

chapter 14

In the morning, I drove to Pennsylvania, thirty miles or so to the north. The Appalachian Trail runs for 230 miles in a northeasterly arc across the state, like the broad end of a slice of pie. I never met a hiker with a good word to say about the trail in Pennsylvania. It is, as someone told a *National Geographic* reporter in 1987, the place "where boots go to die." During the last ice age it experienced what geologists call a periglacial climate—a zone at the edge of an ice sheet characterized by frequent freeze-thaw cycles that fractured the rock. The result is mile upon mile of jagged, oddly angled slabs of stone strewn about in wobbly piles known to science as *felsenmeer* (literally, "sea of rocks"). These require constant attentiveness if you are not to twist an ankle or sprawl on your face—not a pleasant experience with fifty pounds of momentum on your back. Lots of people leave Pennsylvania limping and bruised. The state also has what are reputed to be the meanest rattlesnakes anywhere along the trail, and the most unreliable water sources, particularly in high summer. The really beautiful Appalachian ranges in Pennsylvania—Nittany and Jacks and

Tussey—stand to the north and west. For various practical and historical reasons, the AT goes nowhere near them. It traverses no notable eminences at all in Pennsylvania, offers no particularly memorable vistas, visits no national parks or forests, and overlooks the state's considerable history. In consequence, the AT is essentially just the central part of a very long, taxing haul connecting the South and New England. It is little wonder that most people dislike it.

Oh, and it also has the very worst maps ever produced for hikers anywhere. The six sheets—*maps* is really much too strong a word for them—produced for Pennsylvania by a body called the Keystone Trails Association are small, monochrome, appallingly printed, inadequately keyed, and astoundingly vague—in short, useless: comically useless, heartbreakingly useless, dangerously useless. No one should be sent into a wilderness with maps this bad.

I had this brought home to me with a certain weep-inducing force as I stood in a parking lot in a place called Caledonia State Park looking at a section of map that was simply a blurred smear of whorls, like a poorly taken thumbprint. A single contour line was interrupted by a printed number in microscopic type. The number said either "1800" or "1200"—it wasn't possible to tell—but it didn't actually matter because there was no scale indicated anywhere, nothing to denote the height interval from one contour line to the next, or whether the packed bands of lines indicated a steep climb or precipitous descent. Not one single thing—not one single thing—within the entire park and for some miles around was inscribed. From where I stood, I could be fifty feet or two miles from the Appalachian Trail, in any direction. There was simply no telling.

Foolishly, I had not looked at these maps before setting off from home. I had packed in a hurry, simply noted that I had the correct set, and stuck them in my pack. I looked through them all now with a sense of dismay, as you might a series of compromising pictures of a loved one. I had known all along that I was never going to walk across Pennsylvania—I had neither the time nor the