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## The Long Way Home: The Death of Geraldine Largay

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# The Death of Geraldine Largay

ON THE MORNING OF JULY 22, 2013, GERALDINE LARGAY HIKEED with her full backpack along a rugged stretch of the Appalachian Trail south of Stratton, Maine, on her way from one backcountry shelter to the next. She crossed Orbeton Stream and walked over an old railroad bed. She then stepped off the trail to make a pit stop in the woods.

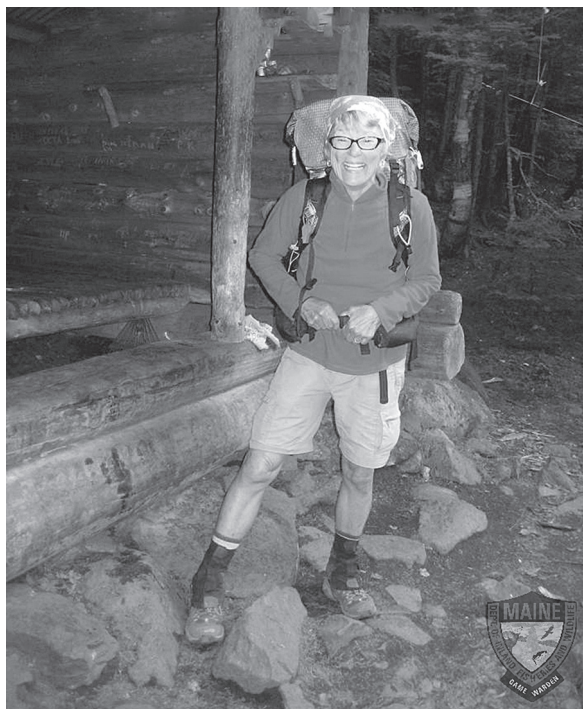
Then she got lost.

Teams of ground searchers and search dogs with their handlers tried to find her for two years. A forester surveying adjacent land owned by the U.S. Navy stumbled upon her flattened tent, strewn gear, and remains in October 2015, nearly three miles from where she'd first stepped off.

The Maine Warden Service hiked in the next day. They found a diary (not made public) and some notes to searchers. They found her food wrappers, her clothing, and her cell phone. She had waited in that tent under dense tree cover instead of moving to lower ground, where she would have been more likely to find her way to roads and people. She had been alive when the first major search ended. She might have lived almost a month after she was last seen. What went through her mind as she waited to die remains a terrible mystery to most of us.

In 2016, the Maine wardens released thousands of pages of data from the search. These pages took me many weeks to read. They tell of the ground searches that led to nothing and reports of false leads. Hikers and the public wrote and called. They blamed Bigfoot; they thought they had seen Largay in restaurants or hostels months later, even places many miles from Maine. For a while, a sensible theory suggested that she might have fallen off a cliff. Some were sure she'd been killed or abducted. Her cell phone number was taken over by someone in Illinois; the investigation into that took many days.

In these documents, a few crucial clues to what happened jumped out at me. In the end, her death was the result of her own decisions. My heart grieves. I cannot get this tragedy out of my mind. It has taken over my



*Geraldine Largay smiled for Dottie Rust's photo while buckling her pack's hip belt on July 22, 2013. This was the last photo ever taken of her.*

MAINE WARDEN SERVICE

late-night musings. I read and reread the pages about her search, hoping that I will find some explanation of why a strong hiker who'd been on the trail for three months was unable to walk herself toward a woods road or streambed.

This tragedy unfolded not because of bad weather or terrain, failure of equipment, or lack of hiking experience. Gerry Largay was used to rain and rough terrain, she had top-of-the-line equipment, and she had hiked 950 miles. This tragedy developed because she was terrified.

AS A WOMAN WHO HAS BACKPACKED SOLO MANY TIMES, I FEEL INVESTED in showing that women can survive getting off course. You might say I'm going to look harder in the documents than most people might for proof that Gerry Largay got stuck because she encountered bad luck that no one could have overcome. I find something darker. I find fear.

For more than two months, she had hiked with a partner, her friend Jane Lee. Lee had left the trail at the end of June for a family emergency. Lee asked Largay to wait until 2014 to finish. Largay said no: she and George, her husband, who was driving from point to point, helping his wife resupply, had

moved out of their Atlanta, Georgia, house and stored their belongings. They had a great deal invested in Gerry's completing her hike that year.

Largay wanted to continue despite the fact that she disliked solitude on the trail. Lee told the investigators that Largay feared being alone so much that she would go to great lengths to avoid tenting by hiking farther to a shelter where others would be.

In one affidavit, Lee "stated that Geraldine routinely would become disoriented throughout their hike and they would have frequent arguments about which direction to hike in along the trail. . . . As the terrain became more difficult Geraldine became more easily disoriented."

Maine's terrain is rough and slow going. Largay's progress was about 1 mile an hour, which is normal for many through that stretch. On that day, she left the Poplar Ridge Shelter at 7:15 A.M., texting her husband, George, who was meeting her at the next road a day later: "About to leave shelter. Don't worry about getting stuff for 100 Mile Wilderness." This message reveals much. It suggests Gerry Largay was exhausted and was considering a break. I think she was rethinking her decision to hike solo because the terrain had become so challenging.

By 11:01 A.M., she was lost. She composed the following text to George, which he never received due to bad reception: "In somm trouble. Got off trail to go to br. Now lost. Can u call AMC to c if a trail maintainer can help me. Somewhere north of woods road. XOX." She tried to send this message ten more times.

The next day, she wrote this text: "Lost since yesterday. Off trail 3 or 4 miles. Call police for what to do pls." She tried to send this again four days later. She apparently tried to compose and send other texts, none of which made it out.

Lee told investigators, "George doesn't know the extent of Gerry's inability to deal." But she was sure that her friend would not have gotten lost at a trail intersection near where she did go missing. The AT is well blazed in that section.

But because she was alone, I believe that Largay went farther off the trail than usual for her pit stop, taking her pack with her instead of leaving it on the trail. Thus, an act meant to keep her safe ended up putting her in danger. From there, things deteriorated because, as Lee said, Largay "didn't know how to use compass." That she had "no confidence." That she had phobias: "alone, in tent, dark." And so, after Largay got lost off-trail, she must have decided to set up her tent under great duress.

Gerry Largay also took various medications that she needed to continue; if she ran out, she would have had reactions that could include panic. The reports didn't specify the amount of medication she had along, but her practice was not to carry anything extra. It's clear that she was not set up to wait long in the woods without running out of medication.

The evidence points to this: she decided early on that if no one could find her, she would die waiting. I think she gave up within the first few days and started a waiting game. This had to have been excruciating. But fear can be a powerful fixative.

Rescuers found a diary and a page from a book with handwritten notes. They did not make the diary public. But the page from the book, dated August 6, reads, "When you find my body please call my husband George . . . and my daughter Kerry . . . [it] will be the greatest kindness for them to know that I am dead and where you found me—no matter how many years from now. Please find it in your heart to mail the contents of this bag to one of them."

She decided to remain in situ, in impenetrable forest, even though she must have longed to find her loving family. How I would like to turn the clock back and turn myself into a genie who visits her and urges her up and out, downhill toward a streambed (or the nearby railroad bed she'd crossed). How I want to talk with her and discover what she was thinking. I believe that this is a textbook example of why staying put and waiting can be the very wrong decision when the chosen site is so obscure.

"I wish you were here," her granddaughter wrote in capital letters on the wooden cross Largay's family placed at her final resting place. Everything we know about her from her family says that Geraldine Largay would have wished that, too. Except that for some reason, she was unable to save herself.

—Christine Woodside

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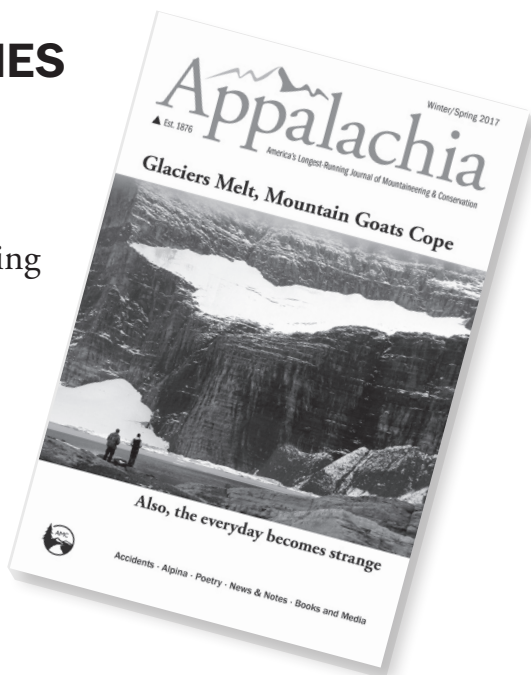
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