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Breakup at 4,800 Feet

He hiked out, and she didn't

Elissa Ely



HEAVY-LIMBED AND MIDDLE-AGED, WE HIKE UP OLD BRIDLE Path and over Agony Ridge, heading toward Greenleaf Hut, liberated from the human ties we had left behind. We felt ourselves agile and untethered. Without attachments to spouses and children, we had become downright buoyant.

On the second Agony, we slipped over rained-on rocks. We paused, took stock, took hold of wet boulders, and paused again. We were feeling more endangered now. A young Greenleaf Hut croo member passed in the other direction. She saw us hesitating and nodded, lightly skimming the rocks, but did not stop. She, too, was unattached.

Someone breathed behind us, and an old man, hale in a bandana, fell into step. He looked as though he could have blown up a balloon while vaulting past us. When he slowed down, it was not because he needed to; it was that we were new neighbors, and he had stopped to socialize over the fence. He said he hoped he could finish the entire Franconia Ridge loop and looked at his watch. “Feels good,” he said. The day was beautiful, the route straightforward.

But, our neighbor added, he had to move quickly. He had promised his wife he would be back before she became too worried. They had been married for 40 years. She didn’t like hiking; she liked shopping. She was going to find an outlet store or two, and would be waiting for him in the Lafayette Campground parking lot. They had parted an hour and a half ago, and he figured he had about three hours left before he needed to get back to her. He wondered whether he could finish the loop in that time. He thought probably not—which was disappointing, of course, but you had to be realistic. He would climb to the summit and turn around.

That was the marital bargain: all the mountain freedom he wanted, if he could keep his wife from worrying about him.

His solitary hike fulfilled him; we could see that. At the same time, it was obvious, he could hardly wait to return to his wife. He excused himself and sped up. Time talking to us meant distance lost. Thousands of feet below, an elderly woman would be waiting in a car with shopping bags. Maybe she was reading a paperback in the passenger seat. Maybe she had brought her knitting. Maybe she was gazing out the open window, remembering something they needed to do together.

Mount Lafayette seen from the Franconia Ridge, setting of beauty, sorrow, and joy.

JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN

That night, cheek to jowl with strangers, we lay in adjoining top tiers of triple bunk beds. A young man had spread his sheet in the bunk beneath one of us, and a young woman lay in the bunk beneath him. They spoke quietly to each other, in French. He kept peering over the edge to check on her. She lay curled under her sheet as if she had a chill. Once or twice, he climbed out of his bed and knelt next to hers. They seemed affectionate, though she also seemed ill. We wondered what emergency procedures might be necessary if her fever—it must have been a fever—didn't go down.

The next morning, he rose for breakfast, but she didn't. She lay under her sheet while we dressed with our backs to them. She lay there while he folded his blankets and filled his backpack, went to the dining hall, finished his meal a table away from us, and returned to the bunks with a last cup of coffee. He knelt by her bed and said something, which we didn't hear. Then he took up his poles, pulled his belongings onto his back, and left. A few minutes later, we realized he had hiked out. Another few, and we knew he wasn't returning.

She lay in the bunk, weeping. This was not for our eyes; it's wrong to witness the shattering of a stranger. We had no right to this intimacy at 4,800 feet, yet could not avoid it. We looked past her for the toothpaste.

Then we climbed the mile to Mount Lafayette, stood in what seemed—to our aging bones—like a gale, and turned onto the foggy ridge. We stumbled down the Falling Waters Trail. Near the bottom, we encountered a couple hiking up the Falling Waters Trail, nowhere near the ridge, and even farther from the top of Lafayette and the trail down to Greenleaf Hut. They asked hopefully how much farther it was to Greenleaf Hut. We wondered whether they would find our stranger still there, crying.

We had taken to the mountains for a high view of our sorrows and for the freedom it brought. Elevation doesn't diminish sorrows, and freedom is only a joy if you choose it. Late that night, driving in silence back to Boston and tethered again to responsibilities, we separately and secretly rejoiced—because, in fact, human ties are everything.

ELISSA ELY is a Boston-based psychiatrist and writer who is often published in the *Boston Globe*.

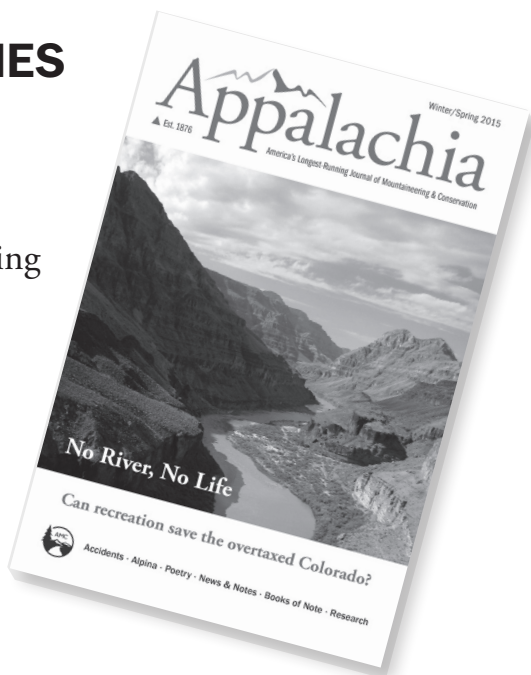
Editor's note: This essay takes place on one of the most traveled ridges in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The Franconia Ridge loop combines the Old Bridle Path, the Franconia Ridge Trail, and the Falling Waters Trail, an 8.9-mile circuit.

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