

2013

## Outfit for an Excursion: On a Backcountry Journey, a Daughter Notices Signs of Aging in Her Father

Annie Bellerose

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bellerose, Annie (2013) "Outfit for an Excursion: On a Backcountry Journey, a Daughter Notices Signs of Aging in Her Father," *Appalachia*: Vol. 64: No. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol64/iss2/9>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

# Outfit for an Excursion

*On a backcountry journey, a daughter  
notices signs of aging in her father*

**Annie Bellerose**



The following will be a good outfit for one who wishes to make an excursion of twelve days into the Maine woods in July, with a companion . . . for the same purposes that I did.

—*Henry David Thoreau*, *The Maine Woods*

WE'RE GOING ON A TRIP, MY DAD AND I. FIVE DAYS IN THE Adirondacks. We'll set up a base camp and hike from there. We haven't been on a hike for more than just the day in a while; I've been in college, then living out West, then working an outdoor education job with 80-hour weeks. But I'm heading off to graduate school in North Carolina in the fall, and we felt we must carve out the time for a trip together before bugs and people descend on the woods and I have to head south. We've taken a lot of trips as a family, starting when I was very small, but my mother's demanding job and bad knees have increasingly kept her from joining us. So these trips have become something special for my dad and me. And it's these trips, starting all those years ago, that have taught me how wild places can make you who you are and bring you closer to who you want to be, how going into a wild place can be most like going home.

*My journal, 1990:*

Today is July 14. The drive was much too long (8 hours). We saw a red fox and a mosse, which was in the middle of the road, but the mosse finally moved. When we got there I tried to build a stone pot for birch bark, but it didn't work. After supper we went for a paddle. We heard bullfrogs and loons. P.S. We saw 2 rabbits a few times.

*My dad's journal, July 14, 1990:*

Have 160 pounds of gear.

Anne wakes with upset stomach. So excited.

Toilet paper. Second roll. (PC [Paula Casey Bellerose, Annie's mother] believes you can never have too much.)

Gorp.

Ham patties & pancakes and oatmeal. Crackers and cheese.

What to take?

*Annie Bellerose on Maine's Allagash River in 1990.* GEORGE BELLEROSE

What forgotten  
Maps-study & study  
Anne how long on road-hrs tick away  
Wind south-north  
Head north—weathered houses. Potato fields  
Trips Blur  
Top of earth feeling as come over rises  
2 loons in front of campsite  
Anne's ululation echoes across the lake but goes unanswered  
Two bullfrogs looking for mates boom back and forth across the pond

In 1990, my mother, father, and I head north from Vermont to Maine. We're retracing some of Thoreau's travels in the Maine woods: climbing Katahdin, up in the northern third of the state, and then heading even farther north to the Allagash River, to paddle toward Canada. It's my dad's idea. At almost 8, I think of Thoreau as some bearded uncle. He seems not too far removed from us despite the years; his trip to Katahdin was in 1846, and the Allagash eleven years later.

At night, my dad reads aloud to us in the tent from Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*. My mother smushes mosquitoes against the nylon walls. And we write in our journals. Mine is in a tiny red-covered spiral-bound book. I write big but mostly along the lines. I stop writing the date after the first day. Maybe I'm becoming immersed in what my dad calls wilderness time, where the day doesn't matter because you're just out on the river again, and it feels like you have been there forever and will be forever. My dad's notebook is also spiral-bound, a bit larger, and his long slanted script takes up pages. My notebook is mostly a list of what animals we see. I'm fascinated by moose, and loons, deer, fish. Like the appendices in *The Maine Woods*, where Thoreau includes lists of what he's seen: Quadrupeds, Plants Which Attained the Height of Trees, List of Birds. My father's notebook is a little more comprehensive. While I'm watching rabbits, he's watching everything, thinking about past trips, trips to come, noticing how I'm imitating loon calls, how I fidget when I'm paddling.

Now, twenty years later, I wish that I'd been paying attention to more than just the animal count, and, occasionally, the weather. I wish I'd had the foresight to write more down: what my dad said, what it felt like to be snuggled between my parents each night in the tent, how we spread out the map each morning to trace our route downriver. Because I'm thinking more and more about my dad, and about what he's taught me. He's getting older,



*Annie Bellerose descends Mount Colden, 2008.* GEORGE BELLEROSE

65 this year, and he has cancer. Each time we settle ourselves into the canoe, each time we stuff an apple and the newspaper into a backpack for a quick Sunday hike, each time we pull out maps and figure out where to go next—it feels more and more precious. It feels one step, one paddle stroke, closer to the time where we won't be able to do this any more.

2008. My dad's standing on top of the mountain where he wants his ashes scattered. I'm slicing cheese and cucumber in the lee of a boulder. He's trying to button up his wool shirt as the wind whips it in his hands, snapping it like a flag. He's got on his old ski hat; it has marching antlered moose and a pom-pom, and a big scalloped bite missing from the forehead from where the dog had a snack. He gets his shirt buttoned and then puts on his fleece vest and then his red rain jacket, which he tucks into his rain pants. His nose is running.

"Dad," I say, "come eat." It's just turned June, and we're on Algonquin Peak in New York's Adirondacks. Thoreau never ventured into the High Peaks, but at night in the tent, my dad reads about these mountains in *The Adirondack Reader*. He's always curious, always wants to learn about the water or the woods he finds himself in.

“Hold on,” he says, and crouches down to take a few quick photos of me spreading out rye crackers and wedges of apple on the rock. When we’re not in the woods, he’s a photojournalist, and even here, he’s draped in cameras, old boxy Nikons filled with black-and-white film. We eat in companionable silence, watching the cloud layer below us. Somewhere in the summit clouds are the rest of the Adirondacks’ High Peaks—a whole range of folded dark mountains, only faintly green down in the valleys, even in June, shirred with the long rocky slides of old and new avalanche paths. We can’t see any of it right now, unless we stand up and look behind our sheltering boulder at Mount Marcy, the highest mountain in the state, barely breaking through the floor of clouds. But it’s for the view that my dad wants his ashes to be spread here, these layers upon layers of mountains, the vistas stretching north to Canada on a clear day, and east to Vermont. My dad’s munching his open-faced sandwich, gazing off into the fog, crumbs piling in the creases of his jacket.

“Dad!” I say and brush them off. After we eat some chocolate, he puts his hands behind his head and stretches out. My dad loves to nap on summits. Today is no exception. The cameras on his chest rise and fall. I clean up, and though at home I get irritated when he can’t seem to get his dirty dishes from the sink to the dishwasher, here, it is a pleasure. I want so badly for him to be happy, and I let him sleep in the clouds, and pack our lunch away, and eat some more chocolate. I think about what it will be like to come back here with a different purpose, with the idea of giving his body over to the wind and letting it blow north to Canada, east to Vermont. It makes me shiver, and I shove my dad, gently, wanting to wake him up.

“What,” he says. “I’m not sleeping.” He always says this.

*My dad’s journal, July 16, 1990:*

Anne is can stomper, bark beater, tent pole collector

Anne talks in her sleep Do you want me to keep paddling?

Outdoors expands time

Purpose is not to bring comforts of home

Wash clothes in front of your campsite—wade out in water

But mainly the canoe rides straight through the waves, sledgehammer directness to it

Will this be a problem in Chase Rapids we’ll see—anxious but?

Glory of woods is its silence listening to crows, loons

People who come with their walkmans & radio can never hear nature

Drive an old car but paddle a good canoe

Anne is wiggly worm in the tent. No telling where we will find her in the morning or middle of the night.

*My journal, July 15, 1990:*

Today we saw 24 loons. We saw 8 loons all together! I saw buck deer in the water. Another time we saw doe in woods. Mommy, Daddy and I went thogh the lock dam and it was much to shollow, sometimes we had to get out and walk the boat.

Our canoe is 18 feet, 3 inches long. It's a deep green, the color of the spruce and fir along the shore. It's named the Big Greenie. The Big Greenie is like a large inanimate animal to me: I sing to it, pat its sides from my seat in the center of the boat, use the blade of my paddle to splash the bow when it's my turn to be up front.

"The boat needs a drink!" I say, gleefully. I am supremely comfortable in the boat. I can stand to scout out the river ahead. I can nap leaned up against the big orange dry bags of our gear. My mother and I can switch from the cane seat in the bow to the middle spot in the center of the canoe while my dad keeps propelling us downstream.

When it comes time for a portage, my mom and I carry all our gear. Each big dry bag is made of waterproof material and has shoulder straps. I lug the paddles, still wearing my lifejacket (if I wear it, it's one less thing to carry), and they clap together and slide around in my hands, taller than I am. My lifejacket smells musty, like river water. I chew on the zipper. We have to make a couple trips to collect all our gear—sleeping bags, the tent (also green, but nameless), the stove, our food, extra clothes. Thoreau carried his belongings in India-rubber knapsacks. He had no lifejacket but, among other things, a full-size ax, a small pocket spyglass, and one blanket, best gray. My dad carries the Big Greenie. Once the boat is pulled up on the shore, first he puts his hands on the gunnels and rocks it back and forth. Then he rolls it up to his knees, and then, with one big sweeping motion, he rolls the canoe up and over his head, and settles the yoke on his shoulders. I think my dad is the strongest person in the world.

2008. I watch where my dad puts his feet. I want him in front of me. Once, this would have been because I needed to see where I should step. Now it's because I worry. Today it's pouring, a heavy rain that started while the morning was still dark. We're trying to hike Marcy, the mountain we could see





*The writer's father, George Bellerose, paddling on the Allagash River, in 1990.* BELLEROSE FAMILY

lifting above yesterday's clouds. An early June rain in the High Peaks is cold, a few degrees away from sleet.

I've been working on my dad the last few days. "Try my poles, Dad, just try them." Finally, in the rain, he says yes to using my aluminum hiking poles, one for each hand. That he even says yes surprises me. His balance isn't always great, especially with a heavy pack, and he's noticed. "I'm not 30 anymore," he mourns. "Ha, I'm not even 40." Once, I couldn't keep up with him. Once, he carried me. Now, I try to sneak the heaviest things into my pack, though if he sees, he protests. He's been in the woods decades longer than I have. He takes long bush plane-accessed paddling trips in Canada. He heli-skis on the West Coast. He's the one who brought me here to begin with. And maybe that's why I feel this sense of responsibility, this terror of things shifting, the balance of strength sliding, rolling, gaining momentum like a pebble on a rocky slab. My father has given me this gift of the outdoors, of these trips together, and now I want it to last for him, for us.

I wouldn't mind if I fell today, in this pummeling rain, already soaked through all my layers. If I were with a friend instead of my dad, I wouldn't mind if my friend fell, either. I'd laugh, reach a hand down, pull him up. But even the idea of my father falling shatters something inside me; I can't bear it, couldn't laugh, would reach out my hand, and then hang on to his.

I can't protect him. After all, most of the year we're apart, and he's off on his weekend day hikes and his 30-mile kayak races alone. I'm not there to



watch each footfall. But today I am, as if the intensity of my watching in these moments can keep him safe all the time.

We keep sloshing along the trail, and we hear the roar before we see it: The river exploding out of its channel, white and furious and loud. We can see the trail on the other side of the water, curving into the wet woods.

“What do you think?” my dad asks.

We stare at the river. The rain comes down in sheets. I walk up the bank one way, my dad the other, looking for a narrower span across the water, some good rocks to jump from. There’s no way across. We turn back toward our campsite, slowly, cold and soggy.

*My journal, July 17, 1990:*

Today we went thogeh Chase Raipids. It was very, very, very exciting. We saw a moses in the river. We saw a loon with a fish in it’s mothe.

*My dad’s journal, July 17 1990:*

Wind begins to stir shortly after 4—that far away whoosh—like a subway that never gets closer by 5:15 the tent begins to quiver and lap of waves on the shore can now be heard

Anne’s plastic camel went through rapids very very pleased that Anne said rapids were very very exciting not scary.

Simplify versus the comforts of home There is room for both but we know which camp we are in

Always conflict hurry up & slow down. I like to see what’s around next bend.

Anne, Paula are much better at enjoying the present bend

In the evening, my dad fires up our noisy gas stove and makes us hot chocolate before bed. The wind rattles the high branches of the white pines, and every time I hear the long, mournful wailing of a loon, I scoot closer to my dad. The three of us play cards; my mom deals out the deck. Today we’ve gone through the rapids, and I feel like a seasoned paddler. I wasn’t allowed to paddle in any of the whitewater, but I’ve had the important job of bailing out the water that slams over the sides of the boat. I can’t keep up with the waves that crest and break and splash us, and sit in an inch of water in the bottom of the boat. Still, I feel necessary to keeping us afloat. And, today, after the rapids in the quiet of the hot July afternoon, my dad took just me out in the boat so I could practice my strokes: the huge arc of a sweep that pushes the water up like a snowplow, the direct pull of a draw, the J stroke that feathers

out at the end like the letter. I can turn the Big Greenie in circles all by myself, first one way, then the other.

“Reach out,” my dad says, “Then pull straight back. Don’t lean too far forward.” I sit as tall as I can, pull straight back. Repeat, even though my arms are tired.

“Nice work, tiger,” he says when I get a good stroke.

Tonight, when we get in our sleeping bags, my dad tells me a story about Moose and Hippo. They’re a camping tradition, joining us for every trip I can remember: to the Boundary Waters, to Yellowstone, to the Tetons. This time Moose makes Hippo pancakes using an earthquake to break the eggs and mix the batter, and a volcano to heat the pan. My dad falls asleep before he’s finished the story and so does my mom, and I listen to the loons’ call and response, the rattling of the white pines, until I fall asleep, too.

*2008.* TONIGHT WE TAKE OUR STOVE AND FOOD DOWN TO THE EDGE of Lake Colden. The lake is long and narrow; the mountains rise like walls on either side. The sky is a gray ribbon above us. We’re hungry; tonight we’re having mac and cheese with tuna and broccoli.

“Dad, do you want to learn how my stove works?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says. I set up the pieces at the water’s edge.

“First you attach the bottle to the stove, and then you pump it 20 to 30 times to build up the pressure in the fuel line. Then you have to prime it.” I show him how one quick twist of the fuel gauge floods clear gas into the little cup below the burner.

“Look, here, you light it.” We watch the gas burn off until there’s a moment where the flickering blue flame jumps upward and I open the gas valve again. The stove whooshes into life.

“Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm,” my dad has been saying at each step.

“Now,” I say, “it’s your turn. From the beginning.” I take apart the pieces of the stove and watch as he puts it all back together.

“And then I prime it . . . and then I light it. . . .” The stove whooshes familiarly. I’m thrilled. The lake laps at our feet. Dinner tastes good, and we follow it with coffee and chocolate chip cookies. My dad loves chocolate chip cookies.

The roles that were once my father’s are now mine. I cook breakfast and dinner, and before that I shopped for them, and spread out all the food across the living room floor, repackaging, labeling: dinner day 1, add two cups water and sundried tomatoes to couscous, breakfast day 3, lunch day 5. I pack the



*Mountains rise like walls on either side of Lake Colden. The last destination of the 2008 trip, Mount Colden, waits on the horizon on the right.* GEORGE BELLEROSE

special surprise chocolate bars. I know how much stove fuel we'll need and how to fix a dislocated shoulder or mend a tent rip. He's the one straggling in the morning now. I get up, pack my clothes for the day, start breakfast, and sort out lunch. He meanders, leaves the tent unzipped, tracks in dead leaves, loses one sock but finds his elbow brace, remembers to zip the tent, wanders over in time for eggs and bagels, coffee. I've been wound tightly from years leading trips and working in the backcountry, and from my own hiking and climbing where dropping something means you'll never see it again, lost in deep snow or empty air. My dad, who once made breakfast while I bounced around the tent, slows me down, reminds me that we're on a trip, that a pine marten just bounded through our campsite, and that wheels of morning light spin on the lake. That we're here together. Remember, *wilderness time*.

My dad has started cancer treatment. He'll be OK. But he'll always carry those weakened cells in his body, that reminder that, after all, he's merely human. It's one sliding step toward what happens to parents: They get old, and then they get older, and they can do less, and less, and, eventually, they die. What will happen for my father when he can no longer go to the woods? When his body, even more so than now, wavers, creaks, stumbles, falls? My dad wrote in his Allagash journal, twenty years ago, about the conflict of time, the hurry up and the slow down. I like to see what's around the next

bend, he wrote; Anne and Paula are better at enjoying the present bend. Since then, I've become the one racing around the corners, wanting to see, needing to know what's coming next, wanting to be ready for it. And my father is the one who reminds me to take a nap on the summit. "Cultivate leisure," he's always saying.

On the last full day of our trip, we climb Mount Colden and stand battered by the wind on the clear summit, our first views of the trip. To the north, we can see Canada. To the east, the summit of Marcy, a crow's flight away, and 30 miles beyond that, Vermont. We clamber up on a big boulder for lunch, wearing all our layers. I slice an orange and hand my dad wedges. The wind blows the juice off my fingers. The clouds are moving fast, blocking out squares of shadow on the mountains below. Far, far down is the tiny glinting sliver of the lake. My dad leans back, pulls his hat over his eyes.

"I'm not *really* sleeping, you know," he says. "I'm *enjoying*. Don't you want to take a nap, too?"

I lie back on the rock next to my dad. I close my eyes. I let the wind sing past me.

---

ANNIE BELLERSE, a native New Englander who has worked many seasons as a back-country caretaker in Vermont and New Hampshire, holds a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She spent half of 2013 working in New Zealand.