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Encounters on Mount Willard

A subway seeker meets a mountain man

Elissa Ely



They were two excited boys, hiking with their elderly grandfather. Maybe they were 5 and 7, wearing fluorescent sneakers like headlamps on their feet. Their grandfather wore a rucksack and a bandana, limped heavily, but carried no poles: Old School.

Mount Willard Trail from Crawford Notch covers 3.1 miles out and back, a route rated child-friendly. It leaves plenty of breath for questions if you're a kid, and plenty of breath for answers if you're not. Their little group passed me once, dropped back, passed again. The first time, we exchanged greetings. The second time, we nodded. The third time, we ignored each other; that was more than enough social contact.

—The book says it takes an hour, right? one boy asked, elbowing his brother off a rock step.

—The book does say that, though it might take longer for an old man, his grandfather said, wiping his neck.

Eventually, the trail joined an old carriage road that wound without hurry to the summit. When I reached it, the three of them were already sitting on rocks, and the boys were triumphantly pulling sandwiches out of the rucksack.

Two thousand eight hundred sixty-five feet below, a ribbon of highway unfolded, with railroad tracks to its right. In his soft flat voice, the grandfather had begun to explain the geology of glaciation and notch formation, and though they were not in school, the boys were listening (I thought) with extraordinary avidity. Leaning into him on each side, their feelings were clear. He had led them up a mountain. He could lift a piano with one arm.

Other hikers arrived and found places on other rocks, at distances meant to preserve that interpersonal space that Americans cherish. We were not unsociable, but we were separate, in the way hiking strangers can be. A few minutes later, a man in shorts and tube socks burst out of the brush and bounded straight to the edge of a ledge.

—LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, he yelled, throwing up his arms in victory, —WELCOME TO MOUNT WILLARD. He glanced around. —I'm from the city, he added, —and what I really need right now is a subway.

He peeked over the ledge, then leapt back dramatically. —WHOA, he said, speaking in capitals again. —MY FIRST MOUNTAIN.

It might have been exhilaration that caused him to overstate himself. But ours was an arrangement of strangers who understood the subtleties of

The top of the route up Mount Willard is an old carriage trail. The light at the end of it nudges novice and experienced walkers to keep trudging. MIKE CHERIM

contact. And so, I felt concern when he noticed the three of them and began to walk that way.

—You look very KNOWLEDGEABLE, very INFORMED, sir, he said, standing over them, uninvited. He was speaking mostly in lowercase again, using respectful words, yet sounding not quite respectful. Also, he was hovering too closely. There was no need to crowd; this was not rush hour. —I'm not from New Hampshire. I'm from The Big City. Is that Crawford Notch?

The man nodded.

—And have you done a lot of hiking in these mountains?

He nodded again.

—And what exactly is your favorite mountain, sir? In all your years of hiking?

It was his tone of voice that caused the boys to look up at their grandfather. They had caught a whiff of something unseemly, something a little endangering, and they were worried.

—I'd say Mount Garfield, the old man said, politely.

—Is that so? And why is that, exactly?

The old man paused.

—Well, for one thing, you can see all the way into the Pemigewasset Wilderness. Also, I was married on Mount Garfield.

—No kidding!

The subway-seeker swept a hand toward everyone else on the summit, inviting the rest of us into his amused interrogation. —That's fantastic! Absolutely amazing! Married on a mountaintop, were you? How was it?

—The marriage had nowhere to go but down, the old man said.

Those of us listening (everyone) snickered. His grandsons didn't understand, but they could tell their grandfather was holding his own.

Deflated by the wit of someone else, exposed for its lack in himself, the subway-seeker took a step back. He was on top of his first mountain but seemed to have lost interest in the view.

He wandered for a couple of minutes, not looking out to the horizon or down to the highway or up to the clouds. No one noticed exactly when he headed down. For that matter, no one knew exactly why he had come up.

The rest of sat on our separate rocks—with plenty of space between us—and ate what we were eating. Pictures were taken, and people talked among themselves. Those close enough to overhear learned a lot about glaciation.

When the older man had rested, their group of three started back. I was rested, too, and trailed behind. Now and then, one boy gave the other an energizing punch, and they bickered about who would walk next to their grandfather. He was limping even more heavily, wiping his neck with the bandana, still talking softly. I heard him say,

—So, let's figure this out: If it's 1.6 miles to the summit, how far will that make it round trip?

He had led them up a mountain and taught them mountain geology. Then, he had taught them mountain dignity. Now, he was teaching them mountain math.

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