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Ongoing

Action heals a wound

Sarah Ruth Bates



I STOOD UNDER THE MAKESHIFT ROOF OF THE OPEN TRUNK, THREADED my arms through the straps of my backpack, and leaned forward to take the weight.

Pain shot through my right ankle. I'd rolled it two weeks earlier but thought it had healed.

I'd convinced my older brother to drive me three hours from Boston to northwestern Massachusetts. I planned to hike the Long Trail, solo, up through Vermont, 272 miles to Canada. We'd found the trailhead through rain that fogged the car windows.

I turned little circles in the dry space under the trunk door, testing. Pain, then a good step, pain again, good steps, then pain, more insistent.

I slipped out of the backpack, which toppled into the trunk. I cried. Michael drove us home.

A doctor and a physical therapist both said I'd be back on the trail in two weeks. So I put my perishables in the fridge, iced the ankle every night, and caught up on *Game of Thrones*. The physical therapist checked my strength and range of motion. A flash of pain brought bile to my tongue.

The sausage and cheese in the fridge grew mold. I tried not to worry, which made me worry more. I saw another doctor, an acupuncturist, and four physical therapists. In a session with one, I pulled my right adductor, a muscle of the inner thigh. I wore an orthopedic boot for months. I turned down running, rock climbing, skiing, hiking, even playing around with a soccer ball in the kitchen with my brother. I felt pain with every other step.

I CAME BACK TO THE TRAILHEAD TWO YEARS LATER. MY SQUAD OF medical consultants reassured me that I wouldn't injure myself permanently, but "it could be uncomfortable."

I packed for the ankle, as though I was bringing along supplies for an infant: an Ace bandage; a tennis ball for rolling out knotted muscles; and an oozy, gel-filled wrap that cooled when exposed to air, for icing without a freezer. Three progressively emptier Greyhound buses got me to Williamstown, Massachusetts, in early afternoon.

I walked 2.5 miles through town to the trailhead, wearing a 40-plus-pound Osprey pack. Each footstep felt heavy, like landing a jump from a low height.

The author at Corliss Camp Shelter, along Vermont's Long Trail, just a few days' walk from Canada. COURTESY OF SARAH RUTH BATES

I left the sidewalk for the trail. It wound up a hill. I listened to my labored breathing. Birds sang; sunlight filtered through leaves, dappling the ground. A few uphill miles brought me to the junction with the Appalachian Trail, which runs concurrently with the Long Trail for a hundred-odd miles. I found the sign for the AT above a mess of strewn granite and turned.

The afternoon light became golden, shadows lengthening. I saw the large wooden sign for the beginning of the Long Trail. Big moments are difficult on the trail alone: There's no one to mark them with you. I reverted to millennial rituals and took a selfie with the sign before walking on.

I'd planned to sleep in a shelter, 3 miles into the Long Trail. But the light waned. The heat lifted. A breeze shifted the leaves. I was tired—from the years of worrying about this day more than from the physical labors of it. I walked into the woods, unclipped my backpack, and lowered it.

I hung my hammock and ate pasta with little meatball pellets, straight from the pot. I looked at the camp I'd set up, my first little home on the Long Trail. Sure, I'd walked just a mile and a half of the trail, but it was a mile and a half farther than I'd gone two years ago.

I woke up to rain. I'd dropped a boot outside the tarp, and it had filled. I poured out a Starbucks cup's worth of water, shook the boot, and put it back on. The wet brought slugs, too. They clung to my tarp, my hammock, and my backpack. I detached them with a stick. An hour later, I took a step up and saw two slugs on my right thigh. They left orange smears that I knew I wouldn't be able to wash off for a week.

One biggish mountain, Stratton, stood between the start of the trail and the first town I'd pass. The trail gets traffic from day-hikers and isn't a technical climb. It was broad and even, but with more climbing than I'd tried so far. My ankle twinged, first sporadically, then with every other step. I was glad to stop that night at a shelter. The next day, I joined another hiker to hitchhike into town together. I didn't want to slow him down, so I hustled. The pain got louder.

I'd been pretending not to notice when it hurt. I didn't want pain to end the trip. In town, though, I needed ice.

The innkeeper offered me a bag of frozen peas. I did not want to ice my foot with a stranger's vegetables. I bought a gallon bag of ice at a gas station, toted it to a park, found a bench, and sat with the ice pressed between my ankles. I looked out at a baseball field—usually such a normal sight. The uniformly trimmed grass looked off, after days in the woods.

I wanted to get back on the trail, back into the wild. But I'd soon come to tougher peaks with trickier terrain. Could I keep going? I'd try.

I capped my days at 10 miles. Some people asked me about my pace. I met some AT thru-hikers with just a few states left between them and Katahdin in Maine. They were covering 20 or 30 miles every day. One called Ibuprofen "Vitamin I." He'd lined the hip belt of his pack with foam strips because he'd gotten too skinny to cinch it tighter. We said, "See you," but I knew I'd never catch up to him.

Each day, at the first twinge in my ankle, I stepped off the trail and rolled out my calf with the tennis ball. When I passed a stream, I often put down my pack, walked downstream, and sat on a rock. I took off my boots and "iced" the ankle in silty water, swatting mosquitoes.

The pace opened up my days. I drank coffee in the mornings and took breaks to write in my journal. When it rained, sometimes I kept walking and sometimes I put up my tarp and hammock for the night. I listened to the rain and reread Mary Oliver. "I don't say it's easy," she writes, "but what else will do?"*

The tennis ball's surface turned from neon fuzz to long, grimy tufts of green, growing its own trail beard. I hated that everyone passed me. But I loved thinking about how everyone I'd met had stood exactly where I was. The narrow trail strung us together like the sliding beads of an abacus, adding up a summer.

ONE NIGHT, I REACHED A SHELTER LATE, THE SUN SETTING. ANOTHER hiker asked where I was headed. Canada. He laughed.

Other people had asked pointed questions and laughed at my daily mileage, and I hadn't pushed back. The voices in my head said the same: You won't make it, you can't do this, you're an idiot to try.

But I had passed the halfway point that day. Sure, my pack was heavy, my pace slow, and my ankle ached. But it hadn't stopped me. It had carried me.

On one of the last days of my hike, I slipped in mud and fell hard. I'd been walking a little faster, eager to meet my goal, freer under the weight of my pack, as I'd eaten much of the food in it. I slammed into the dirt. My elbow took most of the impact. I didn't move for a few moments. Had I failed, this close to my destination?

* Mary Oliver, "A Thousand Mornings," *A Thousand Mornings: Poems* (Penguin Books, 2013).

I stood and brushed off some of the mud. I moved my arms and legs experimentally. I felt OK. I put my pack back on and kept walking.

I had assumed, when I first hurt my ankle, that I'd need to recover while resting to restore it. I needed to flip a switch from broken to healthy. If I couldn't do that, the before-after of the injury would cut my life in half. I wouldn't be myself in the after. Before, a happy, sun-browned child with skinned knees. After—what? A murky, clouded scene I couldn't picture.

But I was recovering by hiking. I could stop outsourcing the problem and confront it myself. I could quiet the spiraling panic that the pain triggered. I had looked directly at the sensation, noticed what made it worse and what helped, and gone on that way.

What if my ankle never stops hurting? The question scares me. I'm angry with my body for its weakness and frustrated that no treatment digs out the problem at its root. I can't make it new again. The solution is a process, not a cure. There's no box to check off. But the process got me to Canada.

A year later, in airport security, the scanner beeped. My ankle showed up, highlighted in yellow on the screen. The male attendant called over a female colleague to pat it down. "Her right ankle."

She knelt and gently gripped it, feeling for what was wrong. I wanted to say, hey, if you figure it out, tell me. She shook her head, smiling, and waved me through.

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