

the crack of a falling limb, the crash of a bolting deer—makes you spin in alarm and stifle a plea for mercy. Whatever mechanism within you is responsible for adrenaline, it has never been so sleek and polished, so keenly poised to pump out a warming squirt of adrenal fluid. Even asleep, you are a coiled spring.

The American woods have been unnerving people for 300 years. The inestimably priggish and tiresome Henry David Thoreau thought nature was splendid, splendid indeed, so long as he could stroll to town for cakes and barley wine, but when he experienced real wilderness, on a visit to Katahdin in 1846, he was unnerved to the core. This wasn't the tame world of overgrown orchards and sun-dappled paths that passed for wilderness in suburban Concord, Massachusetts, but a forbidding, oppressive, primeval country that was "grim and wild . . . savage and dreary," fit only for "men nearer of kin to the rocks and wild animals than we." The experience left him, in the words of one biographer, "near hysterical."

But even men far tougher and more attuned to the wilderness than Thoreau were sobered by its strange and palpable menace. Daniel Boone, who not only wrestled bears but tried to date their sisters, described corners of the southern Appalachians as "so wild and horrid that it is impossible to behold them without terror." When Daniel Boone is uneasy, you know it's time to watch your step.

When the first Europeans arrived in the New World, there were perhaps 950 million acres of woodland in what would become the lower forty-eight states. The Chattahoochee Forest, through which Katz and I now trudged, was part of an immense, unbroken canopy stretching from southern Alabama to Canada and beyond, and from the shores of the Atlantic to the distant grasslands of the Missouri River.

Most of that forest is now gone, but what survives is more impressive than you might expect. The Chattahoochee is part of four million acres—6,000 square miles—of federally owned forest stretching up to the Great Smoky Mountains and beyond and spreading sideways across four states. On a map of the United States it is an incidental smudge of green, but on foot the scale of it

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Woods are not like other spaces. To begin with, they are cubic. Their trees surround you, loom over you, press in from all sides. Woods choke off views and leave you muddled and without bearings. They make you feel small and confused and vulnerable, like a small child lost in a crowd of strange legs. Stand in a desert or prairie and you know you are in a big space. Stand in a woods and you only sense it. They are a vast, featureless nowhere. And they are alive.

So woods are spooky. Quite apart from the thought that they may harbor wild beasts and armed, genetically challenged fellows named Zeke and Festus, there is something innately sinister about them, some ineffable thing that makes you squint in atmosphere of pregnant doom with every step and leaves you profoundly aware that you are out of your element and ought to keep your ears pricked. Though you tell yourself it's preposterous, you can't quite shake the feeling that you are being watched. You order yourself to be serene (it's just a woods for goodness sake), but really you are jumpier than Don Knotts with pistol drawn. Every sudden noise—

say hello and maybe find out if anyone has heard a weather forecast. But the man ahead never paused; never varied his pace, never looked back. In the late afternoon he vanished and I never saw him again.

In the evening, I told Katz about it.

"Jesus," he muttered privately, "how he's hallucinating on me." But the next day Katz saw him all day—behind him, following, always near but never overtaking. It was very weird. After that, neither of us saw him again. We didn't see anyone.

In consequence, we had shelters to ourselves each night, which was a big treat. You know your life has grown pathetic when you're thrilled to have a covered wooden platform to call your own, but there you are—we were thrilled. The shelters along this section of trail were mostly new and spanking clean. Several were even provisioned with a broom—a cozy, domestic touch. Moreover, the brooms were used *(we used them, and whistled while we did it)*, proving that if you give an AT hiker an appliance of comfort he will use it responsibly. Each shelter had a nearby privy, a good water source, and a picnic table, so we could prepare and eat our meals in a more or less normal posture instead of squatting on camp bags. All of these are great luxuries on the trail. On the fourth night, just as I was facing the dismal prospect of finishing my only book and thereafter having nothing to do in the evenings but lie in the half light and listen to Katz snore, I was delighted, thrilled, sublimely gratified to find that some earlier user had left a Graham Greene paperback! ~~If there is one thing the AT teaches, it is low-level ecstasy—something we could all do with more of in our lives.~~

So I was happy. We were doing fifteen or sixteen miles a day, nothing like the twenty-five miles we had been promised we would do, but still a perfectly respectable distance by our lights. I felt springy and fit and for the first time in years had a stomach that didn't look like a ball bag. I was still weary and stiff at the end of the day—that never stopped—but I had reached the point where aches and blisters were so central a feature of my existence that I ceased to notice them. Each time you leave the cosseted and hy-

gienic world of towns and take yourself into the hills, you go through a series of staged transformations—a kind of gentle descent into equanimity—and each time it is as if you have never done it before. At the end of the first day, you feel mullish, self-consciously grubby; by the second day, disgustingly so; by the third, you are beyond caring; by the fourth, you have forgotten what it is like not to be like this. I hunger, too, follow a rhythmic pattern. On the first night you're starving for your meal, on the second night you're starving but wish it wasn't noodles; on the third you don't want the noodles but know you had better eat something; by the fourth you have no appetite at all but just eat because that is what you do at this time of day. I can't explain it, but it's strangely agreeable.

And then something happens to make you realize how much—how immeasurably much—you want to revisit the real world. On our sixth night, after a long day in uncharacteristically dense woods, we emerged towards evening at a small grassy clearing on a high bluff with a long, sensational, unobstructed view to the north and west. The sun was just falling behind the distant blue-gray Allegheny ridge, and the country between—a plain of broad, orderly farms, each with a clump of trees and a farmhouse—was just at that point where it was beginning to drain of color. But the feature that made us gawk was a town—a real town, the first we had seen in a week—that stood perhaps six or seven miles to the north. From where we stood we could just make out what were clearly the large, brightly lit and colored signs of roadside restaurants and big motels. I don't think I have ever seen anything that looked half so beautiful, a quarter so tantalizing. I would almost swear to you I could smell the aroma of grilling steaks wafting up to us on the evening air. We stared at it for ages, as if it were something we had read about in books but had never expected to see.

"Waynesboro," I said to Katz at last.

He nodded solemnly. "How far?"

I pulled out my map and had a look. "About eight miles by trail."

He nodded solemnly again. "Good," he said. It was, I realized,

This took me aback. "You've never been on the trail?" But you're a ranger, I wanted to say.

"No, afraid not," she answered wistfully. "I lived here all my life, but haven't got to it yet. One day I will."

Katz, mindful of Beulah's husband, was practically dragging me towards the safety of the woods, but I was curious.

"How long have you been a ranger?" I called back.

"Twelve years in August," she said proudly.

"You ought to give it a try sometime. It's real nice."

"Might get some of that flab off your butt," Katz muttered privately, and stepped into the woods. I looked at him with interest and surprise—it wasn't like Katz to be so uncharitable—and put it down to lack of sleep, profound sexual frustration, and a surfeit of Harlees sausage biscuits.

Shenandoah National Park is a park with problems. More even than the Smokies, it suffers from a chronic shortage (though a cynic might say a chronic misapplication) of funds. Several miles of side trails have been closed, and others are deteriorating. If it weren't that volunteers from the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club maintain 80 percent of the park's trails, including the whole of the AT through the park, the situation would be much worse. Mathews Arm Campground, one of the park's main recreational areas, was closed for lack of funds in 1993 and hasn't been open since. Several other recreation areas are closed for most of the year. For a time in the 1980s, even the trail shelters (or huts, as they are known here) were shut. I don't know how they did it—I mean to say, how exactly do you close a wooden structure with a fifteen-foot-wide opening at the front?—and still less why, since forbidding hikers from resting for a few hours on a wooden sleeping platform is hardly going to transform the park's finances. But then making things difficult for hikers is something of a tradition in the eastern parks. A couple of months earlier, all the national parks, along with all other nonessential government departments, had been closed for a couple of weeks during a budget impasse between President Clinton and Congress. Yet Shenandoah, despite its perennial want of money, found the funds to post a warden at each

AT access point to turn back all thru-hikers. In consequence, a couple of dozen harmless people had to make lengthy, pointless detours by road before they could resume their long hike! This vigilance couldn't have cost the Park Service less than \$20,000, or the better part of \$1,000 for each dangerous thru-hiker deflected.

On top of its self-generated shortcomings, Shenandoah has a lot of problems arising from factors largely beyond its control. Overcrowding is one. Although the park is over a hundred miles long, it is almost nowhere more than a mile or two wide, so all its two million annual visitors are crowded into a singularly narrow corridor along the ridge line. Campgrounds, visitor centers, parking lots, picnic sites, the AT, and Skyline Drive (the scenic road that runs down the spine of the park) all exist cheek by jowl. One of the most popular (non-AT) hiking routes in the park, up Old Rag Mountain, has become so much in demand that on summer weekends people sometimes have to queue to get on it.

Then there is the vexed matter of pollution. Thirty years ago it was still possible on especially clear days to see the Washington Monument, seventy-five miles away. Now, on hot, smoggy summer days, visibility can be as little as two miles and never more than thirty. Acid rain in the streams has nearly wiped out the park's trout. Gypsy moths arrived in 1984 and have since ravaged considerable acreages of oaks and hickories. The Southern pine beetle has done similar work on conifers, and the locust leaf miner has inflicted disfiguring (but incredibly usually nonfatal) damage on thousands of locust trees. In just a couple of years, the woolly adelgid has fatally damaged more than 90 percent of the park's hemlocks. Nearly all the rest will be dying by the time you read this. An untreatable fungal disease called anthracnose is wiping out the lovely dogwoods not just here but everywhere in America. Before long, the dogwood, like the American chestnut and American elm, will effectively cease to exist. It would be hard, in short, to conceive a more stressed environment.

And yet here's the thing: Shenandoah National Park is lovely. It is possibly the most wonderful national park I have ever been in.

Popular impressions to the contrary, relatively few victims of hypothermia die in extreme conditions, stumbling through blizzards or fighting the bite of arctic winds. To begin with, relatively few people go out in that kind of weather, and those that do are generally prepared. Most victims of hypothermia die in a much more doleful kind of way, in temperate seasons and with the air temperature nowhere near freezing. Typically, they are caught by an unforeseen change of conditions or combination of changes—a sudden drop in temperature, a cold pelting rain, the realization that they are lost—for which they are emotionally or physically under-equipped. Nearly always, they compound the problem by doing something foolhardy—leaving a well-marked path in search of a shortcut, blundering deeper into the woods when they would have been better off staying put, fording streams that get them only wetter and colder.

Such was the unfortunate fate of Richard Salinas, who in 1990 went hiking with a friend in Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina. Caught by fading light, they headed back to their car but somehow became separated. Salinas was an experienced hiker and all he had to do was follow a well-defined trail down a mountain to a parking lot. He never made it. Three days later, his jacket and knapsack were found abandoned, miles into the woods. His body was discovered two months later, snagged on branches in the little Linville River. As far as anyone can surmise, he had left the trail in search of a shortcut, got lost, plunged deep into the woods, panicked, and plunged deeper still, until at last hypothermia fatally robbed him of his senses.

Hypothermia is a gradual and insidious sort of trauma. It overtakes you literally by degrees as your body temperature falls and your natural responses grow sluggish and disordered. In such a state, Salinas had abandoned his possessions and soon after made the desperate and irrational decision to try to cross the rain-swollen river, which in normal circumstances he would have realized could take him only farther away from his goal. On the night he got lost, the weather was dry and the temperature in the 40s. Had he kept his jacket and stayed out of the

water, he would have had an uncomfortably chilly night and a story to tell. Instead, he died.

A person suffering hypothermia experiences several progressive stages, beginning, as you would expect, with mild and then increasingly violent shivering as the body tries to warm itself with muscular contractions, proceeding on to profound weariness, heaviness of movement, a distorted sense of time and danger, and increasingly helpless confusion resulting in a tendency to make imprudent or illogical decisions and a failure to observe the obvious. Gradually the sufferer grows thoroughly disoriented and subject to increasingly dangerous hallucinations—~~including the decidedly cruel misconception that he is not freezing but burning up~~. Many victims tear off clothing, fling away their gloves, or crawl out of their sleeping bags. The annals of trail deaths are full of stories of hikers found half-naked lying in snowbanks just outside their tents. When this stage is reached, shivering ceases as the body just gives up and apathy takes over. The heart rate falls and brain waves begin to look like a drive across the prairies. By this time, even if the victim is found, the shock of revival may be more than his body can bear.

This was neatly illustrated by an incident reported in the January 1997 issue of *Outside* magazine. In 1980, according to the article, sixteen Danish seamen issued a Mayday call, donned life jackets, and jumped into the North Sea as their vessel sank beneath them. There they bobbed for ninety minutes before a rescue ship was able to lift them from the water. Even in summer, the North Sea is so perishingly cold that it can kill a person immersed in it in as little as thirty minutes, so the survival of all sixteen men was cause for some jubilation. They were wrapped in blankets and guided below, where they were given a hot drink and abruptly dropped dead—all sixteen of them.

But enough of arresting anecdotes. Let's toy with this fascinating malady ourselves.

I was in New Hampshire now, which pleased me, because we had recently moved to the state, so I was naturally interested to explore it. Vermont and New Hampshire are so snugly proximate