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The Long Way Home: The Forest Mermaid

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The Forest Mermaid

GODDARD SHELTER ON THE EDGE OF VERMONT'S GLASTENBURY MOUNTAIN was a magic place in my memory, and five years after I first saw it, I set out to find it again.

The trail into Goddard Shelter is a treed route covering nine miles. I stepped out of my family's van, pulled out my loaded backpack with tent, food, water bag and filter, clothing, and more. Lifting it up onto my right knee, I felt that weight for the first time in a few years. My muscles asked me what was happening. I was 33 years old.

I'D LAST COVERED THIS DISTANCE IN A FEW HOURS WITH MY HUSBAND, NAT, and our friends Phil and Cay during our Appalachian Trail thru-hike. The woods back then seemed rolling and unremarkable, and nine miles was a little jog for us that year. In the late afternoon, sooner than we expected, we crossed a stream and encountered our buddy Brian coming the other way with his water bottle. "You're here!" he said. We were at the shelter early. That never happened.

We entered the clearing and there stood the shelter, almost brand new that year. Its robust log walls smelled fresh. It measured easily twice as wide and deep as most AT open-front shelters. Four fat logs held up the roof. The shelter sat on pillars made of field rocks, and it perched on the edge of a cleared meadow. A white-throated sparrow sang its clear note followed by the repeated tones a third higher.

Cay cooked us macaroni and cheese. We ate watching the meadow turn golden and then gray as the sun set to our right behind trees. Nat put away the food and hung the bags on the lines suspended from nails below the roof. I washed the dishes and hung the dish bag. Cay and I sat resting on the edge of the shelter and noticed a woman with long brown hair, neatly combed.

She was wearing a pink cable-knit cardigan sweater and dark blue sweat-pants. She looked out on the meadow; the man she'd come with was washing dishes near the stream.

We asked her how far they were going. She smiled and said just in and out; they would go home the next morning. Her boyfriend came back from washing

the dishes, and the two of them walked silently down into the meadow. He said, “Would you like to go up to the fire tower?” They disappeared.

She was graceful, and clean, and her sweater was the loveliest piece of clothing I had ever seen. She was like a mermaid, except on land: she had emerged from nowhere, seemed to know something I could not know, could move through a landscape in a way that was almost invisible—has anyone really seen a mermaid swim?

FIVE YEARS HAD PASSED. I WAS A MOTHER OF TWO SMALL CHILDREN, 2 AND 4 years old.

I trotted across Route 9 and stepped into the woods. Within only a few minutes, light rain began falling. I took my pack off, placed my raincoat and rain pants in a top pocket for easy access, and stretched the laminated pack cover around the load. I trudged slowly and saw no one at first. Soon the rain became steady.

I stopped to put on my rain pants and raincoat. I leaned into the inclines. At the power line, little wisps of fog completed the backdrop for this dreary experiment in solo hiking.

There came that stream, and it was running nicely. I was near the shelter. Now the rain was letting up, and I entered the opening around the shelter. I saw at least a dozen men and a few women standing around, leaning over stoves, shaking out gear, leaning against the shelter walls. The building was full. I was here, but I would be tenting.

After my dinner of macaroni, I darted into my shelter. The rain returned. I looked at my feet crossed in front of me. I breathed in slowly, and out slowly. I felt lonely.

The shelter, in the next morning’s brighter light, looked darker and time-worn. It was not the brand-new, magical building it had seemed five years earlier. I stepped down into the meadow and turned around. The rain and fog obscured the dark-brown walls. Trying to recapture a lost moment, I closed my eyes and imagined the young woman in her pink cardigan sweater. The forest mermaid. She was talking to her boyfriend. They were in sympathy. They knew where they were going. She did not try to prove anything. She had said almost nothing, and yet said everything.

—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

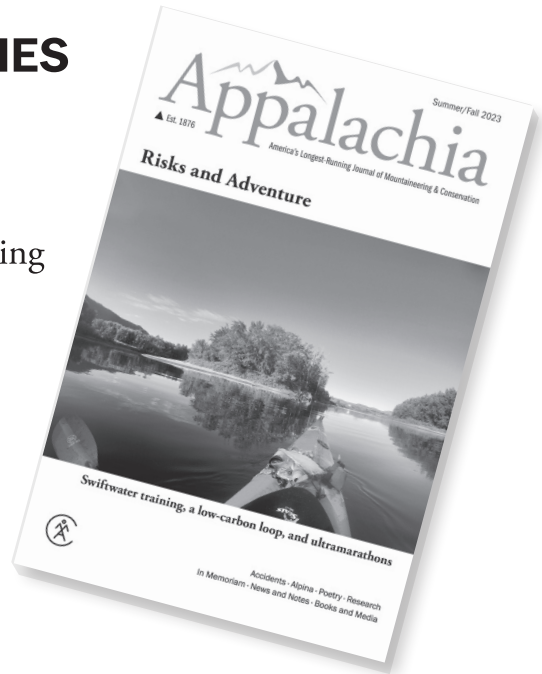
This piece is an excerpt from Going Over the Mountain: One Woman’s Journey from Follower to Solo Hiker and Back, coming out in September from AMC Books.

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