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## The Long Way Home: With Magic Like This, Who Needs Routine?

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## With Magic Like This, Who Needs Routine?

IT'S NOT AN EXAGGERATION PORTRAYING MY FIRST LONG TREK IN THE White Mountains as falling through the back of my closet into C.S. Lewis's fictional land of Narnia. Like Edmund in that children's story, I stumbled, awestruck, into the forest, staring at the trees and rocks as if I had never seen them before.

But in the early years of my mountain passion, I never ran into a beautiful woman in a sleigh doling out boxes of Turkish Delight. That is, I did not meet the American long-distance trails' equivalent of Narnia's White Witch—those people who lie in wait at trail crossings and offer soda, fried chicken, junk food, and pack ferrying to worn-out long-distance hikers.

On the Appalachian Trail between Georgia and Maine and on the Pacific Crest Trail between southern California and northern Oregon, they call the White Witches “trail angels” and their protection “trail magic.”

The dispensers of trail magic smile, kindly. They give out food. They sometimes take a hiker's money to carry his pack for a while, while the hiker goes over a giant massif without his gear.

I question whether I could have hiked more than a few hundred miles, instead of the thousands of miles I've put on my boots over the years, had I been faced with trail angels. I say this is not magic but misapplied altruism. This “help,” available at so many road crossings, has become temptation. An exhausted, lonely, cold, hungry hiker faced with free burgers and sodas will quickly forget that the purpose of quitting her job and leaving home was precisely to avoid indulging—to go alone, to experience the true conditions of the backcountry. The purpose was precisely discomfort, challenge, loneliness, and uncertainty of whether her supplies would last until the next town.

Trail magic has become so ubiquitous on long-distance trails that it has inspired a counterrevolution, a subgroup, the “unsupported” hikers. These adventurers proclaim ahead of time that they will never accept a ride into town, never will leave food hidden in a cache, never will accept free food from

anyone. There's so much magic all around these days that those who want the traditional wilderness experience feel that they must always reject it.

At age 24, on my first overnight in the Whites, I fell in the mountains' thrall because they scared me and woke me up. I experienced something that Belden Lane mentions in his book *Backpacking With the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014). His time in Canyonlands National Park, a labyrinth of high rock walls in Utah, terrified yet thrilled him. He compared his feeling to Søren Kierkegaard's description of anxiety or perhaps horror, "a desire for what one fears."

I hike long distances because doing so presses me deep into a landscape dominated by wild animals and forces of nature that I, being human, cannot understand. I don't think humans are wired to turn away from food, water, rest, and transportation when it appears in front of us. I would have missed so much in my rambles into the backcountry if I'd encountered the White Witch every time I came to a road crossing.

I don't mean my friends and I didn't ever get help. No, we ate ice cream on a Pennsylvania lawn and rode in a pickup truck to a burger party thrown by past thru-hikers in Virginia. But these were wonderful because they were rare. Not rare today. Scott Bryce, who wrote a glossary for Pacific Crest Trail hikers, said that in recent years "trail magic is becoming so common that some hikers now expect it, and become rude when it isn't offered."

I've noticed something different—not rudeness or entitlement, but something like surrender. It's subtle. Not long ago, I crossed paths with thru-hikers on Mount Moosilauke. I knew from their thin, muscular bodies, disheveled states, and aromas that they'd been on the trail since spring. But they carried no packs. They explained that someone had charged only a few dollars to carry their gear around to the next road crossing. We swapped stories; I told them I'd been a thru-hiker many years earlier. One of them said that back then, thru-hiking had actually been hard. I was surprised. We all agreed that going packless over Moosilauke feels good, but they looked a little apologetic and wistful, as if they'd had too much Turkish Delight.<sup>1</sup>

—Christine Woodside

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1. The White Witch offering Turkish Delight comes from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, by C.S. Lewis (HarperCollins, 2002; first published in 1950).

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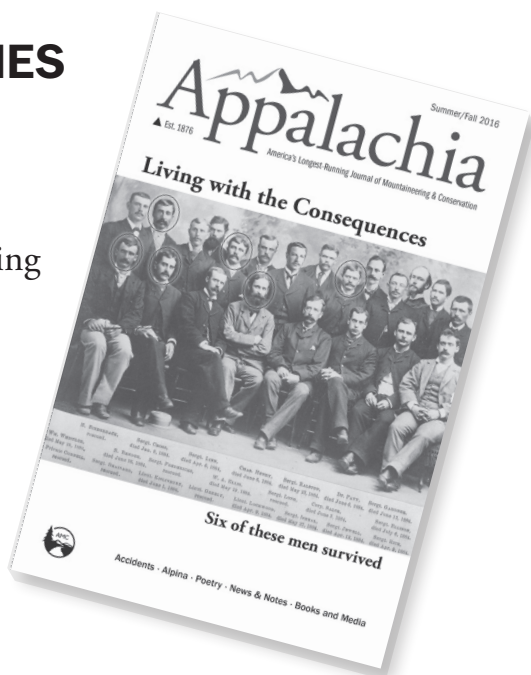
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