | was hopelessly out of shape-- hopelessly. The pack weighed way too much. Way too much. | had never encountered anything so hard, for which | was so ill prepared. Every step was a strugale.

The hardest part was coming to terms with the constant dispiríting discovery that there is always more hill. The thing about being on a hill, as opposed to standing back from it, is that you can almost never see exactly what's to come. Between the curtain of trees at every side, the ever-

receding contour of rising slope before you, and your own plodding weariness, you gradually lose track of how far you have come. Each time you haul yourself up to what you think must surely be the crest, you find that there is in fact more hill beyond, sloped at an angle that kept it from view before, and that beyond that slope there is another, and beyond that another and another, and beyond each of those more still, until it seems impossible that any hill could run on this long. Eventually you reach a height where you can see the tops of the topmost trees, with nothing but clear sky beyond, and your faltering spirit stirs-- nearly there now!--but this s a pitiless deception. The elusive summit continually retreats by whatever distance you press forward, so that each time the canopy parts enough to give a view you are dismayed to see 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 f inally reach the telltale world of truly high ground, where the chilled air smells of pine sap and the | don't know exactly when | lost track of Katz, but it was in the f 'st couple of hours. At first | would wait for him to catch up, bitching every step of the way and pausing after each three or four shu' fing paces to wipe his brow and look sourly at his immediate future. 1t was painful to behold in every way. Eventually | waited to see him pull into view, just to conf m 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. | 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, | stood and waited a long while, and thought about going back, but eventually turned and struggled on. | had enough small agonies of my own.

Seven miles seems so little, but it's not, believe me. With a pack, even for f t 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, |-should-have-married-the-quarterback look because you haven't gone 400 yards. But, hey, it hurts. Hurts a lot. Believe me, | 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 f your gaze on a point two miles away. That's your Í ist 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 | trudged along for hours, in a private little world of Wweariness and woe, up and over imposing hills, through an endless cocktail party of trees, all the time thinking: *| must have done seven miles by now, surely.* But always the wandering trail ran on.

At 3:30, | climbed some steps carved into granite and found myself on a spacious rock overlook: the summit of Springer Mountain. | 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. | 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 (1 had somehow expected it to be leather bound and funereal) and it was f iled with eager entries, nearly all written in a youthful hand. There were perhaps twenty-five pages of entries since the f irst 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 ref lective, with messages along the lines of "So here | am at Springer at last. | don't know what the coming weeks hold for me, but my faith in the Lord is strong and | know | have the love and support of my family. Mom and Pookie, this trip is for you," and so on.

| 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. | walked and walked, down the hill and through the endless groves of trees, back over ground that | had gratefully put behind me forever, or so | had thought. Several times | called his name and listened, but there was nothing. | walked on and on, over fallen trees | had struggled over hours before, down slopes | could now only dimly recall. My grandmother could have got this far, | kept thinking. Finally, | rounded a bend and there he was stumbling towards me, wild-haired and one-gloved and nearer hysteria than | 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 | 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?" | asked, trying not to betray too much alarm.

"Heavy fucking shit, that's what. The pepperoni, the rice, the brown sugar, the Spam, | 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, | guess, what he had expected.

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

*OK," | said when | returned, "you haven't got too far to go.”

"How far?"

"Maybe a mile.”

"Shit," he said bitterly.

"I'l take your pack." | lifted it onto my back. 1t 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.

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

"| don't khnow how to put up my tent," Katz said in a petulant tone.

“*Well, I'll put it up for you then.” You big soft f labby baby. Suddenly | was very tired.

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

"Have you gone to bed?' | said, aghast.

*Yump,' he replied in a kind of a formative growl.

"That's it? You've retired? With no dinner?"

"Yump."

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, described 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 f rst 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 | 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 | 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 grey-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 serambling; 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--so easy. So | 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?' | says. And he says, "This time I'm not going home.' *

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

"Twenty-one miles from Springer. Doesn't seem much, does it? | 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 | had three ladies from California--middle-aged gals, real nice, kind of giggly but, you know, nice--| 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--| 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 scientif c research to work that out. But you'd be amazed how many people quit. Then again, | 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. 1t took him eight months, longer than it takes most people, and | don't think he'd seen anybody for the last several weeks. When he came off he was just a trembling wreck. | 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 | kept thinking, 'Well, you know, sir, hiking the Appalachian Trail is a voluntary endeavor, but of course | 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. À treacherous, icy wind seemed to dart around from every angle and then zip up sleeves and pant legs. "Jeezuss!" Katz cried in astonishment, as if somebody had just thrown a bucket of ice water over him, and scooted inside. | 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. | got a Coke from a machine in the corridor, had a lavishly steamy shower involving many towels, inserted myself between crisp sheets (how long would it be till | enjoyed this kind of comfort again?) watched discouraging reports by happy, mindless people on the Weather Channel, and slept hardly at all.

| 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, was some warning. Even so, several small towns were washed away and eleven people lost their lives. But these were relatively small dams. Tocks Dam would have held one of the largest artif icial reservoirs in the world, with forty miles of water behind it. Four substantial cities -- Trenton, Cam-den, Wilmington, and Philadelphia -- and scores of smaller communities stood downstream. A disaster on the Delaware would truly be a disaster.

And here was the nimble Army Corps of Engineers planning to hold back 250 billion gallons of water with notoriously unstable glacial till. Besides that there were all kinds of environmental worries -- that salinity levels below the dam would rise catastrophically, for example, devastating the ecology lower down, not least the valuable oyster beds of Delaware Bay.

In 1992, after years of growing protests that spread far beyond the Delaware Valley, the dam plan was f nally put on hold, but by this time whole villages and farms had been bulldozed. A quiet, remote, very beautiful farming valley that had not changed a great deal in 200 years was lost forever. "One beneí cial result of the [canceled] project," notes the Appalachian Trail Guide to New York and New Jersey, "was that the land acquired by the federal government for the national recreation area has provided the Trail with a protected corridor."

To tell you the truth | was getting a little wearied of this. | know the Appalachian Trail is supposed to be a wilderness experience, and | accept that there are countless places where it would be a tragedy for it to be otherwise, but sometimes, as here, the ATC seems to be positively phobic about human contact. Personally, | would have been pleased to be walking now through hamlets and past farms rather than through some silent "protected corridor."

Doubtless it is all to do with our historic impulse to tame and exploit the wilderness, but America's attitude to nature is, from all sides, very strange if you ask me. | couldn't help comparing my experience now with an experience |'d had three or four years earlier in Luxembourg when | went hiking with my son for a magazine assignment. Luxembourg is .a much more delightful place to hike than you might think. 1t has lots of woods but also castles and farms and steepled villages and winding river valleys-- the whole, as it were, European package. The footpaths we followed spent a lot of time in the woods but also emerged at obliging intervals to take us along sunny back roads and over stiles and through farm f ields and hamlets. We were always able at some point each day to call in at a bakery or post o! fice, to hear the tinkle of shop bells and eavesdrop on conversations we couldn't understand. Each night we slept in an inn and ate in a restaurant with other people. We experienced the whole of Luxembourg, not just its trees. 1t was wonderful, and it was wonderful because the whole charmingly diminutive package was seamlessly and effortlessly integrated,.

In America, alas, beauty has become something you drive to, and nature an either/or proposition--either you ruthlessly subjugate it, as at Tocks Dam and a million other places, or you deify it, treat it as something holy and remote, a thing apart, as along the Appalachian Trail. Seldom would it occur to anyone on either side that people and nature could coexist to their mutual beneí t--that, say, a more graceful bridge across the Delaware River might actually set off the grandeur around it, or that the AT might be more interesting and rewarding if it wasn't all wilderness, if from time to time it purposely took you past grazing cows and tilled f jelds.

| would have much preferred it if the AT guidebook had said: "Thanks to the Conference's efforts, farming has been restored to the Delaware River Valley, and the footpath rerouted to incorporate sixteen miles of riverside walking because, let's face it, you can get too much of trees sometimes."

Still, we must look on the bright side. 1f the Army Corps of Engineers had had its foolish way, I'd have been swimming back to my car now, and | was grateful at least to be spared that.

Anyway, it was time to do some real hiking again

In 1983, a man walking in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts just off the Appalachian Trail saw--or at least swears' he saw--a mountain lion cross his path, which was a little unsettling and even more unexpected since mountain lions hadn't been seen in the northeastern United States since 1903, when the last one was shot in New York State.

Soon, however, sightings were being reported all over New England. A man driving a back road of Vermont saw two cubs playing at the roadside. A pair of hikers saw a mother and two cubs cross a meadow in New Hampshire. Every year there were half a dozen or more reports in similar vein, all by credible witnesses. In the late winter of 1994 a farmer in Vermont was walking across his property, taking some seed to a bird feeder, when he saw what appeared to be three mountain lions about seventy feet away. He stared dumbstruck for a minute or two--for mountain lions are swift, f ierce creatures, and here were three of them looking at him with calm regard--then high-tailed it to a phone and called a state wildlife biologist. The animals were gone by the time the biologist arrived, but he found some fresh scat, which he dutifully bagged up and dispatched to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Laboratory. The lab report came back that it was indeed the scat of Felis concolor, the eastern mountain lion, also variously and respectfully khown as the panther, cougar, puma, and, especially in New England, catamount.

Al this was of some interest to me, for | was hiking in about the same spot as that initial mountain lion sighting. | was back on the trail with a new keenness and determination, and a new plan. | was going to hike New England, or at least as much of it as | could knock off until Katz returned in seven weeks to walk with me through Maine's Hundred Mile Wilderness. There are almost 700 miles of gorgeously mountainous Appalachian Trail in New England--about a third of the AT's total trail length--enough to keep me occupied till August. To that end, | had my obliging wife drive me to southwestern Massachusetts and drop me on the trail near Stockbridge for a three-day amble through the Berkshires. Thus it was that | was to be found, on a hot morning in mid-June, laboring sweatily up a steep but modest eminence called Becket Mountain, in a haze of repellent-resistant blackf les, and patting my pocket from time to time to check that my knife was still there.

| didn't really expect to encounter a mountain lion, but only the day before | had read an article in the Boston Globe about how western mountain lions (which indubitably are not extinct) had recently taken to stalking and killing hikers and joggers in the California woods, and even the odd poor soul standing at a backyard barbecue in an apron and funny hat. It seemed a kind of omen. cheerful, nodding wonders almost beyond counting. There are 1,500 types of wildf lower 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 f rst light, shivering and rubbing arms, made coffee, broke down camp, ate a couple of f istfuls 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 | 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. 1t never escaped me for a moment that he didn't have to be there.

| 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 f it 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 al fiiation 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 | encountered long periods of perfect aloneness, when | didn't see another soul for hours; many times when | would wait for Katz for a long spell and no other hiker would come along. When that happened, | would leave my pack and go back and f nd him, to see that he was all right, which always pleased him. Sometimes he would be proudly bearing my stick, which | had left by a tree when | had stopped to tie my laces or adjust my pack. We seemed to be looking out for each other. It was very nice. | can put it no other way.

Around four we would f ind 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 | could tell. | would read for an hour or so with my curiously ineí fcient 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 | 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 It's not entirely beyond the realm of possibility that mountain lions could have survived undetected in New England. Bobcats-- admittedly much smaller creatures than mountain lions--are known to exist in considerable numbers and yet are so shy and furtive that you would never guess their existence. Many forest rangers go whole careers without seeing one. And there s certainly ample room in the eastern woods for large cats to roam undisturbed. Massachusetts alone has 250,000 acres of woodland, 100,000 of it in the comely Berkshires. From where | was now, | could, given the will and a more or less inf ite supply of noodles, walk all the way to Cape Chidley in northern Quebec, 1,800 miles away on the icy Labrador Sea, and scarcely ever have to leave the cover of trees. Even so, it is unlikely that a large cat could survive in suí fcient numbers to breed not just in one area but evidently all over New England and escape notice for nine decades. Still, there was that scat. Whatever it was, it excreted like a mountain lion.

The most plausible explanation was that any lions out there--if lions they were--were released pets, bought in haste and later regretted. 1t would be just my luck, of course, to be savaged by an animal with a flea collar and a medical history. | imagined lying on my back, being extravagantly ravaged, inclining my head slightly to read a dangling silver tag that said: "My name is Mr. Bojangles. 1f found please call Tanya and Vinny at 924-4667."

Like most large animals (and a good many small ones), the eastern mountain lion was wiped out because it was deemed to be a nuisance. Until the 1940s, many eastern states had well-publicized "varmint campaigns," often run by state conservation departments, that awarded points to hunters for every predatory creature they killed, which was just about every creature there was--

hawks, owls, kingí shers, eagles, and virtually any type of large mammal. West Virginia gave an annual college scholarship to the student who killed the most animals; other states freely distributed bounties and other cash rewards. Rationality didn't often come into it. Pennsylvania one year paid out $90,000 in bounties for the killing of 130,000 owis and hawks to save the state's farmers a slightly less than whopping $1,875 in estimated livestock losses. (It is not very often, after all, that an owl carries off a cow.)

As late as 1890, New York State paid bounties on 107 mountain lions, but within a decade they were virtually all gone. (The very last wild eastern mountain lion was killed in the Smokies in the 1920s.) The timberwolf and woodland caribou also disappeared from their last Appalachian fastnesses in the f irst years of this century, and the black bear very nearly followed them. In 1900, the bear population of New Hampshire--now over 3,000-- had fallen to just f fty.

There is still quite a lot of life out there, but it is mostly very small. According to a wildlife census by an ecologist at the University of Illinois named V. E. Shelford, a typical ten-square-mile block of eastern American forest holds almost 300,000 mammals-- 220,000 mice and other small rodents, 63,500 squirrels and chipmunks, 470 deer, 30 foxes, and 5 black bears.

The real loser in the eastern forests has been the songbird. One of the most striking losses was the Carolina parakeet, a lovely, innocuous bird whose numbers in the wild were possibly exceeded only by the unbelievably numerous passenger pigeon. (When the first pilgrims came to America there were an estimated nine billion passenger pigeons-- more than twice the number of all birds found in America today.) Both were hunted out of existence--the passenger pigeon for pig feed and the simple joy of blasting volumes of 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 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 ineí fciency. 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 National Forest in Idaho for about $2 each after spending $4 per tree surveying the land, drawing up contracts, 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 Wilderness Society. This is all so discouraging that | think we'll leave it here and return to our two lonely heroes trudging through the lost world of the Chattahoochee.

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 puí fing. 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 o feially 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 f fty 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 universal scheme of things was to grow big enough to topple with a really good, splintering crash. | was forever coming up to trees so precariously and weightily tipped over the path that | would waver, then scoot under, fearing the crush of really unfortunate timing and imagining Katz coming along a few minutes later, regarding my wriggling legs and saying, "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 shuí fle of wind-stirred leaves along the forest f bor, 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-filing smell of chlorophyll you get when you push through low, leafy branches. Above all, there would be wildí bwers in dazzling profusion, blossoming from every twig, pushing valiantly through the fertile litter on the forest f bbor, carpeting every sunny slope and stream bank--trilium 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 birds from the sky with blind ease, the Carolina parakeet because it ate farmers' fruit and had a striking plumage that made a lovely ladies' hat. In 1914, the last surviving members of each species died within weeks of each other in captivity.

A similar unhappy fate awaited the delightful Bachman's warbler. Always rare, it was said to have one of the loveliest songs of all birds. For years it escaped detection, but in 1939, two birders, operating independently in different places, coincidentally saw a Bachman's warbler within two days of each other. Both shot the birds (nice work, boys!), and that, it appears, was that for the Bachman's warbler. But there are almost certainly others that disappeared before anyone much noticed. John James Audubon painted three species of bird--the small-headed f ycatcher, the carbonated warbler, and the Blue Mountain warbler--that have not been seen by anyone since. The same is true of Townsend's bunting, of which there is one stuífed specimen in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

Between the 1940s and 1980s, the populations of migratory songbirds fell by 50 percent in the eastern United States (in large part because of loss of breeding sites and other vital wintering habitats in Latin America) and by some estimates are continuing to fall by 3 percent or so a year. Seventy percent of all eastern bird species have seen population declines since the 1960s. These days, the woods are a pretty quiet place.

Late in the afternoon, | stepped from the trees onto what appeared to be a disused logging road. In the center of the road stood an older guy with a pack and a curiously bewildered look, as if he had just woken from a trance and found himself unaccountably in this place. He had, | noticed, a haze of blackfles of his own.

"Which way's the trail go, do you suppose?" he asked me. |t was an odd question because the trail clearly and obviously continued on the other side. There was a three- foot gap in the trees directly opposite and, in case there was any possible doubt, a white blaze painted on a stout oak.

| swatted the air before my face for the twelve thousandth time that day and nodded at the opening. "Just there, I'd say."

"Oh, yes," he answered. "Of course.”

We set off into the woods together and chatted a little about where we had come from that day, where we were headed, and so on. He was a thru-hiker--the first | had seen this far north--and like me was making for Dalton. He had an odd, puzzled look all the time and regarded the trees in a peculiar way, running his gaze slowly up and down their lengths over and over again, as if he had never seen anything like them before.

"So what's your name?" | asked him.

"Well, they call me Chicken John.”

"Chicken John!" Chicken John was famous. | was quite excited. Some people on the trail take on an almost mythic status because of their idiosyncrasies. Early in the trip Katz and | kept hearing about a kid who had equipment so high-tech that no one had ever seen anything like it. One of his possessions was a self-erecting tent. Apparently, he would carefully open a stuíf sack and it would f ly out, like joke snakes from a can. He also had a satellite navigation system, and goodness knows what else. The trouble was that his pack weighed about ninety-f ive pounds. He dropped out before he got to Virginia, so we never did see him. Woodrow Murphy, the walking fat man, had achieved this sort of fame the year before. Mary Ellen would doubtless have attracted a measure of it if she had not dropped out. Chicken John had it now--though | couldn't for the life of me recall why. It had been months before, way back in Georgia, that | had first heard of him.

"So why do they call you Chicken John?" | asked.

"You know, | don't honestly know," he said as if he had been wondering that himself for some time.

"When did you start your hike?"

"January 27th.”

"January 27th?" | saíd in small astonishment and did a quick private calculation on my f ingers. "That's almost Í ve months."

"Don't | know it," he said with a kind of happy ruefulness.

He had been walking for the better part of half a year, and he was still only three- quarters of the way to Katahdin.

"What kind of”--| didn't know quite how to put this--"what kind of miles are you doing, John?"

"Oh, 'bout fourteen or f fteen if all goes well. Trouble is"--he slid me a sheepish look--"| get lost a lot."

That was it. Chicken John was forever losing the trail and ending up in the most improbable places. Goodness knows how anyone could manage to lose the Appalachian Trail. Itis the most clearly def ned, well-blazed footpath imaginable. Usually it is the only thing in the woods that isn't woods. 1f you can distinguish between trees and a long open corridor through the trees you will have no trouble f nding your way along the AT. Where there might be any doubt at all--where a side trail enters or where the AT crosses a road-- there are always blazes. Yet people do get lost. The famous Grandma Gatewood, for instance, was forever knocking on doors and asking where the heck she was.

| asked him what was the most lost he had ever been.

"Thirty-seven miles," he said almost proudly. "I got off the trail on Blood Mountain in Georgia--still don't know how exactly-
- and spent three days in the woods before | came to a highway. | thought | was a goner that time. | ended up in Tallulah Falls-- even got my picture in the pa-
per. The police gave me a ride back to the trail the next day, and pointed me the right way. They were real nice."

"Is it true you once walked three days in the wrong direction?"

He nodded happily. "Two and a half days to be precise. Luckily, | came to a town on the third day, and | said to a feller, "Ex-
cuse me, young feller, where is this?' and he said, 'Why, it's Damascus, Virginia, sir, and | thought, well, that's mighty strange be-
cause | was in a place with the very same name just three days ago. And then | recognized the fire station."

"How on earth do you-- " | decided to rephrase the question. "How does it happen, John, exactly?"

"Well, if | knew that, | wouldn't do it, | sup-
pose," he said with a kind of chuckle. "All | know is that from time to time | end up a long way from where | want to be. But it makes life interest-
ing, you know. I've met a lot of nice people, had a lot of free meals. Excuse me," he said abruptly, "you sure we're going the right way?"

"Positive."

He nodded. "I'd hate to get lost today. There's a restaurant in Dalton." | understood this perfectly. 1f you're go-
ing to get lost, you don't want to do it on a restaurant day.

We walked the last six miles together, but we didn't talk much after that. | was doing a nineteen-mile day, the longest | would do any-
where on the trail, and even though the grade was generally easy and | was carrying a light pack, | was real tired by late afternoon. John seemed con-
tent to have someone to follow, and in any case he had his hands full scrutinizing the trees.

It was after six when we reached Dalton. John had the name of a man on Depot Street who let hikers camp in his back-
yard and use his shower, so | went with him to a gas station while he asked directions. When we emerged, he started off in precisely the wrong direction.

"It's that way, John," | said.

"Of course it is," he agreed. "And the name's Bernard, by the way. | don't khow where they got that Chicken John from."

| nodded and told him | would look for him the next day, but | never did see him again.

| spent the night in a motel and the next day hiked on to Cheshire. It was only nine miles over easy terrain, but the blacki y made it a tor-
ment. | have never seen a scientif ic name for these tiny, vile, winged specks, so | don't kKhnow what they are other than a hover-
ing mass that goes with you wherever you go and are forever in your ears and mouth and nostrils. Human sweat transports them to a realm of orgasmic ec-
stasy, and insect repellent only seems to excite them further. They are particularly relentless when you stop to rest or take a drink--

so relentless that eventually you don't stop to rest and you drink while moving, and then spit out a tongueful of them. It's a kind of living hell. So it was with some relief that | stepped from their woodland realm in early afternoon and strolled into the sunny, dozing straggle that was the little community of Cheshire.

Cheshire had a free hostel for hikers in a church on the main street (Massachusetts people do a lot for hikers, it seems; elsewhere | had seen houses with signs inviting people to help themselves to water or pick apples from trees), but | didn't feel like a night in a bunkhouse, still less a long afternoon sitting around with nothing to do, so | pushed on to Adams, four miles away up a baking highway, but with at least the prospect of a night in a motel and a choice of restaurants.

Adams had just one motel, a dumpy place on the edge of town. | took a room and passed the rest of the afternoon strolling around, idly looking in store windows and browsing through boxes of books in a thrift shop (though of course there was nothing but Reader's Digest volumes and those strange books you see only in thrift shops, with titles like Home Drainage Encyclopedia: Volume One and Nod If You Can Hear Me: Living with a Human Vegetable) and afterwards wandered out into the country to look at Mount Greylock, my destination for the next day. Greylock is the highest eminence in Massachusetts and the f irst hill over 3,000 feet since Virginia for northbound hikers. It's just 3,491 feet to the top, but, surrounded as it is by much smaller hills, it looks considerably bigger. It has in any case a certain imposing majesty that beckons. | was looking forward to it.

And so, early the next morning, before the day's heat had a chance to get properly under way (a scorcher was forecast), | stopped in town for a can of pop and a sandwich for my lunch, and then set off on a wandering dirt road towards the Gould Trail, a side trail leading steeply up to the AT and on to Greylock.

Greylock is certainly the most literary of Appalachian mountains. Herman Melville, living on a farm called Arrowhead on its western side, stared at it from his study window while he wrote Moby-Dick, and, according to Maggie Stier and Ron McAdow in their excellent Into the Mountains, a history of New England's peaks, claimed that its proí le reminded him of a whale. When the book was f ished, he and a group of friends hiked to the top and partied there till dawn. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edith Wharton also lived nearby and set works there, and there was scarcely a literary f igure associated with New England from the 1850s to 1920s who didn't at some time hike or ride up to admire the view.

Ironically, at the height of its fame, Greylock lacked much of the green-cloaked majesty it enjoys today. Its sides were mangy with the scars of logging, and the lower slopes were pitted with slate and marble quarries. Big, ramshackle sheds and sawhouses poked into every view. All that healed and grew over, but then in the 1960s, with the enthusiastic support of state oí ficials in Boston, plans were drawn up to turn Greylock into a ski resort, Wwith an aerial tram, a network of chairlifts, and a summit complex consisting of a hotel, shops, and restaurants (all in soaring 1960s Jetsons-style architecture) but luckily nothing ever came of it. Today Greylock sits on 11,600 acres of preserved land. It's a beauty.

The hike to the top was steep, hot, and seemingly endless, but worth the effort. The open, sunny, fresh-aired summit of Greylock is crowned with a large, handsome stone building called Bascom Lodge, built in the 1930s by the tireless cadres of the Civilian Conservation Corps. It now offers a restaurant and overnight accommodation to hikers. Also on the summit is a wonderful, wildly incongruous lighthouse (Greylock is 140 miles from the sea), which serves as the Massachusetts memorial for soldiers killed in the First World War. It was originally planned to stand in Boston Harbor but for some reason ended up here.

| ate my lunch, treated myself to a pee and a wash in the lodge, and then hurried on, for | still had eight miles to go and had a rendezvous arranged with my wife at four in Williamstown. For the next three miles, the walk was mostly along a lofty ridgeline connecting Greylock to Mount Williams. The views were sensational, across lazy hills to the Adirondacks half a dozen miles to the west, but it was really hot. Even up here the air was heavy and listless. And then it was a very steep descent--3,000 feet in three miles-- through dense, cool green woods to a back road that led through exquisitely pretty open countryside.

Out of the woods, it was sweltering. It was two miles along a road totally without shade and so hot | could feel the heat through the soles of my boots. When at last | reached Williamstown, a sign on a bank announced a temperature of 97. No wonder | was hot. | crossed the street and stepped into a Burger King, our rendezvous point. If there is a greater reason for being grateful to live in the twentieth century than the joy of stepping from the dog's breath air of a really hot summer's day into the crisp, clean, surgical chill of an air-conditioned establishment, then | really cannot think of it.

| bought a bucket-sized Coke and sat in a booth by the window, feeling very pleased. | had done seventeen miles over a reasonably challenging mountain in hot weather. | was grubby, sweat streaked, comprehensively bushed, and rank enough to turn heads. | was a walker again.

In 1850, New England was 70 percent open farmland and 30 percent woods. Today the proportions are exactly reversed. Probably no area in the developed world has undergone a more profound change in just a century or so, at least not in a contrary direction to the normal course of progress.

I1f you were going to be a farmer, you could hardly choose a worse place than New England. (Well, the middle of Lake Erie maybe, but you know what | mean.) The soil is rocky, the terrain steep, and the weather so bad that people take actual pride in it. À year in Vermont, according to an old saw, is *nine months of winter followed by three months of very poor sledding."

But until the middle of the nineteenth century, farmers survived in New England because they had proximity to the coastal cities like Boston and Portland and because, | suppose, they didn't know any better. Then two things happened: the invention of the McCormick reaper (which was ideally suited to the big, rolling farms of the Midwest but no good at all for the cramped, stony f ields of New England) and the development of the railroads, which allowed the Midwestern farmers to get their produce to the East in a timely fashion. The New England farmers couldn't compete, and so they became Midwestern farmers, too. By 1860, nearly half of Vermont-born people--200,000 out of 450,000--were living elsewhere.

In 1840, during the presidential election campaign, Daniel Webster gave an address to 20,000 people on Stratton Mountain in Vermont. Had he tried the same thing twenty years later (which admittedly would have been a good trick, as he had died in the meantime) he would have been lucky to get an audience of (fty. Today Stratton Mountain is pretty much all forest, though if you look carefully you can still see old cellar holes and the straggly remnants of apple orchards clinging glumly to life in the shady understory beneath younger, more assertive birches, maples, and hickories. Everywhere throughout New England you f ind old, tumbledown field walls, often in the middle of the deepest, most settled-looking woods--a reminder of just how swiftly nature reclaims the land in America.

And so | walked up Stratton Mountain on an overcast, mercifully cool June day. It was four steep miles to the summit at just under 4,000 feet. For a little over a hundred miles through Vermont the AT coexists with the Long Trail, which threads its way up and over the biggest and most famous peaks of the Green Mountains all the way to Canada. The Long Trail is actually older than the AT--it was opened in 1921, the year the AT was proposed--and I'm told that there are Long Trail devotees even yet who look down on the AT as a rather vulgar and overambitious upstart. In any case, Stratton Mountain is usually cited as the spiritual birthplace of both trails, for it was here that James P. Taylor and Benton MacKaye claimed to have received the inspiration that led to the creation of their wilderness ways--Taylor in 1909, MacKaye sometime afterwards.

Stratton was a perfectly f hne mountain, with good views across to several other well- known peaks--Equinox, Ascutney, Snow, and Monadnock--but | couldn't say that it was a summit that would have inspired me to grab a hatchet and start clearing a route to Georgia or Quebec. Perhaps it was just the dull, heavy skies and bleak light, which gave everything a flat, washed-out feel. Eight or nine other people were scattered around the summit, including one youngish, rather pudgy man on his own in a very new and expensive-looking windcheater. He had some kind of handheld electronic device with which he was taking mysterious readings of the sky or landscape.

He noticed me watching and said, in a tone that suggested he was hoping someone would take an interest, "It's an Enviro Monitor.”

*Oh, yes?" | responded politely.

"Measures eighty values--temperature, UV index, dew point, you name it." He tilted the screen so | could see it. "That's heat stress.” It was some meaningless number that ended in two decimal places. "It does solar radiation," he went on, "barometric pressure, wind chill, rainfall, humidity--ambient and active--even estimated burn time adjusted for skin type.”

"Does it bake cookies?" | asked.

He didn't like this. *There are times when it could save your life, believe me," he said, a little stoutly. | tried to imagine a situation in which | might f ind myself dangerously imperiled by a rising dew point and could not. But | didn't want to upset the man, so | said: "What's that?" and pointed at a blinking f igure in the upper lefthand corner of the Screen.

"Ah, I'm not sure what that is. But this--"he stabbed the console of buttons--"now this is solar radiation.* It was another meaningless f igure, to three decimal places. "It's very low today," he said, and angled the machine to take another reading. "Yeah, very low today." Somehow | knew this already. In fact, although | couldn't attest any of it to three decimal places, | had a pretty good notion of the weather conditions generally, on account of | was out in them. The interesting thing about the man was that he had no pack, and so no waterproofs, and was wearing shorts and sneakers. 1f the weather did swiftly deteriorate, and in New England it most assuredly can, he would probably die, but at least he had a machine that would tell him when and let him know his f inal dew point.

| hate all this technology on the trail. Some AT hikers, | had read, now carry laptop computers and modems, so that they can f ie daily reports to their family and friends. And now increasingly you f ind people with electronic gizmos like the Enviro Monitor or wearing sensors attached by wires to their pulse points so that they look as if they've come to the trail straight from some sleep clinic.

In 1996 the Wall Street Journal ran a splendid article on the nuisance of satellite navigation devices, cellphones, and other such appliances in the wilderness. All this high- tech equipment, it appears, is drawing up into the mountains people who perhaps shouldn't be there. At Baxter State Park in Maine, the Journal reported, one hiker called uUp a National Guard Unit and asked them to send a helicopter to airlift him off Mount Katahdin because he was tired. On Mount Washington, meanwhile, "two very demanding women," according to an of ficial there, called the mountain patrol HQ and said they couldn't manage the last mile and a half to the summit even though there were still four hours of daylight left. They asked for a rescue team to come and carry them back to their car. The request was refused. A few minutes later, they called again and demanded in that case that a rescue team bring them some f lashlights. That request was refused also. A few days later, another hiker called and requested a helicopter because he was a day behind schedule and was afraid he would miss an important business meeting. The article also described several people who had got lost with satellite navigation devices. They were able to report their posítions as 36.2 degrees north by 17.48 degrees west or whatever but unfortunately didn't have the faintest idea what that meant, as they hadn't brought maps or compasses or, evidently, brains. My new friend on Stratton, | believe, could have joined their club. | asked him whether he felt it was safe for me to make a descent with solar radiation showing 18.574.

"Oh, yeah," he said quite earnestly. "Solar radiationwise, today is very low risk."

"Thank goodness," | said, quite earnestly, too, and took my leave of him and the mountain,

And so | proceeded across Vermont in a series of pleasant day hikes, without anything electronic but with some very nice packed lunches that my wife made for me each night before retiring and left on the top shelf in the fridge. Despite my earlier vow not to hike with the car, | found it rather suited me here--indeed, completely suited me. | could hike all day and be home for dinner. | could sleep in my own bed and each day set off in clean, dry clothes and with a fresh packed lunch. It was nearly perfect.

And so for a happy three weeks | commuted to the mountains. Each morning | would rise at dawn, put my lunch in my pack, and drive over the Connecticut River to Vermont. | would park the car and walk up a big mountain or across a series of rolling green hills. At some point in the day when it pleased me, usually about 11:00 A.M., | would sit on a rock or a log, take out my packed lunch, and examine the contents. | would go, as appropriate, "Peanut butter cookies! My favorite!" or "Oh, hum, luncheon meat again," and eat in a zestful chewy silence, thinking of all the mountaintops | had sat on with Katz where we would have killed for this. Then | would pack up everything very neatly, drop it in my pack, and hike again till it was time to clock off and go home. And so passed late June and the f irst part of July.

| did Stratton Mountain and Bromley Mountain, Prospect Rock and Spruce Peak, Baker Peak and Grií fth Lake, White Rocks Mountain, Button Hill, Killington Peak, Gifford Woods State Park, Quimby Mountain, Thistle Hill, and f nally concluded with a gentle eleven-mile amble from West Hartford to Norwich. This took me past Happy Hill Cabin, the oldest shelter on the AT and possibly the most sweetly picturesque (soon afterwards it was torn down by some foolishly unsentimental trail o fcials), and the town of Norwich, which is notable principally for being the town that inspired the "Bob Newhart Show" on television (the one where he ran an inn and all the locals were charmingly imbecilic) and for being the home of the great Alden Partridge, of whom no one has ever heard.

Partridge was born in Norwich in 1755 and was a demon walker--possibly the f irst person on the whole planet who walked long distances for the simple pleasure of it. In 1785, he became superintendent of West Point at the unprecedentedly youthful age of thirty, then had some kind of falling out there, and moved back to Norwich and set up a rival institution, the American Literary, Scientif c, and Military Academy. There he coined the term physical education and took his appalled young charges on brisk rambles of thirty-! ve or forty miles over the neighboring mountains. In between times he went off on more ambitious hikes of his own. On a typical trip he strode 110 miles over the mountains from Norwich to Williamstown, Massachusetts (essentially the route | had just completed in gentle stages), trotted up Mount Greylock, and came back home the same way. The trip there and back took him just four days--and this at a time, remember, when there were no maintained footpaths or helpful blazes. He did this sort of thing with virtually every peak in New England. There ought to be a plaque to him somewhere in Norwich to inspire the few hardy hikers still heading north at this point, but sadly there is none.

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

When | awoke, it was daylight. The inside of my tent was coated in a curious (laky rime, which | realized after a moment was my all my nighttime snores, condensed and frozen and pasted to the fabric, as if into a serapbook of respiratory memories. My water bottle was frozen solid. This seemed gratifyingly macho, and | examined it with interest, as if it were a rare mineral. | was surprisingly snug in my bag and in no hurry at all to put myself through the foolishness of climbing hills, so | just lay there as if under grave orders not to move. After a while | 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 | was awake or anything, but just saíd in a quiet voice: "Was |, would you say, a complete asshole last night?"

"Yes you were, Stephen.”

He was quiet a moment. *I'm making coffee.” | 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.”

| unzipped myself from my nylon womb and emerged on creaking joints. |t 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 tri! e warmer than the day before, and a low dawn sun burning through the trees looked cautiously promising.

"How do you feel?" he said

| 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." | watched over his shoulder. "Is there a reason," | asked, "why you are fitering the coffee with toilet paper?”

"I, oh ... 1 threw out the f lter papers.”

| gave a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "They couldn't have weighed two ounces.”

"| 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 f irst refreshment in the wilderness. He handed me a cup of coffee. It was swimming in grounds and little f lecks 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. | left it in New Hampshire.”

He looked at me. "Really?" then added, as if for the record: "| love oatmeal.”

"What about some of that cheese?"

He shook his head. "Flung."

"Peanuts?"

"Flung.”

"Spam?*

"Really f ung."

This was beginning to sound a trif le grave. "What about the baloney?"

"Oh, | ate that at Amicalola," he said, as if it had been weeks ago, then added in a tone of sudden magnanimous concession, "Hey, I'm happy with a cup of coffee and a couple of Little Deb-byes."

| gave a small grimace. "I left the Little Debbies, too."

His face expanded. "You left the Little Debbies?"

| nodded apologetically.

"All of them?"

| 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 jumpier than Don Knotts with pisto! 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 f uid. 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. From Norwich it is about a mile to the Connecticut River and a pleasant, unassuming 1930s bridge leading to the state of New Hampshire and the town of Hanover on the opposite bank. The road that led from Norwich to Hanover was once a leafy, gently sinuous two-lane affair--the sort of tranquil, alluring byway you would hope to f nd connecting two old New England towns a mile apart. Then some highway oí fial or other decided that what would be a really good idea would be to build a big, fast road between the two towns. That way, people could drive the one mile from Norwich to Hanover perhaps as much as eight seconds faster and not have to suffer paroxysms of anguish if somebody ahead wanted to turn onto a side road, because now there would be turning lanes everywhere, big enough for a truck pulling a titan missile to maneuver through without rolling over a curb or disrupting the vital í low of traí fic.

So they built a broad, straight highway, six lanes wide in places, with concrete dividers down the middle and outsized sodium street lamps that light the night sky for miles around. Unfortunately, this had the effect of making the bridge into a bottleneck where the road narrowed back to two lanes. Sometimes two cars would arrive simultaneously at the bridge and one of them would have to give way (well, imagine!), so, as | write, they are replacing that uselessly attractive old bridge with something much grander and in keeping with the Age of Concrete. For good measure they are widening the street that leads up a short hill to the center of Hanover and its handsome, historic green. Of course, that means chopping down trees all along the street and drastically foreshortening most of the front yards with concrete retaining walls, and even a highway o! ficial would have to admit that the result is not exactly a picture, not something you would want to put on a calendar called "Beautiful New England," but it will shave a further four seconds off that daunting trek from Norwich, and that's the main thing.

All this is of some signif cance to me partly because | live in Hanover but mostily, | believe, because | live in the late twentieth century. Luckily | have a good imagination, so as | strode from Norwich to Hanover, | imagined not a lively mini-expressway but a country lane shaded with trees, bounded with hedges and wild-flowers, and graced with a stately line of modestly scaled lampposts, from each of which was suspended, upside down, a highway o fcial, and | felt much better.

Of all the catastrophic fates that can befall you in the out-of-doors, perhaps none is more eerily unpredictable than hypothermia. There is scarcely an instance of hypothermic death that isn'tin some measure mysterious and improbable. Consider a small story related by David Quammen in his book Natural Acts.

In the late summer of 1982, four youths and two men were on a canoeing holiday in Banff National Park when they failed to return to their base camp at the end of the day. The next morning, a search party went out looking for them. They found the missing canoeists í bating dead in their life jackets in a lake. All were faceup and composed. Nothing about them indicated distress or panic. One of the men was still wearing his hat and glasses. Their canoes, drifting nearby, were sound, and the weather overnight had been calm and mild. For some unknowable reason, the six had carefully left their canoes and lowered themselves fully dressed into the cold water of the lake, where they had peacefully perished. In the words of a member of the search party, it was "like they had just gone to sleep." In a sense, they had.

Popular impressions to the contrary, relatively few victims of hypothermia die in extreme conditions, stumbling through blizzards or fighting the bite of arctic winds. To begin with, relatively few people go out in that kind of weather, and those that do are generally prepared. Most victims of hypothermia die in a much more dopey kind of way, in temperate seasons and with the air temperature nowhere near freezing. Typically, they are caught by an unforeseen change of conditions or combination of changes--a sudden drop in temperature, a cold pelting rain, the realization that they are lost--

for which they are emotionally or physically underequipped. Nearly always, they compound the problem by doing something foolhardy--leaving a well-marked path in search of a shortcut, blundering deeper into the woods when they would have been better off staying put, fording streams that get them only wetter and colder.

Such was the unfortunate fate of Richard Salinas, who in 1990 went hiking with a friend in Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina. Caught by fading light, they headed back to their car but somehow became separated. Salinas was an experienced hiker and all he had to do was follow a well-def ned trail down a mountain to a parking lot. He never made it. Three days later, his jacket and knapsack were found abandoned, miles into the woods. His body was discovered two months later, snagged on branches in the little Linville River. As far as anyone can surmise, he had left the trail in search of a shortcut, got lost, plunged deep into the woods, panicked, and plunged deeper still, until at last hypothermia fatally robbed him of his senses.

Hypothermia is a gradual and insidious sort of trauma. It overtakes you literally by degrees as your body temperature falls and your natural responses grow sluggish and disordered. In such a state, Salinas had abandoned his possessions and soon after made the desperate and irrational decision to try to cross the rain-swollen river, which in normal circumstances he would have realized could take him only farther away from his goal. On the night he got lost, the weather was dry and the temperature in the 40s. Had he kept his jacket and stayed out of the water, he would have had an uncomfortably chilly night and a story to tell. Instead, he died.

A person suffering hypothermia experiences several progressive stages, beginning, as you would expect, with mild and then increasingly violent shivering as the body tries to warm itself with muscular contractions, proceeding on to profound weariness, heaviness of movement, a distorted sense of time and distance, and increasingly helpless confusion resulting in a tendency to make imprudent or illogical decisions and a failure to observe the obvious. Gradually the sufferer grows thoroughly disoriented and subject to increasingly dangerous hallucinations--including the decidedly cruel misconception that he is not freezing but burning up. Many victims tear off clothing, f ling away their gloves, or crawl out of their sleeping bags. The annals of trail deaths are full of stories of hikers found half naked lying in snowbanks just outside their tents. When this stage is reached, shivering ceases as the body just gives up and apathy takes over. The heart rate falls and brain waves begin to look like a drive across the praíries. By this time, even if the victimis found, the shock of revival may be more than his body can bear.

This was neatly illustrated by an incident reported in the January 1997 issue of Outside magazine. In 1980, according to the article, sixteen Danish seamen issued a Mayday call, donned life jackets, and jumped into the North Sea as their vessel sank beneath them. There they bobbed for ninety minutes before a rescue ship was able to lift them from the water. Even in summer, the North Sea is so perishingly cold that it can kill a person immersed in it in as little as thirty minutes, so the survival of all sixteen men was cause for some jubilation. They were wrapped in blankets and guided below, where they were given a hot drink and abruptly dropped dead--all sixteen of them.

But enough of arresting anecdotes. Let's toy with this fascinating malady ourselves.

| was in New Hampshire now, which pleased me, because we had recently moved to the state, so | was naturally interested to explore it. Vermont and New Hampshire are so snugly proximate and so similar in size, climate, accent, and livelihood (principally, skiing and tourism) that they are often bracketed as twins, but in fact they have quite different characters. Vermont is Volvos and antique shops and country inns with cutely contrived names like Quail Hollow Lodge and Fiddlehead Farm Inn. New Hampshire is guys in hunting caps and pickup trucks with license plates bearing the feisty slogan "Live Free or Die." The landscape, too, differs crucially. Vermont's mountains are comparatively soft and rolling, and its profusion of dairy farms gives it a more welcoming and inhabited feel. New Hampshire is one big forest. Of the state's 9,304 square miles of territory, some 85 percent--an area somewhat larger than Wales--is woods, and nearly all the rest is either lakes or above treeline. So apart from the very occasional town or ski resort, New Hampshire is primarily, sometimes rather dauntingly, wilderness. And its hills are loftier, craggier, more dii ficult and forbidding than Vermont's.

In the Thru-Hirer's Handbook” (the one indispensable guide to the AT, | might just say here), the great Dan "Wingfoot" Bruce notes that when the northbound hiker leaves Vermont he has completed 80 percent of the miles but just 50 percent of the effort. The New Hampshire portion alone, running 162 miles through the White Mountains, has thirty- f ve peaks higher than 3,000 feet. New Hampshire is hard.

| had heard so much about the ardors and dangers of the White Mountains that | was mildly uneasy about venturing into them alone--not terrif ied exactly, but prepared to be if | heard just one more bear-chase story--so you may conceive my quiet joy when a friend and neighbor named Bill Abdu offered to accompany me on . some day hikes. Bill is a very nice fellow, amiable and full of khnowledge, experienced on mountain trails, and with the inestimable bonus that he is a gifted orthopedic surgeon--just what you want in a dangerous wilderness. | didn't suppose he'd be able to do much useful surgery up there, but if | fell and broke my back at least I'd know the Latin names for what was wrong with me.

We decided to start with Mount Lafayette, and to that end set off by car one clear July dawn and drove the two hours to Franconia Notch State Park (a "notch" in New Hampshire parlance is a mountain pass), a famous beauty spot at repose beneath commanding summits in the heart of the 700,000-acre White Mountain National Forest. Lafayette is 5,249 feet of steep, heartless granite. An 1870s account, quoted in Into the Mountains, observes: "Mt. Lafayette is ... a true alp, with peaks and crags on which lightnings play, its sides brown with scars and deep with gorges." All true. It's a beast. Only nearby Mount Washington exceeds it for both heft and popularity as a hiking destination in the White Mountains.

From the valley f bor, we had 3,700 feet of climb, 2,000 feet of it in the f rst two miles, and three smaller peaks en route--Mount Liberty, Little Haystack, and Mount Lincoln—but it was a splendid morning, with mild but abundant sunshine and that invigorating, minty- clean air you get only in northern mountains. It had the makings of a flawless day. We walked for perhaps three hours, talking little because of the steepness of the climb but enjoying being out and keeping a good pace.

Every guidebook, every experienced hiker, every signboard beside every trailhead parking lot warns you that the weather in the White Mountains can change in an instant. Stories of campers who go for a stroll along sunny heights in shorts and sneakers only to find themselves, three or fours hours later, stumbling to unhappy deaths in freezing fog are the stuff of every campf ire, but they are also true. It happened to us when we were a few hundred feet shy of the summit of Little Haystack Mountain. The sunshine abruptly vanished, and from out of nowhere a swirling mist rolled into the trees. With it came a sudden fall in temperature, as if we had stepped into a cold store. Within minutes the forest was settled in a great foggy stillness, chill and damp. Timberline in the White Mountains occurs as low as 4,800 feet, about half the height in most other ranges, because the weather is so much more severe, and | began to see why. As we emerged from a zone of krummbholz, the stunted trees that mark the last gasp of forest at treeline, and stepped on to the barren roof of Little Haystack, we were met by a stiff, sudden wind--the kind that would snatch a hat from your head and f ing it a hundred yards before you could raise a hand-- which the mountain had def lected over us on the sheltered western slopes but which here was í Ving unopposed across the open summit. We stopped in the lee of some boulders to put on waterproofs, for the extra warmth as much anything, for | was already quite damp from the sweat of effort and the moist air--a clearly foolish state to be in with the temperature falling and the wind whisking away any body heat. | opened my pack, rooted through the contents, and then looked up with that confounded expression that comes with the discovery of a reversal. | didn't have my waterproofs. | rooted again, but there was hardly anything in the pack-- a map, a light sweater, a water bottle, and a packed lunch. | thought for a moment and with a small inward sigh remembered pulling the waterproofs out some days before and spreading them out in the basement to air. | hadn't remembered to put them back. Bill, tightening a drawstring on his windcheater hood, looked over. "Something wrong?"

| told him. He made a grave expression. "Do you want to turn back?"

"Oh, no." | genuinely didn't want to. Besides, it wasn't that bad. There wasn't any rain and | was only a little chilly. | put the sweater on and felt immediately better. Together we looked at his map. We had done almost all the height, and it was only a mile and a half along a ridgeline to Lafayette, at which point we would descend steeply 1,200 feet to Greenleaf Hut, a mountain lodge with a cafeteria. If | did need to warm up, we would reach the hut a lot faster than if we went f ve miles back down the mountain to the car.

"You sure you don't want to turn back?" "No," | insisted. "We'll be there in half an hour.* So we set off again into the galloping wind and depthless gray murk. We cleared Mount Lincoln, at 5,100 feet, then descended slightly to a very narrow ridgeline. Visibility was no more than f ifteen feet and the winds were razor sharp. Air temperature falls by about 2.5ºF with every thousand feet of elevation, so it would have been chillier at this height anyway, but now it was positively uncomfortable. | watched with alarm as my sweater accumulated hundreds of tiny beads of moisture, which gradually began to penetrate the fabric and join the dampness of the shirt beneath. Before we had gone a quarter of a mile the sweater was wet through and hanging heavily on my arms and shoulders.

To make things worse, | was wearing blue jeans. Everyone will tell you that blue jeans are the most foolish item of clothing you can wear on a hike. | had contrarily become something of a devotee of them because they are tough and give good protection against thorns, ticks, insects, and poison ivy--perfect for the woods. However, | freely concede that they are completely useless in cold and wet. The cotton sweater was something | had packed as a formality, as you might pack anti snakebite medicine or splints. 1t was July, for goodness sake. | hadn't expected to need any kind of outerwear beyond possibly my trusty waterproofs, which of course | didn't have either. In short, | was dangerously misattired and all but asking to suffer and die. | certainly suffered.

| was lucky to escape with that. The wind was whooshing along noisily and steadily at a brisk twenty-f ive miles an hour, but gusting to at least double that, and from ever- shifting directions. At times, when the wind was head on, we would take two steps forward and one back. When it came from an angle, it gave us a stiff shove towards the edge of the ridge. There was no telling in the fog how far the fall would be on either side, but it looked awfully steep, and we were after all a mile up in the clouds. 1f conditions had deteriorated just a little--if the fog had completely obscured our footing or the gusts had gathered just enough bump to knock a grown man over--
we would have been pinned down up there, with me pretty well soaked through. Forty minutes before, we had been whistling in sunshine. | understood now how people die in the White Mountains even in summer.

As it was, | was in a state of mild distress. | was shivering foolishly and feeling oddly lightheaded. The ridge seemed to run on forever, and there was no guessing in the milky void how long it would be till the form of Lafayette would rise to meet us. | glanced at my watch--
it was two minutes to eleven; just right for lunch when and if we ever got to the godforsaken lodge--and took some comfort from the thought that at least | still had my wits about me. Or at least | felt as if | did. Presumably, a confused person would be too addled to recognize that he was confused. Ergo, if you know that you are not confused then you are not confused. Unless, it suddenly occurred to me--and here was an arresting notion--unless persuading yourself that you are not confused is merely a cruel, early symptom of confusion. Or even an advanced symptom. Who could tell? For all | knew | could be stumbling into some kind of helpless preconfusional state characterized by the fear on the part of the sufferer that he may be stumbling into some kind of helpless preconfusional state. That's the trouble with losing your mind; by the time it's gone, it's too late to get it back.

| glanced at my watch again and discovered with horror that it was still only two minutes to eleven. My sense of time was going! | might not be able to reliably assess my faltering brain, but here was proof on my wrist. How long would it be till | was dancing around half naked and trying to beat out f lames, or seized with the brilliant notion that the best way out of this mess would be to glide to the valley í bor on a magic, invisible parachute? | whimpered a little and scooted on, waited a good full minute and stole a glance at my watch again. Still two minutes to eleven! | was deí nitely in trouble.

Bill, who seemed serenely impervious to cold and of course had no idea that we were doing anything but proceeding along a high ridge in an unseasonal breeze, looked back from time to time to ask how | was doing.

"Great!" I'd say, for | was too embarrassed to admit that | was in fact losing my mind preparatory to stepping over the edge with a private smile and a cry of "See you on the other side, old friend!" | don't suppose he had ever lost a patient on a mountaintop, and | didn't wish to alarm him. Besides, | wasn't entirely convinced | was losing my grip, just severely uncomfortable.

I've no idea how long it took us to reach the windy summit of Lafayette other than that it was a double eternity. A hundred years ago there was a hotel on this bleak, forbidding spot, and its wind-worn foundations are still a landmark--| have seen it in photographs-- but | have no recollection of it now. My focus was entirely on descending on the side trail to Greenleaf Hut. It led through a vast talus f eld and then, a mile or so farther on, into woods. Almost as soon as we left the summit, the wind dropped, and within 500 feet the world was quite calm, eerily so, and the dense fog was nothing more than straggly, drifting shreds. Suddenly we could see the world below and how high up we were, which was a considerable distance, though all the nearby summits were wreathed in clouds. To my surprise and gratif cation, | felt much better. | stood up straight, with a sense of novelty, and realized that | had been walking in a severe hunch for some time. Yes, | deí initely felt much better: hardly cold at all and agreeably clearheaded.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," | said to Bill with a mountain man chuckle and pressed on to the hut.

Greenleaf Hut is one of ten picturesque and, in this case, wonderfully handy stone lodges built and maintained in the White Mountains by the venerable Appalachian Mountain Club. The AMC, founded over 120 years ago, is not only the oldest hiking club in America but the oldest conservation group of any type. It charges a decidedly ambitious $50 a night for a bunk, dinner, and breakfast and consequently is widely known to thru- hikers as the Appalachian Money Club. Still, to its considerable credit, the AMC maintains 1,400 miles of trails in the Whites, runs an excellent visitor center at Pinkham Notch, publishes worthwhile books, and lets you come into its huts to use the toilets, get water, or just warm up, which is what we gratefully did now.

We purchased cups of warming coffee and took them to a set of long tables, where we sat with a sprinkling of other steamy hikers and ate our packed lunches. The lodge was very congenial in a basic and rustic sort of way, with a high ceiling and plenty of room to move around. When we'd f inished, | was beginning to stiffen up, so | got up to move around and looked in on one of the two dormitories. It was a large room, packed with built-in bunks stacked four high. 1t was clean and airy, but startlingly basic, and presumably would be like an army barracks at night when it was full of hikers and their equipment. It didn't look remotely appealing to me. Benton MacKaye had nothing to do with these huts, but they were absolutely in accord with his vision--spare, rustic, wholesomely communal--and | realized with a kind of dull shock that if his dreams of a string of trailside hostels had been realized this is precisely how they would have been. My fantasy of a relaxed and cosy refuge with a porchful of rockers would actually have been rather more like a spell at boot camp (and an expensive one at that, if the AMC's fees were anything to go by).

| did a quick calculation. Assuming $50 as the standard price, it would have cost the average thru-hiker somewhere between $6,000 and $7,500 to stay in a lodge each night along the trail. Clearly, it would never have worked. Perhaps it was better that things were as they were.

The sun was shining weakly when we emerged from the hut and set off back down the mountain on a side trail to Franconia Notch, and as we descended it gathered strength until we were back in a nice July day, with the air lazy and mild and the trees fetchingly speckled with sunlight and birdsong. By the time we reached the car, in late afternoon, | was almost completely dry, and my passing fright on Lafayette--now basking in hearty sunshine against a backdrop of vivid blue sky--seemed a remote memory.

As we climbed in, | glanced at my watch. It said two minutes to eleven. | gaveit a shake and watched with interest as the second hand kicked back into motion.

On the afternoon of April 12, 1934, Salvatore Pagliuca, a meteorologist at the summit weather observatory on Mount Washington, had an experience no one else has had before or since.

Mount Washington sometimes gets a little gusty, to put it mildly, and this was a particularly breezy day. In the previous twenty-four hours the wind speed had not fallen below 107 miles an hour, and often gusted much higher. When it came time for Pagliuca to take the afternoon readings, the wind was so strong that he tied a rope around his waist and had two colleagues take hold of the other end. As it was, the men had dif fculty just getting the weather station door open and needed all their strength to keep Pagliuca from becoming a kind of human kite. How he managed to reach his weather instruments and take readings is not known, nor are his words when he finally tumbled back in, though "Jeeeeeecemf!" would seem an apt possibility.

Wihat is certain is that Pagliuca had just experienced a surface wind speed of 231 miles an hour. Nothing approaching that velocity has ever been recorded elsewhere.

In The Worst Weather on Earth: A History of the Mt. Washington Observatory, William Lowell Putnam dryly notes: "There may be worse weather, from time to time, at some forbidding place on Planet Earth, but it has yet to be reliably recorded." Among the Mount Washington weather station's many other records are: most weather instruments destroyed, most wind in twenty-four hours (nearly 3,100 miles of it), and lowest windchill (a combination of 100-mph winds and a temperature of --47ºF, a severity unmatched even in Antarctica)

Washington owes its curious|ly extreme weather not so much to height or latitude, though both are factors, as to its position at the precise point where high altitude weather systems from Canada and the Great Lakes pile into moist, comparatively warm air from the Atlantic or southern United States. In consequence, it receives 246 inches of snow a year and snowpacks of twenty feet. In one memorable storm in 1969, 98 inches of snow (that's eight feet) fell on the summit in three days. Wind is a particular feature; on average it blows at hurricane force (over 75 mph) on two winter days in three and on 40 percent of days overall. Because of the length and bitterness of its winters, the average mean annual temperature at the summit is a meager 27ºF. The summer average is 52ºF-- a good 25 degrees lower than at its base. Itis a brutal mountain, and yet people go up there--or at least try to--even in winter.

In Into the Mountains, Maggie Stier and Ron McAdow record how two University of New Hampshire students, Derek Tinkham and Jeremy Haas, decided to hike the entire Presidential Range-- seven summits, including Washington, all named for U.S. presidents-- in January 1994, Although they were experienced winter hikers and were well equipped, they couldn't have imagined what they were letting themselves in for. On their second night, the winds rose to ninety miles an hour and the temperature plummeted to --32ºF. | have experienced --25ºF in calm conditions and can tell you that even well wrapped and with the benef t of residual heat from indoors it becomes distinctly uncomfortable within a couple of minutes. Somehow the two survived the night, but the next day Haas announced he could go no farther. Tinkham helped him into a sleeping bag, then stumbled on to the weather observatory a little over two miles away. He just made it, though he was gravely frostbitten. His friend was found the next day, "half out of his sleeping bag and frozen solid."

Scores of others have perished in far less taxing conditions on Washington. One of the earliest and most famous deaths was that of a young woman named Lizzie Bourne who in 1855, not long after Mount Washington began to attract tourists, decided to amble up in the company of two male companions on a summery September afternoon. As you will have guessed already, the weather turned, and they found themselves lost in fog. Somehow they got separated. The men made it after nightfall to a hotel on the summit. Lizzie was found the next day just 150 feet from the front door, but quite dead.

Altogether, 122 people have lost their lives on Washington. Until recently, when it was overtaken by Mount Denali in Alaska, it was the most murderous mountain in North America. So when the fearless Dr. Abdu and | pulled up at its base a few days later for the second of our grand ascents, | had brought enough backup clothes to cross the Arctic--waterproofs, woollen sweater, jacket, gloves, spare trousers, and long underwear. Never again would | be chilled at height.

Washington, the highest peak north of the Smokies and east of the Rockies at a solidly respectable 6,288 feet, gets few clear days, and this was a clear day, so the crowds were out in force. | counted over seventy cars at the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center lot at 8:10 in the morning when we arrived, and more pouring in every minute. Mount Washington is the most popular summit in the White Mountains, and the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, our chosen route, is the most popular trail up. Some 60,000 hikers a year take to the Tuckerman route, though a good many of them get a lift to the top of the mountain and walk down, so the figures are perhaps a trif ke skewed. In any case, it was no more than moderately busy on a good, hot, blue-skied, gorgeously promising morning in late July. The walk up was much easier than | had dared hope. Even now, | could not quite get used to the novelty of walking big hills without a large pack. It makes such a difference. | won't say we bounded up, but considering that we had almost 4,500 feet of climb in a little over three miles, we walked at a pretty steady clip. 1t took us two hours and forty minutes (Bill's hiking guide to the White Mountains suggested a walking time of four hours and f fteen minutes), so we were pretty proud.

There may be more demanding and exciting summits to reach along the Appalachian Trail than Mount Washington but none can be more startling. You labor up the last steep stretch of rocky slope to what is after all a considerable eminence and pop your head over the edge, and there you are greeted by, of all things, a vast, terraced parking lot, full of automobiles gleaming hotly in the sun. Beyond stands a scattered complex of buildings among which move crowds of people in shorts and baseball caps. It has the air of a world's fair bizarrely transferred to a mountaintop. You get so used along the AT to sharing summits with only a few other people, all of whom have worked as hard as you to get there, that this was positively dazzling. On Washington, visitors can arrive by car on a winding toll road or on a cog railway from the other side, and hundreds of people-- hundreds and hundreds of them, it seemed--had availed themselves of these options. They were everywhere, basking in the sunshine, draped over the railings on the viewing terraces, wandering between various shops and food places. | felt for some minutes like a visitor from another planet. | loved it. It was a nightmare, of course, and a desecration of the highest mountain in the northeast, but | was delighted it existed in one place. It made the rest of the trail seem perfect.

The epicenter of activity was a monstrously ugly concrete building, the Summit Information Center, with big windows, broad viewing platforms, and an exceedingly lively cafeteria. Just inside the door was a large list of all the people who had died on the mountain and the causes, beginning with one Frederick Strickland of Bridlington, Yorkshire, who lost his way while hiking in an October storm in 1849, and ran on through a quite breathtaking array of mishaps before concluding with the deaths of two hikers in an avalanche just three months earlier. Already six people had died on Washington's slopes in 1996, with the year barely half over--quite a sobering statistic--and there was plenty of room on the board for more.

In the basement was a small museum with displays on Washington's climate, geology, and distinctive plant life, but what particularly captivated me was a comical short video called "Breakfast of Champions," which | presume the meteorologists had made for their own amusement. It was f imed with a f xed camera on one of the summit terraces and showed a man sitting at a table, as if at an open-

air restaurant, during one of its famous blows. While the man holds down the table with his arms, a waiter approaches against the wind with great and obvious dii fculty, like someone wingwalking at 30,000 feet. He tries to pour the customer a bowll of cereal, and it all fles horizontally from the box. Then he adds milk, but this goes the same way (mostly over the customer--a particularly gratifying moment). Then the bowl flies away and the silverware, as | recall, and then the table starts to go, and then the film ends. 1t was so good | watched it twice, then went off to f ind Bill so he could see it. | couldn't spot him in the restless throngs, so | went outside on to the viewing platform and watched the cog railway train chuí fng up the mountain, pouring out clouds of black smoke as it went. It stopped at the summit station and hundreds of more happy tourists tumbled off.

Tourism goes back a long way on Mount Washington. As early as 1852 there was a restaurant at the summit and the proprietors were serving about a hundred meals a day. In 1853, a small stone hotel called Tip-Top House was built atop the mountain and was a huge and immediate success. Then in 1869 a local entrepreneur named Sylvester March built the cog railway, the f rstin the world. Everyone thought he was mad and that even if he succeeded in building the railway, which was doubtful, there wouldn't be any demand for it. In fact, as the disgorging throngs below me demonstrated now, people haven't tired ofit yet.

Five years after the railway opened the old Tip-Top was succeeded by a much grander Summit House Hotel, and that was followed by a forty-foot-tower with a multicolored searchlight, which could be seen all over New England and far out to sea. By late in the century a daily newspaper was being published on the summit as a summer novelty and American Express had opened a branch oí fice.

Meanwhile back at ground level, things were also booming. The modern tourist industry, in the sense of people traveling en masse to a congenial spot and f inding lots of diversions awaiting them when they got there, is essentially a White Mountains invention. Massive hotels, with up to 250 rooms, sprang up in every glen. Built in a jaunty domestic style, like cottages blown up to the scale of hospitals or sanitoria, these were exceedingly ornate and elaborate structures, among the largest and most complicated ever built of wood, with wandering rooí lines robustly punctuated with towers and turrets and every other mark of architectural busyness the Victorian mind could devise. They had winter gardens and salons, dining rooms that could seat 200, and porches like the promenade decks of ocean liners from which guests could drink in the wholesome air and survey nature's craggy splendor.

The f ner hotels were very fine indeed. The Profile House at Franconia Notch had its own private railway line to Bethlehem Junction eight miles away; its grounds held twenty- one cottages, each with up to twelve bedrooms. The Maplewood had its own casino. Guests at the Crawford House could choose among nine daily newspapers from New York and Boston, shipped in specially. Whatever was new and exciting--elevators, gas lighting, swimming pools, golf courses--the White Mountain hotels were in the vanguard. By the 1890s, there were 200 hotels scattered through the White Mountains. There has never been a collection of hotels of comparable grandeur anywhere, certainly not in a mountain setting. Now, however, they are virtually all gone.

In 1902, the grandest of them all, the Mount Washington Hotel, opened at Bretton Woods, in an open, meadowy setting against the backdrop of the Presidential Range. Built in a commanding style described optimistically by the architect as "Spanish Renaissance," it was the pinnacle of grace and opulence, with 2,600 acres of cultivated grounds, 235 guest rooms, and every detail of f nery that heaps of money could buy. For the plasterwork alone, the developers brought in 250 Italian artisans. But already it was something of an anachronism.

Fashion was moving on. American vacationers were discovering the seaside. The White Mountain hotels were a little too dull, a little too remote and expensive, for modern tastes. Worse, they had begun to attract the wrong sort of people--parvenus from Boston and New York. Finally, and above all, there was the automobile. The hotels were built on the assumption that visitors would come for two weeks at least, but the car gave them a fickle mobility. In the 1924 edition of New England Highways and Byways from a Motor Car, the author gushed about the unrivaled splendor of the White Mountains--the tumbling cataracts of Franconia, the alabaster might of Washington, the secret charm of little towns like Lincoln and Bethlehem--and strongly encouraged visitors to give the mountains a full day and night. America was entering the age not just of the automobile but of the retarded attention span.

One by one the hotels closed down, became derelict, or, more often, burned to the ground (often, miraculously, almost the only thing to survive was the insurance policy), and their grounds slowly returned to forest. Once one could have seen perhaps twenty large hotels from the summit. Today there is just one, the Mount Washington, still imposing and festive with its perky red roof but inescapably forlorn in its solitary grandeur. (And even it has staggered along the edge of bankruptcy from time to time.) Elsewhere across the spacious valley far below, where once had proudly stood the Fabyan, the Mount Pleasant, the Crawford House, and many others, today there were only forest, highways, and motels.

From beginning to end the great age of the resort hotels in the White Mountains lasted just fifty years. Once again, | offer you the Appalachian Trail as a symbol of venerability. And with that in mind, | went off to find my friend Bill and complete our walk. I've had a brilliant idea," said Stephen Katz. We were in the living room of my house in Hanover. It was two weeks later. We were leaving for Maine in the morning.

"Oh yeah?" | said, trying not to sound too wary, for ideas are not Katz's strongest suit.

"You know how awful it is carrying a full pack?”

| nodded. Of course | did.

"Well, | was thinking about it the other day. In fact I've been thinking about it a lot because to tell you the truth, Bryson, the idea of putting that pack on again filed me with"--he lowered his voice a tone--"fucking dread." He nodded with solemnity and repeated the two key words. "And then | had a great idea. An alternative. Close your eyes.”

"What for?"

"I want to surprise you.”"

| hate having to close my eyes for a surprise, always have, but | did it

| could hear him rooting in his army surplus duffel bag. " 'Who carries a lot of weight all the time?' " he continued. "That was the question | asked myself. 'Who carries a lot of weight day in and day out?' Hey, don't look yet. And then it occurred to me." He was silent a moment, as if making some crucial adjustment that would assure a perfect impression. "OK, now you can look.”

| uncovered my eyes. Katz, beaming immoderately, was wearing a Des Moines Register newspaper delivery bag--the kind of bright yellow pouch that paperboys traditionally sling over their shoulders before climbing on their bikes and riding off to do their rounds.

"You can't be serious," | said quietly.

"Never been more serious in my life, my old mountain friend. | brought you one too." He handed me one from his duffel bag, still pristinely folded and in a transparent wrapper.

"Stephen, you can't walk across the Maine wilderness with a newspaper delivery bag."

"Why not? It's comfortable, it's capacious, it's waterproof--near enough--and it weighs all of about four ounces. Itis the Perfect Hiking Accessory. Let me ask you this. When was the last time you saw a paperboy with a hernia?" He gave a small, smug nod, as if he had stumped me with that one.

| made some tentative, preparatory shapes with my mouth prior to saying something, but Katz raced on before | could get a thought in order.

"Now here's the plan," he continued. "We cut our load down to the bare minimum--no stoves, no gas bottles, no noodles, no coffee, no tents, no stuff sacks, no sleeping bags. We hike and camp like mountain men. Did Daniel Boone have a three-season fiberf il sleeping bag? | don't think so. All we take is cold food, water bottles, maybe one change of clothes. | figure we can get the load down to f ve pounds. And"--he waggled his hand delightedly in the empty newspaper bag--"we put it all in here." His expression begged me to drape him with plaudits.

"Have you given any thought to how ridiculous you would look?"

"Yup. Don't care."

"Have you considered what a source of uncontained mirth you would be to every person you met between here and Katahdin?"

"Don't give the tiniest shit."

"Well, has it occurred to you what a ranger would say if he found you setting off into the Hundred Mile Wilderness with a newspaper delivery bag? Do you know they have the power to detain anyone they think is not mentally or physically f t?" This was actually a lie, but it brought a promising hint of frown to his brow. "Also, has it occurred to you that maybe the reason paperboys don't get hernias is that they only carry the bag for an hour or so a day--that maybe it might not be so comfortable lugging it for ten hours at a stretch over mountains--that maybe it would bang endlessly against your legs and rub your shoulders raw? Look how it's chafing against your neck already ."

His eyes slid stealthily down to the strap. The one positive thing about Katz and his notions was that it was never very hard to talk him out of them. He took the bag off over his head. "OK," he agreed, "screw the bags. But we pack light."

| was happy with that. In fact, it seemed a perfectly sensible proposal. We packed more than Katz wanted--| insisted on sleeping bags, warm clothes, and our tents on the grounds that this could be a good deal more demanding than Katz appreciated--but | agreed to leave behind the stove, gas bottles, and pots and pans. We would eat cold stuff--

principally Snickers, raisins, and an indestructible type of salami product called Slim Jims. 1t wouldn't kill us for a fortnight. Besides, | couldn't face another bowl of noodles. Altogether we saved perhaps f ve pounds of weight each--hardly anything really--but Katz seemed disproportionately happy. 1t wasn't often he got his way, even in part.

And so the next day, my wife drove us deep into the boundless woods of northern Maine for our trek through the Hundred Mile Wilderness. Maine is deceptive. It is the twelfth smallest state, but it has more uninhabited forest--ten million acres--than any other state but Alaska. In photographs it looks serene and beckoning, parklike even, with hundreds of cool, deep lakes and hazy, tranquil miles of undulating mountains. Only Katahdin, with its rocky upper slopes and startling muscularity, offers anything that looks faintly intimidating. In fact, itis all hard,

The trail maintainers in Maine have a certain hale devotion to seeking out the rockiest climbs and most forbidding slopes, and of these Maine has a breathtaking plenitude. In its 283 miles, the Appalachian Trail in Maine presents the northbound hiker with almost 100,000 feet of climb, the equivalent of three Everests. And at the heart of it all lies the famous Hundred Mile Wilderness-- 99.7 miles of boreal forest trail without a store, house, telephone, or paved road, running from the village of Monson to a public campground at Abol Bridge, a few miles below Katahdin. It is the remotest section of the entire AT. If something goes wrong in the Hundred Mile Wilderness, you are on your own. You could die of an infected blood blister out there.

It takes a week to ten days for most people to cross this notorious expanse. Because we had two weeks, we had my wife drop us at Caratunk, a remote community on the Kennebec River, thirty-eight miles short of Monson and the oí fcial start of the wilderness. We would have three days of limbering up and a chance to resupply at Monson before plunging irreversibly into the deepest woods. | had already done a little hiking to the west around Rangeley and Flagstaff Lakes, in the week before Katz came, as a kind of reconnoiter, so | felt as if | knew the terrain. Even so, it was a shock.

It was the f rst time in almost four months that | had hoisted a pack with a full load. | couldn't believe the weight, couldn't believe that there had ever been a time when | could believe the weight. The strain was immediate and discouraging. But at least | had been hiking. Katz, it was quickly evident, was starting from square one--actually, several score pancake breakfasts to the wrong side of square one. From Caratunk it was a long, gently upward haul of f ve miles to a big lake called Pleasant Pond, hardly taxing at all, but | noticed right away that he was moving with incredible deliberativeness, breathing very hard, and wearing a kind of shocked "Where am 1?" expression. All he would utter was "Man!" in an amazed tone when | asked him how he was, and a single heartfelt "Fuhhhhhhhhck"-breathy and protracted, like the noise of a plumped cushion when someone sits on it--when he let his pack fall from his back at the í rst rest stop after forty- five minutes. It was a muggy afternoon and Katz was a river of sweat. He took a water bottle and downed nearly half of it. Then he looked at me with quietly desperate eyes, put his pack back on, and wordlessly returned to his duty.

Pleasant Pond was a vacation spot--we could hear the happy shrieks of children splashing and swimming perhaps a hundred yards away--though we couldn't see anything of the lake through the trees. Indeed without their gaiety we wouldn't have known it was there, a sobering reminder of how suffocating the woods can be. Beyond rose Middle Mountain, just 2,500 feet high but acutely angled and an entirely different experience on a hot day with a cumbersome pack sagging down on tender shoulders. | plodded joylessly on to the top of the mountain. Katz was soon far behind and moving with shuí fing slowness.

It was after six o'clock when | reached the base of the mountain on the other side and found a decent campsite beside a grassy, little-used logging road at a place called Baker Stream. | waited a few minutes for Katz, then put up my tent. When he still hadn't come after twenty minutes, | went looking for him. He was almost an hour behind me when | finally found him, and his expression was glassy-eyed.

| took his pack from him and sighed at the not entirely unexpected discovery that it was light.

"What's happened to your pack?"

"Aw, | threw some stuíf," he said unhappily.

"What?"

"Oh, clothes and stuff." He seemed uncertain whether to be ashamed or belligerent. He decided to try belligerence. "That stupid sweater for one thing." We had disputed mildly over the need for woolens.

"But it could get cold. It's very changeable in the mountains."

"Yeah, right. It's August, Bryson. | don't know if you noticed."

There didn't seem much point in trying to reason with him. When we reached the camp and he was putting up his tent | looked into his pack. He had thrown away nearly all his spare clothes and, it appeared, a good deal of the food.

"Where's the peanuts?" | said. "Where's all your Slim Jims?"

"We didn't need all that shit. It's only three days to Monson."

"Most of that food was for the Hundred Mile Wilderness, Stephen. We don't khnow what kind of supplies there'll be in Monson."

"Oh." He looked struck and contrite. "I thought it was a lot for three days."

1 looked despairingly in the pack and then looked around. "Where's your other water bottle?"

He looked at me sheepishly. "| threw it."

"You threw a water bottle?" This was truly staggering. 1f there is one thing you need on the trail in August, it is lots of water.

"It was heavy."

"Of course it's heavy. Water's always heavy. But it is also kind of vital, wouldn't you say?"

He gave me a helpless look. "I just had to get rid of some weight. | was desperate."

"No, you were stupid."

"Yeah, that too," he agreed.

"Stephen, | wish you wouldn't do these things."

"I know," he said and looked sincerely repentant.

Wihile he f nished putting up his tent, | went off to filter water for the morning. Baker Stream was really a river--broad, clear, and shallow--and very beautiful in the glow of a summery evening, with a backdrop of overhanging trees and the last rays of sunlight sparkling its surface. As | knelt by the water, | became curiously aware of something-- some thing--in the woods beyond my left shoulder, which caused me to straighten up and peer through the clutter of foliage at the water's edge. Goodness knows what impelled me to look because | couldn't have heard anything over the musical tumult of water, but there about f fteen feet away in the dusky undergrowth, staring at me with a baleful expression, was a moose--full grown and female, or so | presumed since it had no antlers. It had evidently been on its way to the water for a drink when it was brought up short by my presence and now clearly was undecided what to do next.

Itis an extraordinary experience to f ind yourself face-to-face in the woods with a wild animal that is very much larger than you. You know these things are out there, of course, but you never expect at any particular moment to encounter one, certainly not up close-- and this one was close enough that | could see the haze of f lealike insects f bating in circles about its head. We stared at each other for a good minute, neither of us sure what to do. There was a certain obvious and gratifying tang of adventure in this, but also something much more low-key and elemental--a kind of respectful mutual acknowledgment that comes with sustained eye contact. It was this that was unexpectediy thrilling--the sense that there was in some small measure a salute in our cautious mutual appraisal. | was smitten.

| had recently read to my dismay that they have started hunting moose again in New England. Goodness knows why anyone would want to shoot an animal as harmless and retiring as the moose, but thousands of people do--so many, in fact, that states now hold lotteries to decide who gets a permit. Maine in 1996 received 82,000 applications for just 1,500 permits. Over 12,000 out-of-staters happily parted with a nonrefundable $20 just to be allowed to take part in the draw.

Hunters will tell you that a moose is a wily and ferocious forest creature. Nonsense. À moose is a cow drawn by a three-year-old. That's all there is to it. Without doubt, the moose is the most improbable, endearingly hopeless creature ever to live in the wilds. Every bit of it--its spindly legs, its chronically puzzled expression, its comical oven-mitt antlers--looks like some droll evolutionary joke. 1t is wondrously ungainly: it runs as if its legs have never been introduced to each other. Above all, what distinguishes the moose is its almost boundless lack of intelligence. 1f you are driving down a highway and a moose steps from the woods ahead of you, he will stare at you for a long minute (moose are notoriously shortsighted), then abruptly try to run away from you, legs flailing in eight directions at once. Never mind that there are several thousand square miles of forest on either side of the highway. The moose does not think of this. Clueless as to what exactly is going on, he runs halfway to New Brunswick before his peculiar gait inadvertently steers him back into the woods, where he immediately stops and takes on a startled expression that says, "Hey-- woods. Now how the heck did | get here?" Moose are so monumentally muddle-headed, in fact, that when they hear a car or truck approaching they will often bolt out of the woods and onto the highway in the curious hope that this will bring them to safety.

Amazingly, given the moose's lack of cunning and peculiarly blunted survival instincts, it is one of the longest-surviving creatures in North America. Mastodons, saber-toothed tigers, wolves, caribou, wild horses, and even camels all once thrived in eastern North America alongside the moose but gradually stumbled into extinction, while the moose just plodded on. It hasn't always been so. At the turn of this century, it was estimated that there were no more than a dozen moose in New Hampshire and probably none at all in Vermont. Today New Hampshire has an estimated 5,000 moose, Vermont 1,000, and Maine anywhere up to 30,000. It is because of these robust and growing numbers that hunting has been reintroduced as a way of keeping them from getting out of hand. There are, however, two problems with this that | can think of. First, the numbers are really just guesses. Moose clearly don't line up for censuses. Some naturalists think the population may have been overstated by as much as 20 percent, which means that the moose aren't being so much culled as slaughtered. No less pertinent is that there is just something deeply and unquestionably wrong about killing an animal that is so sweetly and dopily unassuming as a moose. | could have slain this one with a slingshot, with a rock or stick-- with a folded newspaper, I'd almost bet-- and all it wanted was a drink of water. You might as well hunt cows.

Stealthily, so as not to alarm it, | crept off to get Katz. When we returned, the moose had advanced to the water and was drinking about twenty-five feet upstream. "Wow," Katz breathed. He was thrilled, too, | was pleased to note. The moose looked up at us, decided we meant her no harm, and went back to drinking. We watched her for perhaps five minutes, but the mosquitoes were chewing us up, so we withdrew and returned to our camp feeling considerably elated. 1t seemed a conf irmation--we were in the wilderness now--and a gratifying, totally commensurate reward for a day of hard toil.