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Expectations

Bad joints encounter good advice

Elissa Ely



I EXPLAINED IT TO THE DOG: IN A SINGLE SEASON, SHE HAD GROWN TOO old for the mountains. Noticing the backpack by the door had led to her usual expectations—trotting up switchbacks, disappearing off-trail, disposing of discarded banana peels on summits (she is an ecological being). This is life as she's loved it for almost a decade.

But her joints won't keep up with her expectations anymore. That night, while her other owner was slowly walking her, I threw my backpack into the trunk. It was a forfeiture of contract—a crime that needed to occur in the dark.

She slept heavily as I tiptoed past her bed the next morning, and the drive to Mount Jackson—one of the lowest and easiest of the White Mountain 4,000-footers—was lonely. I had forgotten to unclip her water bowl from the backpack's shoulder straps, and when I crossed the road at Crawford Depot, heading toward the trailhead, it tapped on my back like a reproachful finger.

If you are used to hiking in the company of a bounding dog, hiking solo is like hiking with half a body. Trudging past the cutoffs for Elephant Head and Bugle Cliff, I was lonely for the two of us. These were brief side trips we would have taken together, and chances were excellent that she would have found something edible.

A little over a mile along, where the trail splits with Mount Webster, I heard voices and slowed down. I didn't want human companionship. I wanted my banana peel hunter.

"There's another person behind us," one high voice said to the other. "I think it's a lady."

From a distance, two people ahead looked the same height. Coming closer, they separated into a petite woman under what seemed a long-worn, well-squashed hat and a boy. He pawed the dirt with his sneakers while she hailed me, and I had the feeling he knew a long conversation was coming.

Over the first friendly minutes, she shared most of her résumé. She had recently turned 73 and was introducing her grandson to some of the 4,000-footers. They had tackled the Tripyramids a few days earlier and were cooling off with a simpler trail today. "I'm done with slides," she said.

Her lifestyle had begun with a medical directive. In her 40s, recovering from cancer, her doctor suggested short walks for strength. Since then, on her own, she had hiked the Appalachian Trail twice and all White Mountain 4,000-footers from each direction in each season. Injuries were minimal,

A hiker enjoys Mount Webster, a slightly smaller mountain that awaits the author and her dog in their new routine. DIANE CARBONE

though toward the end of the Appalachian Trail she did tear some shoulder cartilage. It hurt, but she had no time to wait for a repair in Maine. Tylenol was fine.

We had fallen into step, as strangers do, and were on a slight scramble just below the top. She turned to watch me. “Where you from?” she asked authoritatively.

“Massachusetts,” I said.

“Ah. Massachusetts.”

She repeated the word as if it were a verdict, and I decided not to ask whether I was guilty or innocent.

Gray jays circled the summit—trained, ruthless. Dropping her pack, she fished out a raisin from some pocket. “Here,” she said to her grandson. “You’re not supposed to feed ’em, but everyone should do it once.”

She fished around in another pocket for her phone and took a photo as the bird dove onto his trembling palm. For an instant, she looked like one of those grandmothers waving behind the gate while her child finishes his first roller coaster ride. In this case, of course, she could have built the roller coaster.

Peaks across the way that had been in view a few minutes earlier were disappearing.

“Rain clouds,” she said. “Better not stay long. Then, for no particular reason, she added something that changed my life. “I’m about to downsize these hikes,” she said. “It’s the joints.” She said she’d just ordered a copy of *52 With a View* (Ken MacGray’s *New Hampshire’s 52 with a View: A Hiker’s Guide*, self-published, 2020). “The new edition has a section on COVID-19. You should get it.”

Of course, I had heard about this mountain list with the rhyming title. The 52 with a View list was devised by the band of retirees called the Over the Hill Hikers, who trekked once a week up lower New Hampshire elevations. I had never thought to investigate. “52 with a View,” I said, writing it on my palm. It was good advice. I knew someone with bad joints.

Everything was in cloud now, including us. I gave them a few minutes’ lead, because no one wants to be a stalker. Backtracking down the spot we had just scrambled up, she reversed herself to face the rocks, and stepping off, offered a final piece of advice. “It’s easier to go this way,” she yelled. “But you don’t know where the heck you are.”

Then she disappeared. I sensed not a whiff of them the rest of the way down, yet she had illuminated the path forward.

The dog looked forlorn at the door, unconsolated by biscuits she pretended she hadn't been eating all day. But I knew how to make her happy.

The book has arrived. Pages have been turned down at the corners. Our contract together is reissued, and neither of us is too old for the mountains anymore. As I explained it to the dog: it only takes a chance encounter to be reborn.

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