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AT Redemption: A Father at a Crossroads Takes His Kids Hiking . . . 244 Miles

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Hitting “Reset”

AT Redemption

A father at a crossroads takes his kids hiking . . . 244 miles

Ben Montgomery



THE FIGHT BROKE OUT ON A NARROW RIDGE SOMEWHERE HIGH above Davenport Gap, and I'm only slightly embarrassed to admit the first thought in my head was that this was the most beautiful location in which I'd witnessed hand-to-hand combat. Embarrassing, because fighting before me were the fruit of my loins—the youngest and oldest, 9 and 14—tangled up in ground warfare on the Appalachian Trail, flanked on both sides of this mile-high ridge by perilous drop-offs. Asher, the elder, struggled atop Bey. She'd somehow used her walking stick to pin Bey's shoulders to the mountain, and he'd managed to grab two fistfuls of her long brown hair, and the tangle amounted to what would be considered a stalemate in Ultimate Fighting.

A better parent might have intervened. I kept my distance. They both shot long looks in my direction, as if to say, "Aren't you going to stop us, Daddy?" I did not. This was their fight, and it had been brewing for miles. My middle child, Morissey, 12, looked up at me with a smile that said she approved of my inaction and that she rather enjoyed the break in walking. We both watched in silence as the other two wrestled in the glorious wild. When Asher was finally able to pry her brother's hands from her hair, she shoved herself off of him and stomped him in the crotch. He wailed. I moved in to help him up.

I've come to believe that a long hike has a biological cycle. Like almost everything—life, relationships, civilizations, songs, stories, stars—it is born in explosive uncertainty. It grows more comfortable, adapting and striving. It reaches a climactic, epiphanic moment, when great lessons are learned. And it gradually begins its descent toward finality, end, death. Belden Lane, in his book *Backpacking with the Saints* (Oxford University Press, 2014), compares a certain kind of hike to a "death lodge," a sort of symbolic place to which the wanderer retires to say goodbye to his old life. "A death lodge is a place for acknowledging that a chapter in one's life is closing," Lane writes, "with a new one beginning to open." Maybe this hike was our death lodge.

In any event, Day 5, for the Montgomerys, was adolescence.

I would later learn through tiresome post-fight analysis (because if anything is in surplus on a long AT hike, it's the time you have for conversation) that Bey had caught a short burst of energy and tried to pass Asher on the trail,

Asher, Morissey, and Bey Montgomery descend another mountain between Hot Springs, North Carolina, and Springer Mountain, Georgia, on their trek of the Appalachian Trail. BEN MONTGOMERY

and Asher had somehow whacked Bey's leg with her stick, and Bey had tried to take Asher's stick before they both fell to the ground.

The details matter more to the loser, of course, to the party who can hold tight to injustice and long for retribution. And maybe that explains why I'm writing.

WHY DO WE HIKE?

The easy answer, the one I trot out before crowds of ladies who come to libraries and senior centers to hear me talk about my first book, *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* (Chicago Review Press, 2014): We have relied on bipedal locomotion for 6 million years, and only in the past hundred or so have we chosen in great numbers to sit and ride rather than strike out on foot. Early man walked 20 miles a day. Benefits were attributed to walking as far back as ancient times. Pliny the Elder described walking as one of the Medicines of the Will. Hippocrates called walking "man's best medicine" and prescribed walks to treat a variety of afflictions. Aristotle lectured while walking. Leonardo da Vinci designed raised streets to protect walkers from cart traffic. Johann Sebastian Bach walked 200 miles to hear a master play the organ. William Wordsworth is said to have walked 180,000 miles in his lifetime. Charles Dickens took crazy nighttime walks and once said, "The sum of the whole is this : Walk and be happy ! Walk and be healthy." Robert Louis Stevenson wrote of "the great fellowship of the Open Road" and the "brief but priceless meetings which only trampers know." Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche said, "Only those thoughts that come by walking have any value." Henry David Thoreau waxed forever about walking. "I can easily walk ten, fifteen, twenty, any number of miles," he wrote. So we moderns, confined to the roads in our "man traps," as Thoreau presciently called cars, have lost hold of something powerful. And we hike to try to get that back.

That's the easy answer. And it's mostly true.

The more complicated and personal answer, then: Divorce is terrible. I do not wish it on my worst enemy. Divorce is, as the great Pat Conroy wrote in *Atlanta Magazine* in 1978, a lurid duet that entices observers to the dance and brings down a small civilization of friends, children, relatives. "Two people declare war on each other, and their screams and tears and days of withdrawal infect their entire world with the bacilli of their pain," he wrote. "There are no clean divorces. Divorces should be conducted in abattoirs, surgical wards,



Before he spent a half-year working thousands of miles away, Ben Montgomery felt a pull to spend the summer “doing something important with my kids.” Here they relax at one of the AT’s trailside shelters. COURTESY OF BEN MONTGOMERY

blood banks, or funeral homes. The greatest fury comes from the wound where love once issued forth.”

For most of my marriage, I refused to even say the repugnant word. It came up, often in deep late-night conversation, but it was always broached in less offensive language. *Would you be happier with someone else? Should we try something different?* The end of my marriage was accompanied by a startling and unanswerable question: How can two people who have loved each other since they were teenagers, who made vows before their friends and families to always be together, who were miserable when deprived of the other’s company, who brought three wondrous children into the world, who spent no small amount of time in the offices of marriage counselors with the goal of remaining together—how is it that in the void of a few months of trial separation the love they once shared could morph into distrust, anger, hate, and, finally, indifference? This was my lot as 2017 slammed into 2018, as I got sober and rode out Hurricane Irma and lost my job at the newspaper

and finished my third book; as lawyers were hired, finances untangled, and a twentieth wedding anniversary went uncelebrated. I moved into a small apartment, bought a pullout IKEA couch, and tried to make it feel like home. The kids arrived and departed with bags of their clothes. At the house, they have their own bedrooms; at my apartment, they each have a single drawer of their own in a dresser.

We began to develop a routine, though. We'd escape my apartment after dinner each evening and walk to a city park near downtown Tampa to lie in the grass and read, a round-trip journey of a few miles. This simple exercise became salve for my heartache. We held hands and talked about our days as the sun set over the Hillsborough River. In their absence, I found myself longing for our walks.

In the spring of 2018, I learned I had landed a job teaching at the University of Montana for the fall semester. To make ends meet—to afford a mortgage and an apartment and child support and mounting legal bills—I'd have to move 2,600 miles away.

I needed summer to be sustaining, and I felt the pull to spend it all doing something important with my kids. For the first time since college, I didn't have to report to a daily job.

I started thinking about a long walk.

ABOUT 274.5 MILES OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL SEPARATE HOT SPRINGS, North Carolina, our starting point, and Springer Mountain, Georgia, the trail's southern terminus. And by the day of the fight, not far from Davenport Gap Shelter, just 36 miles in, everyone had cried but me.

But we were still on our feet, and the trail seemed to be sending us some rewards.

We started each day in a circle, packs on our backs, reading from *The Pocket Pema Chödrön* (Shambhala, 2017), and we meditated on the mini lessons as we walked. Or maybe it was just me meditating. The kids seemed into it, though.

We can learn to rejoice in even the smallest blessings our life holds. It is easy to miss our own good fortune; often happiness comes in ways we don't even notice.

We watched the sun set on the grass-topped mountain called Max Patch and slept under the stars. We found a tiny turtle, no bigger than a half-dollar, and paused for photos. We ate wild strawberries one of the girls spotted along the trail. Every time we stopped to filter water, Bey took time to look for salamanders, and he began keeping count in his journal.

The essence of life is that it's challenging.

Bear activity in Great Smoky Mountains National Park had forced rangers to close a few shelters, and that led to several high-mile days. I pushed the kids hard, and we put in 17 miles one day when I sensed morale plummeting. That's a long walk for a 9-year-old. In a moment of contrition, I promised that if they made it to Newfound Gap, 67 miles from Hot Springs, we'd try to catch a ride into Gatlinburg to resupply, and we'd spend a night in a hotel.

The way to dissolve our resistance to life is to meet it face to face.

They humped like billy goats the next few days and seemed to find their trail legs. As Day 7 came and went, something started to change. They'd all three tell me later, in private moments, that this was the point of the hike when they began to realize I was serious—that Daddy really was going to make them walk 274 miles to Springer Mountain. And letting go of the idea that quitting was a possibility was its own sort of motivation.

Above Newfound Gap, an afternoon thunderstorm caught us by surprise and soaked us and our gear, but passed as quickly as it had blown in. As we descended from Icewater Spring Shelter, we began passing waves of doe-eyed



The kids found their trail legs after realizing their father really meant to hike all the way to Georgia. BEN MONTGOMERY

day-hikers, folks who had driven up to the gap and looked like they had randomly found themselves on a trail. You knew them by their panting and cleanliness. I felt the kids' pride swell as they practiced proper trail etiquette and stepped aside to let each new family go by, the clean children staring at my dirty offspring as they passed. We popped out of the woods, and the gap was swarming with tourists on a bright summer afternoon. Without talking, we stripped off our wet shoes and socks and plunked down in the grass near the Rockefeller Memorial. We'd made it halfway through the Smokies, and hovering in the air was some unspoken difference between us and everyone else at the gap. They had driven here. We had walked.

I caught a woman taking our picture and smiled.

PART OF OUR DEAL—CALL IT A BRIBE IF YOU WANT—WAS THAT WHEN we reached Gatlinburg, the kids could each pick out one item from Nantahala Outdoor Center, and I would buy it for them. I told them the item had to be reasonably priced and that it had to be useful on our journey. We hitched a ride into town and climbed the steps to the massive outfitter.

Asher quickly picked a pair of lightweight sandals to wear around our campsites in the evenings so her hiking shoes could dry. Morissey, who had been terribly disappointed in the bland dehydrated vegetables that made our evening meals, picked an assortment of prepackaged foodstuffs. Bey could not decide. Round and round he went for the better part of an hour, exploring pocketknives and camp pillows. When my patience wore thin, I suggested we take a break and come back so he could make his selection after a good night's sleep. We rented a car and checked into a hotel near an indoor water park and ate Mellow Mushroom pizza, and the difficulty of our long walk was briefly forgotten. We walked around Gatlinburg, a cauldron of Americana fauxpourri.

In the historic district sits an honest-to-god store where you can rent one of those battery-powered wheelchair/scooter crossbreeds so you don't have to walk anywhere. And it does a brisk business. I know because I stood and watched men and women walk up to the shop, engage in a short transaction, then scoot away. I thought of Peter Steinhart's story in *Audubon* in 1987, when studies showed that Americans were spending four hours a day in front of their television sets. "We experience life not through the soles of our feet but through the seats of our pants," Steinhart wrote. This is us now, soda in hand and butt planted on scooter, making the conscious choice to sit and ride down a sidewalk.

Bey spotted a candy shop and dragged us all inside. He'd found his one item. I paid for a pound of assorted Jelly Belly jelly beans. Whatever it takes to get him to walk.

That night we went Full Gatlinburg. We rode water slides and ate from vending machines and wound up, somehow, at the Hatfield & McCoy Dinner Feud, where I paid \$56.95 per Montgomery so we could be treated like hillbilly royalty. No fewer than five birds lost their lives in the making of our table's bucket of fried chicken.

We watched the actors sing and dance in some loose and farcical interpretation of the old Appalachian family feud. The Hatfields hated the McCoys. The McCoys hated the Hatfields. The families engaged in all sorts of ornery behavior to exact revenge for perceived slights. They bit and scratched and punched and, at one point, even engaged in a diving competition at a swimming hole to see which clan was better. It soon became clear that no one knew why they were fighting. The impetus for the bloodlust had been lost to time. Rage had filled the void of ignorance.

This telling slowly narrowed in on the inciting event that had spawned untold decades of chicanery and vengeance. Only the oldest member of each clan knew what had started the war—old grandpa on one side, dear granny on the other. In the climactic scene, we learned that years before, these two had been in love. And a simple mistake beyond their control—a misheard message, a missed rendezvous—set in motion a chain of events that led to decades of bullets and bloodshed. How easily love can sour. How devastating when it does.

It was my turn to cry.

WE STOPPED TO EAT LUNCH AT CLINGMANS DOME THE NEXT DAY, BARELY 200 miles from Springer Mountain, and watched another parade of tourists ascend a quarter-mile paved sidewalk from the parking lot to the dome. We overheard a few—kids *and* adults—bellyaching about how difficult the hike had been. One woman even stopped at the base rather than continue with her family up the spiral ramp to the tower to witness one of the best views in the Smokies. She'd had enough walking. Pema Chödrön would probably advise us to keep our judgment to a minimum, but we smirked.

The next few days flew by. We woke. We hiked. We ate. We hiked. We slept.

We developed a routine in everything, in setting camp and cooking and filtering water and breaking camp. The kids assumed more and more responsibilities, and I was glad for it. The complaining faded, too, and we started to have fun. When we'd gone without hot food for a spell, we would spend hours concocting the imaginary meals we would eat if we were home. Our conversations were often hilarious. We spent hours playing Would You Rather? As in, *Would you rather have muffin hands or corduroy skin? Would you rather fight ten duck-sized horses or one horse-sized duck?* Bey rewarded us with mad-scientist jelly bean combinations. Buttered popcorn and Dr Pepper was a night at the movies. Root beer and vanilla ice cream made a root beer float.

On June 14, we hiked from Silers Bald Shelter to Mollies Ridge Shelter, almost 18 miles. We arrived just after dark, and the shelter was occupied by a group of seven women, already inside their bags and prepared to sleep. The kids and I activated our headlamps and quietly set about brushing our teeth and getting ready for bed. I told them to bring me their food and odiferous items so I could put them in our bear bag and run it up the cable.

As soon as we slipped into our bags, a rodent—or maybe more—went to work, skittering back and forth across the wooden beams above us all night long. After a fitful and fragmented few hours of sleep, I woke at dawn and discovered what our mouse friend had been up to. First, it had chewed a hole through Bey's L.L. Bean backpack. Then it had managed to drag the bag of jelly beans out and deplete my son's supply by roughly 80 percent. I woke the boy with a whisper.

"I'm sorry, buddy," I said, "but a mouse ate all your jelly beans."

His eyes filled with tears, but he didn't cry.

"You have to make sure we put stuff like that in the bear bag at night," I told him. "OK?"

He shook his head. "OK."

Our shelter mates soon began to stir and dress and pack their bedding. One of them, a woman in her late 20s, began tugging on her hiking boots, then stopped, turned the boot over, and shook its contents into her hand. Eight colorful jelly beans. The next woman did the same. And the next. This mouse spent eight hours stealing jelly beans from Bey's backpack and dispersing the loot in hiking boots. I felt respect for the little guy—and maybe a tinge of sadness that we were ruining his dreams. The whole scenario felt familiar.

I apologized yet again to a late riser who discovered the mother lode in her shoes.

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “I feel lucky, like he chose me. How many times in your life do you get to wake up and find jelly beans in your shoes?”

I’M NOT ASHAMED TO ADMIT THAT I CRIED WHEN WE POPPED OUT OF Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The moment felt significant. We had walked 110 miles from Hot Springs, and we were thriving. I was reminded of a line from a 150-year-old Thoreau essay, “Walking.” “I wish to speak a word for Nature,” he wrote, “for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant of a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.”

We pressed on, and the rewards of nature presented themselves to us. We saw a complete rainbow stretching over the mountains. We startled a rafter of wild turkeys and watched mule deer graze 10 yards from our shelter and soaked our feet in every cold spring we could find. We woke one morning



Morissey Montgomery enjoys a summit. BEN MONTGOMERY

under a lean-to beam upon which someone had written: "Though the wind is fierce, it can't keep me from greeting the sun in the morning." We greeted the glorious sunrise atop a bald and ate our breakfast above the clouds. We passed Mile Marker 100 on Albert Mountain.

My girlfriend, Lorraine, drove up from Tampa; met us close to the North Carolina/Georgia line; and drove us into Helen, Georgia, a charming little town. We did laundry, let the tent dry out, and ate many bags of potato chips. We decided to jump about 30 miles of trail because the kids had to be back to their mother by the end of June. We started again at Hogpen Gap, and a few miles from the parking lot, we saw our first bear. Lorraine tried to take credit; we'd hiked all this way without seeing a bear, and we see one on her first day. Her T-shirt made me laugh out loud: "CAMPING IS IN-TENTS."

The adolescent cub hustled across the trail about twenty yards in front of Asher, who always led our hikes. He parked himself in some bushes by the trail and stuck his nose in the air. We clustered and took some photos of him and searched the area for his mother. We shouted ridiculous things in his direction, but nothing dislodged him, so we bushwhacked to the next switchback and hurried away.

Lorraine struggled up Blood Mountain. We all did, but our mileage heretofore gave us an advantage. I got the sense she didn't want the kids to know how exhausted she was. She wanted to impress them, and they were feeling her out, trying to understand this new person their dad had feelings for. When it came time to decide our sleeping arrangements on Blood Mountain, my daughters were determined that I would sleep in the tent with them, and Lorraine would take the smaller tent with Bey.

Lorraine's plan was to join us for the last few days, catch a shuttle back to her car at Hogpen Gap, then give us a ride back to Tampa. Even now, our hike was taking on a new shape.

WE WERE SLOGGING THROUGH AN AFTERNOON DOWNPOUR ABOUT 5 MILES north of Gooch Gap when I felt a sharp pain on my ankle. I slapped something off and kept walking. It felt like a sting at first, but a few minutes later I could feel the pain traveling up my left leg. Maybe a small snake had bitten me? Are there scorpions in north Georgia? I've been stung by a wide array of flying insects, but this pain was something else. I kept walking.

Soon my anus started itching, and that quickly spread to my lower back. No amount of scratching brought relief. I dropped my pack to scratch my back.

"Something's wrong," I told Lorraine, who was hiking just in front of me. I pulled up my shirt and she examined my lower back.

"You're covered in hives," she said.

"Let's get to the shelter," I said.

I continued to scratch myself for another mile or so, when I felt heat in the lymph nodes on my neck. My ears started ringing.

This may sound crazy, but if you ever want to stand face to face with your own insignificance, if you want to wrap your arms around your place in the wild, get yourself stung by some unknown insect in a downpour and feel your body flip out.

We had no cell phone service, and our path crossed no roads. I felt my lips swelling and my face going numb. I picked up the pace and caught up with Asher.

"I don't want you to panic," I told her, "but I've been stung by something, and my face is going numb, and I've got to get help."

I told her I was going to hurry the rest of the way to the shelter and asked her to take care of her siblings and Lorraine. She responded like we'd rehearsed for this moment a hundred times.

"OK, Daddy," she said.

The Georgia woods became a wet blur. When I stepped into the shelter, which was occupied by a bunch of men and boys, I could barely speak. I managed to ask if anyone was a doctor. No. I explained what was happening to me and a man produced two Benadryl pills. I ate them, stripped out of my wet clothes, and climbed into my bag. Hives covered my body. I tried to scratch my skin off until I eventually fell asleep.

The next morning I was fine, as if nothing had happened. I would learn that when the kids arrived, they had set about making camp and cooking themselves dinner, like old pros. They hung their clothes out to dry. They hung their food in a bear bag. They took care of each other, and Lorraine, and me.

WE CLIMBED SPRINGER MOUNTAIN THE NEXT DAY AND MADE IT TO THE peak just as the sun set. All said, we'd hiked 244 miles together, averaging about 12 miles a day. We had tested ourselves against the earth, and we were better for it. Their smiles in the photographs make me giggle months later.

We'd learned simple lessons on the trail, clichés all, but meaningful. That you don't know what you can endure until you're forced to endure it. That it's OK to cry. That we are a family, fights and everything. That you have to



Ben Montgomery with the kids at their end point, on Springer Mountain. COURTESY OF BEN MONTGOMERY

protect the things you love, or a mouse will steal your treasure and deposit it in hikers' boots.

That life is a struggle. That a long walk can be salve, and maybe even salvation.

That sometimes I'll need them to take care of me, and that they'll be there.

BEN MONTGOMERY is author of three books, including *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* (Chicago Review Press, 2014), which won the 2014 National Outdoor Book Award for History/Biography. He teaches journalism at the University of South Florida in Tampa.