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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA at ASHEVILLE

FREE CHICKENS

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN CANDIDACY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF LIBERAL ARTS

BY

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The Final Project

FREE CHICKENS

by

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is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master of Liberal Arts degree at  
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*I heard once that chickens  
in captivity won't lay eggs. To  
give the chickens illusions of  
freedom, big chicken farms let a  
few of the birds roam around so  
the rest think they aren't captives.  
Thru-hikers are our society's  
equivalent to the free chickens.  
We roam around free convincing  
people who won't quit jobs they  
hate that they aren't wage-slaves.  
Enjoy your freedom free chickens.  
Enjoy every day.*

Dave "Vegas"

McNeil

Manassas Gap Shelter Log

June 2008

## Part I

## Chapter 1 – Georgia

*Time To Go**Thursday, April 3, 2008*

*I am aware of a few certainties: I will be cold; I will walk through rain – a lot of rain; blisters; I will be hungry; happiness, sadness, fear and bewilderment will all be experienced; pain and soreness will be felt everyday; and I'll learn even more about myself. I can't wait to get started. I hope to make it to Maine, but really I just want to enjoy my time on the Trail. 5 days, 5 weeks or 5 months – all will benefit me. For the first time in a while I feel like I'm actually doing what I'm supposed to do right now. One mile at a time, one day at a time. I'll make it as far as I'm supposed to.*

*If ever there were a situation that would make one stop and think, I really would like to leave civilization for a while and wander off into the woods for a few months, it would be a trip to Walmart at 10:00 p.m. looking for a couple of last minute bungee cords. That was me this evening. People looked wilted under the overwhelming florescent lighting. Over the speakers Jimmy Buffett was serenading a touching story about his love of cheeseburgers and his idea of paradise. All I could think was, Thank God I'm walking off into the woods day after tomorrow. I did find the bungee cords I needed. Let's face it, when you need a bungee cord at 10:00 at night...where else can you go?*

*Mom and Dad have been doing alright. They have proudly hung map of the Trail in the kitchen to keep tack of me when I call them. They've got a box of resupply food, shoes and a couple of shirts ready to go when I need them. I can only hope everyone else is so fortunate to have family and friends like me. I'm 32, quit the job that I hated, put all of my be-*

*longings into storage, and moved to my parents' home to prepare for my trip and to use as a springboard back into the "civilized" world when I return. After concluding that I was not crazy, stupid or flighty, everyone supported me.*

. . .

Those were the first words I sent out to family and friends via the blog, *Heading Northbound*<sup>1</sup>, which I set up before heading to Amicalola Falls State Park in northern Georgia, home of the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. My parents and I drove to Amicalola the next day.

After dinner at the park lodge, I settled in and made a few last phone calls to friends. Liz and Melanie both wished me luck and told me they were proud of me no matter how far I made it. My friends are my family.

I called my ex-boyfriend like I had promised. As in previous brief conversations, we didn't discuss anything about us or how he had abruptly altered my post-Trail plans just one month earlier. That conversation was the last thing I wanted to have that evening. Besides, I still hadn't found the words to express my thoughts and feelings concerning the subject. He reminded me again how he genuinely cared for me and wished me only the very best. I knew he meant it, but his words had lost their emotional effect on me. I reminded him that I would talk to him when I had something to say.

I hung up the phone and I looked at my gear, which I spent months researching. Weight seemed to be the biggest concern. Most of the books and articles said that the optimum weight of my pack fully-loaded should not exceed twenty percent of my body weight. This created a packing conundrum since, by those calculations, my 115-pound body should

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<sup>1</sup>"Time To Go." *Heading Northbound*. Viewed Nov. 21, 2014. <http://atnorthbound.blogspot.com/>

not carry more than 23 pounds for extended periods of time. Had I decided to start hiking when I was 250 pounds, my pack limit would have been a whopping 50 pounds allowing me to carry everything I wanted, including the kitchen sink.

Some of the experts were so fanatical about pack weight that they recommended removing zipper toggles from the pack, cutting my toothbrush in half, and cutting any excess tags or cords from each piece of equipment. I needed to pack light, but it sounded a little extreme. Friends offered a lot of advice – a gun, a big knife, and a camping shower were some of the most amusing. However, my ever-supportive and concerned parents decided they had hit on the ultimate piece of gear – a taser. When I arrived at their home a month before leaving to hike, they surprised me with a brand new taser capable of shooting its prongs into some poor bear (or tree if my aim was off) from over twenty feet away. I expressed gratitude amid giggling at the mental picture of what would happen between me, a bear, and my handy taser. Dad said he would get me a holster for easy access to my defense mechanism at all times. They gave up on the idea after we fell out laughing at the multitude of ridiculous scenarios the taser might provide. In the end, I selected gear that would suit my needs, yet be so multipurpose that there would be nothing superfluous.

I did feel guilty after laughing at the taser, though. Seven years earlier my parents experienced the same trepidation when I told them I was going into the Peace Corps. I remembered the fear in Mom's voice when I called her from Nicaragua to tell her I had resigned and was coming home. She begged to know why, but I was unable to talk due to the number of people surrounding me, fascinated by my phone call to the United States. She asked me only one question, "Have you been hurt?" Though exhausted, the only hurt I felt was the sensation of quitting. It would take a year to resolve that feeling and realize that

leaving the Peace Corps was the best choice. Concerning the Trail, I apologized to my parents for leaving them on my own, again.

I broke down my pack at the lodge and took inventory: a GoLite ultra lightweight pack, three dry sacks (one each for clothes, food and trash), a sleeping bag rated for 32 degrees, an ultra-light tarp for cover, one tank top, one pair of shorts, one pair of thermal leggings, two long-sleeved shirts, one fleece vest, three pairs of socks (always keep the third pair clean for town), two pair of underwear, rain pants and a rain jacket, one pair of trail runner shoes, one hat, an alcohol stove and a small bottle of alcohol, an ultra-light cooking pot, a spork, a titanium coffee cup, a small comb, a toothbrush (fully intact) and a travel size tube of toothpaste, dental floss, one small quick-dry towel, a copy of *The Thru-Hiker's Handbook*, two one liter bottles of water, a tiny Swiss Army knife, a water filtration pump, toilet paper, a small waterproof digital camera, a cell phone to be left turned off unless in town, and a little pocket notebook to keep a daily journal.

After researching the wide variety of first aid kits available, I decided to make my own: betadine, Q-tips, band-aids, Neosporin, one gauze wrap, anti-fungal foot cream, Benedryl cream, cortisone cream, and a few ibuprofen tablets. I checked my food supply. Neel's Gap, forty miles up the Trail, would be my first opportunity to resupply. I packed enough for six days, as everything I read said to always pack one extra day's worth of food in case of an emergency: eight packets of instant oatmeal (cinnamon and brown sugar, of course), seven Clif Bars, one small ziplock of trail mix, two packets of instant mashed potato mix, and five packets of various Lipton Pasta Sides. My gear, plus food, topped out at 27 pounds.

I crawled into bed because of the late hour and the long day ahead of me, but I was wide awake. I thought about the Trail. I thought about its length, 2,176.2 miles to be exact.

The AT's overall length changes almost annually due to rerouting. In 2008 the Trail meandered along its longest route in history.

The Trail extends across fourteen states over the spine of the Appalachian Mountain Range. There are approximately 300 named peaks and countless other nameless hills – total climbing of over 470,000 feet, which is an overall elevation gain that roughly equates to climbing Mount Everest sixteen times from sea level to summit. The Trail itself would include dust, mud, rocks, boulders, and lengths of path that were covered in brush due to poor maintenance. There would be other obstacles of the critter variety, including black bears, venomous snakes, stinging insects, and spiders. I have never been a fan of arachnids.

Aside from the topography and creatures, I would contend with the weather and climate. I was starting in the South during the early spring. Please do not be fooled by the concept of the warm, sunny Southland. The north Georgia hills are cold in April. I would be heading North with the seasons. Summer would be spent in the hot, humid Mid-Atlantic States and, by the time I reached the far North, autumn would be in full swing with temperatures declining once again. There would be rain, hail, wind, and lightning.

Other obstacles included those that most concerned my friends and family. People are by far the most dangerous creatures on the Trail. A lone female in the woods burdened with a backpack would make for an easy target.

On January 4, 2008, about three months before I planned to hike out, I received the first of many phone calls.

“Becca, have you seen the news? Turn on the news,” said Kevin.

“I saw it. They found her. She was murdered.”

“She was slaughtered, Becca. She went hiking alone on the AT and ended up nearly decapitated.”

I released a heavy breath. It was all I could do after I saw the report come in.

Kevin continued, “They said they think it was the same guy who decapitated that nurse there in Tallahassee. I know you saw that. That woman was killed where you go ride. The girl they just found was out on the AT for a day hike. He’s a serial killer, Becca. Do you still plan to do this? Hike?”

“Meredith Emerson. The woman they found near the AT is named Meredith Emerson,” I replied. “And they got the guy. He’s off the Trail now. He confessed. Look, Kevin, I’ve got to call you back, Mom’s on the other line.”

Meredith Emerson was a twenty-four year old woman and an experienced hiker, who left for her traditional New Year’s Day hike alone with her dog the morning of January 1, 2008. Hiking on the AT near Blood Mountain, Georgia, she encountered another hiker, an older man named Gary Michael Hilton. Meredith never returned home. Her dog was found alone on January 4, 2008, sixty miles from where they began hiking. That same day, authorities were tipped off by a gas station attendant who spotted Hilton trying to clean out his van. Once confronted by authorities, he confessed to the kidnapping and murder of Meredith Emerson telling police she “wouldn’t stop fighting” over the four days he held her captive. Hilton also confessed to the grizzly murder of a nurse in Tallahassee where I was living at the time, which he had committed just one month earlier.

News of the serial killer's arrest sparked calls from friends and family asking me if I was still planning on hiking. I had seen the television interviews of the local Tallahassee police who said they couldn’t discuss the crime scene because they found it too disturbing. I

read the articles detailing Hilton's other known victims, a couple he killed while hiking in Virginia. It made me stop and think about the what-ifs involved in hiking alone. However, it didn't take me long to decide that I was still leaving to hike the AT. Serial killers don't have "Crazy, Violent, Dangerous" tattooed on their forehead. They look like you and me and they live in cities, as well as the countryside. Not to be clichéd, but I could be hit by a bus crossing the street or struck by a stray bullet in any city. Living on the AT was still far safer than any town in America. And just as I practiced in my daily life and as I did living in the third world during my brief time in the Peace Corps, I would trust my common sense. Safety rule #1: never admit to anyone that I was alone and safety rule #2: never spend any significant time standing by road crossings or secluded parking areas when alone. Carrying a weapon, like the taser, would only present an instrument that could be used against me.

I continued to lie in bed awake as I mused also on the things I was looking forward to: sunrises, sunsets, colors, flowers, critters, the warm sun on my face, the symphony created by the wind rushing through the trees, stillness, quiet, the lack of electrified technology, no extended wardrobe, no make-up, no mirrors, fresh air, and new people. Every day promised to unfold slowly as my eyes and my mind processed something new with every step. No two days, no two steps would be the same.

I thought about how I arrived at this place. One year earlier I had been sitting in a damned cubicle working for the state, staring at its carpeted walls under artificial light and daydreaming of anywhere that had real sunlight and room to move. Life within the cubicle was desperately boring. There were more than twenty of us in a room, all discouraged from speaking. On more than one occasion, my director instructed me to stop saying hello to my coworkers when passing them. It was difficult to take him seriously. He was a large man,

who wore sloppy suits that didn't fit with collared shirts you could see through. He sported a curly mullet hairdo and drove a Firebird complete with the large bird painted on the hood that always had one headlight permanently flipped in the up position.

I was promoted quickly in my job. I began as an Analyst I and was elevated more than once a year through Analyst IV and to Investigator I by the time I left less than four years later. The management was terrible. The director freely commented on the bodies of the women in the office and would call each of us into his office to ask questions about our personal lives. We referred to it as being held hostage. It was invasive – much worse than a creepy catcall you hear walking down the street or a harassing drunk guy trying to feel you up at a bar. Everyday I walked into work, my guard went up on high alert in order to get through the day. The director only attempted to ask me about my personal life once.

Our work was goal-based, which meant each month we were given an arbitrary number of investigations we were to complete that was determined by the director. As punishment for my refusal to play his games, he placed my goals higher than everyone else every month, just out of reach to succeed. My only revolt was securing a small button pin on the outside of my cubicle that said “Micromanage Yourself.”

Furthermore, I had to dress in something referred to as “business casual.” It wasn't business-like and it wasn't casual. Instead, I was forced to have a complete wardrobe that I never wore anywhere but to work. And for four years, I had been stuck in a cubicle forced to ask the person two cubicles down the aisle if it was sunny outside.

Even the investigative work I generally loved failed to fulfill me under the toxic cloud of mismanagement that touched everything. For mental escape, I kept two books among the binders of work procedures. The first was *The Earth From Above: 365 Days* by Yann Ar-

thus-Bertrand. It was a glorious collection of aerial photographs from around the world characterized by a photo on one page and information about the place on the facing page. There was a new place, a new adventure for each day of the year. I entered that dreary box each morning and eagerly turned the page to see where my imagination was going that day. I called it my daily vacation. My mind wandered to other distant places. Like many, I had a list of destinations I wanted to see one day: Bora Bora; the silty, powder blue rivers of Iceland; the Igazú Falls on the Argentine-Brazilian border; Portugal; France.

The other book, *50 Jobs Worse Than Yours* by Justin Racz, was a gift from my mother. Well aware of my misery at work, she had sent it one day to make me laugh. It did. But what made me laugh so hard was the fact that a couple of the author's terrible job entries actually seemed to be jobs that I would prefer doing over the one I performed everyday in that damned cubicle. I would peruse its pages from time to time just to remind myself that there were much worse employment nightmares out there.

I remember it was a Tuesday in February, 2007 and my mind was wandering much more than usual to fend off the daily grind. I picked up *50 Jobs Worse Than Yours* for an easy grin. One of the entries and its accompanying photograph that I had seen many times before struck me so hard I felt flush. The job was "The Before Picture," as in the photos you see in diet commercials that are supposed to be those of the product spokesperson before she lost weight using the advertised diet gimmick that turned her into the thin, fit beauty speaking on the television. Hell, I had had that job before. I had been my own "before" picture. Two years earlier I finally hit my bottom weight of 114 pounds. It wasn't what I expected when I began losing weight at 250 pounds. I always thought if I lost weight, I would stop at my old

high school weight, an average 140 pounds. However, my new lifestyle and my body's frame determined my final weight to be much lighter.

I spent the remainder of the day with a couple of files open on my desk so it looked like I was working. And I was working. I was working hard on thinking through how I landed in that carpet-walled cubicle. Ten years earlier when I was finishing college and weighing 250 pounds, I didn't think I could really lose the weight the way I did – no diets, no pills, no stomach surgery – just by eating less, eating better and moving more. I never considered how much my thought process might change as I lost weight – even in my dreaded workspace, I was positive. I would have laughed if you told me I would look forward to things such as spinach, kale, a good glass of water and putting my body to work on a daily basis. And I certainly never believed it was possible to love and respect myself as much as I did that Tuesday.

Throughout the day my mind kept circling back to a recurring daydream – the Appalachian Trail. Growing up in Alabama near the Trail's southern terminus, I learned of the famed AT at a young age. I knew one guy who hiked it a few years earlier. It sounded cool. It would definitely promise the abundant sunlight I craved. There would be room to move. And there wouldn't be a damned cubicle in sight. Too, I'm a sucker for maps and the Trail's website outlining the route and its history captivated me.

Toward the end of the day, I was congratulating myself. I had adopted a new lifestyle and gained a new life as a result. My weight had remained stable without close attention for two years and I no longer held on to the irrational thought that I would one day wake up fat. I had created real and permanent change in myself. My plan was devised before I left work that day – I would look for another job for six months, if I didn't get anything promising,

then on October 1, 2007 I would stop looking for work and start planning my attempt at a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail in 2008.

I never did find a job more appealing than the one I already had and made the announcement to friends and family that I was going to hike the AT in 2008. I laughed off the fact I had never spent more than a single night in the woods at summer camp, but some people in my life didn't.

Other than my parents, I have many acquaintances, but few close friends. I have always maintained that if I had three or four true friends in this world – those for which either one of us would drop everything to help the other, then I was set for life. Those close to me didn't question the idea of my hiking the AT. My acquaintances, who believed they knew me well, saw things very differently. I was inundated with questions. "Becca, is everything going alright in your life?" "Do you need to talk to someone?" "What do you know about backpacking?" "Are you going to make it?" "What are you going to do in an emergency?" The sheer number of questions surprised me. After a couple of months of friendly interrogations, I stopped trying to defend myself. I really didn't know why I was going. I hadn't had any grand idea when I went into the Peace Corps, either. I knew my desire to hike the Trail was something within me much stronger than a desire to leave my job, but it had no name and my attempts to explain it were unsatisfactory to everyone except those close to me. Then one guy I knew down at the bike shop eyed me lazily from the bench on the front porch, "I hear you're going to try and thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. You'll never make it." I smiled and told him to enjoy the view from his couch. I didn't owe anyone an explanation. My message became clear – I was going, end of story.

Lying in bed at Amicalola State Park Lodge pondering a walk onto the Appalachian Trail the next morning, I realized I had accomplished so many things to create the woman I had become. This was going to be my chance to spend some time on my own, put my new body through all kinds of tests, and see my country in an entirely new way. I expected the AT was going to be the most intensely challenging mind game I ever attempted.

*April 5*

*Approach Trail (8.8mi) to Mile 2.7*

*Stover Creek Shelter (Georgia)*

*I began hiking in light rain. When I reached the summit of Springer Mountain, the southern terminus, I met a ridge runner named Roger. Two ladies hiking from the lodge were talking about a Korean guy ahead of us that doesn't speak English. That must be tough. Past the summit, I met my first trail angel, Trail Squid, who gave me juice.*

*At the shelter I met Jason, a firefighter from Sarasota who is on vacation, and another lone female attempting a thru-hike. I made too many mashed potatoes for dinner. Then one of the lodge girls poured fuel into her pot thinking it was water and started several small fires in the shelter. Now I'm almost out of water. Damn.*

. . .

I awoke at the Lodge on April 5 and saw light rain. All the time I was preparing for my hike, Mom made me make her only one promise – that I not walk away from her in the rain. We ate breakfast quietly while we stared out the massive windows at the misty rain. Then I paced around the lodge. I looked at my parents, “I have to go.” Mom said she knew it when she saw me at breakfast. She had hoped I would change my mind, but she knew me all too well. We grabbed my things and walked over to the Visitors Center where I signed in the log as aspiring AT thru-hiker number 1141.

Tourists outside took pictures and wished me the best of luck once they realized what was happening. Mom and Dad and I exchanged big hugs. I was choked up as I looked at the path beyond the archway that marked the beginning of the 8.8 mile Approach Trail, which would take me to the summit of Springer Mountain.

I had no idea when I would see my parents again. They had done so much to help me get to this place and were there to watch me walk away from them in the rain. Honestly, how many people have parents who would approve of their 32-year-old daughter giving up her career and her home and moving back in with them so that she could live on her own for six months in the woods when she's never been camping for more than a single night? After one more round of hugs, I turned around and walked away before any tears ran down my face. I'm not very good at goodbyes. I never looked back. I just started hiking up the Approach Trail. It was not until I returned home that Mom told me the two of them stood in the rain watching me make my way along the initial switchbacks of the Approach Trail until I was out of sight.

Mom wrote:

*Dear Becca,*

*I can't believe my little girl is really doing this. She's walking up a hill in a misty rain looking so small and so alone. I must be crazy. I should have held on to her leg. She couldn't drag me all the way to Maine. There are all kinds of dangers out there. They're tigers and bears out there. Well maybe not so many tigers, but there are damned sure a lot of bears and spiders and moose and snakes and cliffs and lightning. Maybe if we stay here at the start of the Trail for another night, she'll change her mind. But she won't. Be safe little one. Please don't get hurt. Please be careful of where you are and who you're with. Please call me as soon as you can. Why wouldn't you take the taser? She's out of sight, swallowed by the woods in the rainy morning. How quiet it is. Oh Becca, please come back. But she won't.*

. . .

Those writers of the AT weren't joking when they described the Approach Trail as difficult and straight uphill. *Bastards*. I was led in circles at the beginning, a pack-burdened rat in a maze. The rain and cold didn't help the situation, but I was on my way. Now, I have always fully admitted to being a bit of a jackass. I like to think of it as part of my charm. I spent the first two hours of my hike shaking my head and laughing. "Becca, you're a jack-ass. Ha! You're such a jackass, but you're a jackass who's going to make it to the head of the Appalachian Trail today, which makes you a lovable jackass."

You could've heard me all the way up the Approach Trail. "Shit." "Ouch." "Oh fuck." Audible giggling. "You're a jackass." "Oh, big tree." "What the hell?" "Hello squirrel." I would become known for my tendency to talk to Trail objects and critters, as well as my frequent use of one and two word expletives. I can be a bit of a talker and most hikers talk to themselves and the Trail itself out loud when hiking alone. Like me, I imagine most long-distance hikers are described by their friends as being *a little different*.

After the first couple of hours, I got into a good cadence. The rain stopped, leaving only mist and fog. I would have been happy to stop walking uphill, but it really wasn't that bad. *I can do this*. I rode that wave of positive vibes right up until I busted my ass when I slipped on a wet root.

"Son of a bitch!" My pack's load dictated an awkward, ungraceful movement that spun me around forcing me flat on my butt. I figured it was a good time to take a break and sat where I landed in the middle of the Approach Trail looking around at the desolate forest. There were no leaves on the trees and the flowers had not yet started to bloom. The only colors I could see were brown and grey. *Hmmm*. I hadn't seen any people on the Approach

either. I listened. There was no wind. Water was dripping from the trees – pit, pat, pit. I couldn't see any critters other than the occasional squirrel, but I could hear them zipping about in the brush. I got up and started again.

I hiked up and up and up. It never seemed to end. Up, up. I was starting to feel all of the climbing in my legs and my body was obviously getting accustomed to the pack. My shoulders felt funny and my back ached from my new hiker's posture, which bent my body forward slightly to maintain a center of gravity.

I kept toddling along until I decided to take another break. My misguided calculations insisted I must be near the summit. Then again, I had had that same thought an hour before. In reality, I had no clue where I was other than the fact that I was still on the right trail (a certainty only because there were no other trails). Then I heard faint voices. At first I got a little worried the chatter might have been in my head. I held my breath listening. Nope, the voices were real and they weren't moving. Ha, ha! I leaped up the path a little further and found myself on the summit of Springer Mountain. A white wall of low clouds surrounded the summit and blocked any view from the highest peak in Georgia. I made the trek in pretty good time. I completed the Approach Trail, eight point eight miles uphill, in four hours and twelve minutes. *Not bad, babe.*

A couple of people out to hike a section of the Trail also stood on the summit with a ridge runner, whose job was to monitor a section of trail (often a few miles long between peaks) for safety and to assess the total number of hikers using the Trail. Roger, the runner, welcomed me and took down my basic information for records after discovering I was a thru-hiker. He took a picture of me kneeling by the Appalachian Trail Southern Terminus plaque embedded in the rock. The picture included an image of my first white blaze, a white stripe

of paint measuring two inches by six inches. The AT trail blazes are painted on anything that will stand still such as trees, rocks, street signs, you name it. I was embarking on a journey where I would be blindly following a white dotted line to get to Maine with a backpack holding all of my belongings strapped to me.

I walked onto the AT laughing, “Only 2,176.2 miles to go.” A mile into the Trail, I halted, dumbstruck at what I saw. A gravel parking lot. *Sons of bitches*. Nothing I read in all my diligent research (and I'm a damned fine researcher) ever said anything about an option to skip the Approach Trail. My parents could have driven me up to the lot where I would have been able to backtrack the one mile to the summit and turn around. Apparently you have to talk to the right person to acquire this little piece of information. I was a better person to have conquered the Approach Trail, but it was nice to know that I never had to do it again.

I met Trail Squid at the parking lot, my first trail angel. Trail angels, often former thru-hikers, venture out to the Trail to give the hikers some goodies and encouragement. The man called Trail Squid by other hikers was maybe in his late thirties and looked like he probably popped out to the Trail for a couple of days from his CFO job at a tech company in nearby Atlanta. He exuded nice Southern boy meets Silicone Valley. Trail Squid gave me some juice and we chatted about what lay before me. He was impressed with my Approach Trail time and my small pack.

I hiked on another 1.7 miles to the Stover Creek Shelter for the night. It had been a long day, an exhausting day. The day was physically challenging, but all of my emotions and thoughts throughout the day tired me more. There were six other hikers sharing the shelter – all of them section hikers, except for another lone female on her way to Maine.

The night was cold. Bundled up in my bag, I thought about my first day on the AT. I was actually hiking the famed Appalachian Trail. A born road tripper, I found the AT to be the walking equivalent to jumping in the car and hitting the open road. I was wet, cold, and had been forced to eat entirely too much instant mashed potato mix due to a slight miscalculation. This was where I belonged. I still couldn't say exactly why other than to say I felt



alive amid the woods, the weather, and the new people I met.

(Springer Mountain, Georgia – Southern Terminus of the AT)

*Lesson #1 – For additional information, always ask around after researching on your own.*

*Lesson #2 – Read the directions on the instant powdered food bags regarding portion size.*

*April 6*

*Mile 2.7 to Mile 15.1*

*Gooch Mtn. Shelter (Georgia)*

*I climbed five mountains, including Sassa-kiss-my-assa (Sassafras Mtn) where I developed my first blister. The day was spent hiking with Julie. We got to know each other better and found we had similar stories. She started trying to call me Cruise Control because she thinks I hike fast, but my legs feel like they're falling off.*

*I ate tuna burritos and two Advil for dinner, but I doubt it will make a dent.*

*\*Morning – Apparently we were visited by Rangers last night. Army Rangers have mountain training in the area and camp was crawling with them last night. Storyteller caught one of them peeking into the shelter. Others heard breaking sticks. Julie worried she might have mooned a couple when she got up in the middle of the night to pee.*

*April 7*

*Mile 15.1 to Mile 27.5*

*Slaughter Creek Campsite (Georgia)*

*Julie and I set out before 9:00 a.m. and met Mark, a lost Mormon soul, early in the day. He walked behind me so close that he kept hitting my trekking pole. He kept apologizing, but refused to pass for eight miles.*

*FRUSTRATION and drained energy.*

*We decided to camp out since the shelter was inconvenient. There was a new, quarter-sized blister on my left foot. I had to bust it, it spurted five feet – impressive. I’ll duct tape it good tomorrow morning. It was a good day, but hard at the end. I enjoy some company, but I let other hikers throw me off today. Tomorrow we’ll hike up, up and over Blood Mtn. to Neel’s Gap.*

*Bears...*

. . .

About 1:00 a.m. I was wearing every stitch of my oh-so limited wardrobe to combat the crisp 25 degree night air. Mark got out of his tent to relieve himself and scared a bear out of a tree. He carefully approached my open tarp and whispered, “Becca...Becca...Becca..”

“Whhhhat?!” I said.

“I think there are bears,” Mark whispered.

“Then why are you whispering?!” I yelled. I was more awake than I had been since I left the lodge two days earlier. Now we had bears and no shelter – just three newbie hikers, a pitiful group for which I had become the de facto leader – Queen of the dipshits. Great.

Then a small, weary voice came from Julie’s tent, “Did someone say bears?”

I got out from my sleeping bag to take a look. There were two of them. Their outlines were barely visible in the dark as they circled under our food bags hanging from a tree about a hundred yards away. I turned to see my two fellow hikers huddled together while I considered our limited options. Like I said, though outdoorsy, I had only been camping for a single overnight at summer camp every year before I left to hike the AT (the last time being sixteen years ago). Being from Alabama and after spending some years in Florida, what the hell did I know about black bears?

Of course, I had done my research. Make noise, make yourself seem big were the points I had seen repeated. So we spent a long night chatting up a storm and sitting by our tired excuse for a fire. The bears eventually left allowing a nap before sunrise.

*Lesson #3 – It's true black bears don't want to eat humans, just their food.*

*Lesson #4 – Making noise does keep bears away.*

*April 8*

*Mile 27.5 to Mile 30.7*

*Neels Gap (Georgia)*

*Julie, Mark, Pete, Joe and I made it into Neels Gap (a historic building turned outfitter/hiker hostel) where we met man in the parking lot with extra kid's birthday cupcakes.*

*I got my first shower and transcended to another place.*

*I did my laundry, bought some needed gear – shelter shoes, new food sack, sleeping mat and a couple of eats. My pack weighed in at twenty-six pounds. I also blogged, wrote post cards and had my first talk with Mom and Dad.*

*The hostel is run by Pirate, a quirky, older gentleman with long gray hair and matching beard sporting a red bandana who makes great coffee. Met some new people. Streak is in his early twenties and has been stuck at Neels for six days with a hip injury. He named Julie Fiddler because she hates twangy music. Cruise Control or Cruise became my official trail name.*

*My right knee is sore, but not swollen and the blister looks better. I figured out my rhythm to long-distance hiking – I wake up, eat breakfast, start thinking about dinner, walk to dinner, eat dinner, and sleep. It's simplicity at its finest.*

...

My first shower on the AT was one of only a handful of experiences that might have been religious in nature. Upon selecting my bunk for the night, a cozy little top mattress in a corner of the large basement room promising total darkness, I began gathering my toiletries for my shower experience: towel, shampoo, soap, brillo pad – I mean washcloth – and a razor. Then I began to do what would become the somewhat modest act of peeling off rancid

clothes while trying to remain covered as practiced in the co-ed hostel. In reality, I could have yanked off those disgusting clothes in front of a crowd eating popcorn for the show and skipped all the way to the shower.

I was getting ready alone in the bunkroom until Mark walked in. I had my tiny quick-dry towel wrapped around my bare chest as I shimmied out of my shorts. Mark caught one look at me and his eyes made a beeline for the floor. He rushed to get something from his bunk in an awkward dance of side steps and shuffle, “Um, I’m sorry. Sorry.” I didn’t respond because I wouldn’t have been able to stifle a giggle in the process and didn’t want the guy to feel even worse.

Once out of my clothes and wrapped in a towel not much larger than a hand towel, I made my way to the shower with care in an effort to keep from flashing too many people. By that point I was fairly certain I had already unintentionally mooned a few others while using the facilities outside along the Trail. Unintentional mooning and flashing was just going to be a part of my new Trail life.

There was no line when I reached the bathroom door. I opened the door and there it was (cue singing angels) – the shower. The factory molded, off-white large piece of plastic with an uneven floor that creaked and whined as I stepped in made me almost giddy. Good pressure and scalding hot water. Delightful. As I washed my tired body, the water ran off it brown with grime and earth, taking away what had appeared to be a nice tan. Then I merely stood under the hot manmade waterfall and let my previously sweat-filled pores soak in the fresh water while my lungs inhaled the cleansing steam.

Looking down at the razor, I wondered what would happen if I shaved my legs. In the shaved legs debate I am neutral. In the other world, I was a leg shaver for the most part.

But since I hardly have any hair and due to the fact the it's mainly blond, I never have had a big stake in the debate. I did like soft, smooth legs and it was an opportunity to spoil myself, so I grabbed the razor and went to work. The first pull up the shin of my right leg provided startling results – there was more brown water runoff even though I had thoroughly scrubbed every inch. There was just so much dirt in the skin that the scrape of the razor took cleanliness to a whole new level.

The thought occurred to me that I wasn't the only one who needed the shower experience, so I reluctantly turned off the water after shaving my legs and gathered my things. Upon emerging from the shower closet, there was only one person in line. She caught one look at me, saw the razor and said, "Oh my God. Did you *shave* your legs?"

She was a very young woman (a girl, really) probably just out of college where she learned how to rage against the machine as evidenced by her dreadlocks so poorly done they looked unruly even by dreadlocks standards, piercings and patchouli-soaked hemp clothing. My first thought was, *Oh honey, you're so young. Get over yourself and start paying taxes.* Her eyes were almost ablaze. My second thought was, *You look like you could use a razor head to toe. Why not give this one a go and see how far it'll take you?* Instead I said in my calm, warm post-shower afterglow, "Actually, the razor took off a whole other layer of dirt I couldn't even scrub off. It's fantastic." I heard the hairy girl grunt in protest as I sauntered back to the bunkroom in my little towel.

*Lesson #5 – Regardless of your opinions, take a razor on the Trail.*

*April 9*

*Mile 30.7 to Mile 41.5*

*Low Gap Shelter (Georgia)*

*I hit a low point. The right knee felt great in the morning and I put on a soft knee brace just in case. Four miles into hiking, my right knee collapsed while I was going downhill. I fell hard. At the bottom by the Tesnatee Gap parking area, I told Julie to go on as I was too slow and that I would see her at Low Gap. I wanted to cry in private. I called Mom and got a pep talk, smoked three cigarettes, ate a bunch of food, and talked to a couple of other day hikers who encouraged me to go on. I limped into Low Gap after taking eight hours to hike only 11.5 miles. When I walked in Julie said, “Holy shit...she made it.”*

*The knee feels fine when I’m not moving, so there’s no major injury as far as I’m concerned – just a pull on the back outside of the knee and three blisters total. The guys*



*made room for me in the shelter.*

(Photo of me taken moments before I fell at Tesnatee Gap)

. . .

Mom wrote on April 9:

*Hi Sugar –*

*It was so great hearing from you last night. Obviously your planning was spot on and I could hear the happiness in your voice. We both miss you terribly, but realize you're off on a great adventure. Soak up every moment and make wonderful memories.*

*I watched the Weather Channel this morning and see that you may be in for some rain in a few days, so I'm really happy you got the waterproof food bag and the sleeping pad.*

*Take care Sweetie and call again at the first opportunity.*

*Love you*

*April 10*

*Mile 41.5 to Mile 56.4*

*Tray Mtn. Shelter (Georgia)*

*I did 14.9 miles on a shitty leg. Most of the day was spent with a father and son on spring break. Tray Mountain can kiss my ass. I left at 8:00 a.m. and got into camp at 5:15 p.m. People were surprised to see me and gave me an applause. The New Hampshire boys, Jack and his two friends, made room for me in the shelter so I didn't have to set up the tarp.*

*My fire was destroyed...*

. . .

I always liked making fires. Not in the spirit of pyromania, just the love of a camp-fire – the entrancing fire, the ambiance, the company. Every year when I was a little girl at summer camp, my scrawny body dragged at least two dead trees to the fire ring while the other girls talked about hair and boys. No little sore knee was going to stop me from making us a beautiful fire at the shelter.

I instructed people to find firewood and prepared a nice little log cabin configuration hoping for some good results despite the wet wood. Fires take time to develop and it was going slow. I left it briefly under the watchful eyes of the other hikers to go and make some dinner when Woofman started moaning that it was a *weak* fire.

Woofman (not Wolfman) was a character, even for the Trail. I met him earlier in the day when I was hobbling along with the father and son. He was sitting on the high side of the Trail on the Tray Mountain climb sucking on a cigarette as he tried to catch his breath. He was a burly guy about forty with unruly wavy blown hair that seemed to match his personality. He wore blue jeans (something rarely seen on the AT by anyone except day hikers),

carried a canvas backpack (not seen by *anyone* on the Trail) with “Woofman” spelled out in big letters on the back, a nickname given to him by his buddies for his ability to realistically bark like a dog.

Woofman wore weathered work boots and the smile of an enthusiastic child reminiscent of Ralphie in *A Christmas Story*. It had taken him over a week to get fifty miles because he had to stop so often and go into town for a big, hot meal and a beer. Woofman claimed he was on the Trail because he didn’t have anything better to do, but I suspected he had lost his job, maybe his home and was feeling down and out – a common situation. Still in Georgia, Woofman had determined he would never make it to Maine, but would wander along for as long as he could.

Before I had the chance to work on the fire, Woofman took things into his own hands and proved to all of us that he was a city boy. He found an old, treated piece of wood left over from rebuilding the shelter that he called the “yule log” and added it to the fire with a giggle. Not surprising, it failed to produce results, which shocked Woofman. By that point Jack, the New Hampshire boys, Fiddler, Marty, and I knew the fire situation was going downhill fast and stuck to our own circle by the shelter. A brother and sister out for a weekend camping excursion on the celebrated Appalachian Trail looked horrified – their idyllic weekend of woodland delight shattered by an asshole dancing around the fire and talking to himself about what materials would and would not burn.

Woofman asked if anyone had lighter fluid. He was surprised to learn from the rest of us that lighter fluid was not considered to be a vital piece of AT equipment. Woofman returned to rummaging through his pack. “Ya-hoooooo!” He found a bottle of cheap cologne and sprinkled it on the fire as he danced and sang something that sounded like a med-

ley of his favorite 80s hairband rock lyrics. But once Woofman paused and realized that all the cologne had accomplished was to make himself (and much of camp) smell like a whore in church, he looked dejected once again.

He walked around behind the shelter and returned with his arms full of discarded shingles. We warned Woofman they wouldn't burn and would only make camp smell terrible, but the guy was almost wild-eyed with the idea of burning shingles. Shortly after tossing on the first two, the smell of burning tar was almost too much to bear, but there was no stopping him. For the rest of us, it marked time to go to bed.

The brother and sister huddled together praying to survive the night while I crawled into my sleeping bag located between Jack and Marty. The next thing I knew, Marty rolled over facing me and nuzzled his face into my left shoulder confessing he was a germaphobe frightened of getting sick from being stuck next to the weekender brother and sister. I told him it was alright and Marty was fast asleep on my shoulder.

Lying on our backs, Jack and I laughed about Woofman as went to sleep to the smell of burning tar and the sour singing voice. Not long after we fell asleep, Jack rolled over and nuzzled his head into my right shoulder making an almost cooing sound in his sleep. He wasn't trying to be fresh, just needed a cuddle, I guessed. I went back to sleep with a mental picture of what we must have looked like – me on my back with Marty on one shoulder, Jack on the other. Three mummies laid out in ritualistic formation.

*Lesson #6 – Sometimes you just need a little closeness.*

*April 11*

*Mile 56.4 to Mile 67.5*

*Dicks Creek Gap – Cloud 9 Hiker Hostel (Georgia)*

*I limped out of the shelter at 8:00 a.m. toward Dicks Creek Gap for Cloud 9 Hostel. Of course, I was the last to arrive and a van from Cloud 9 pulled up and told me other hikers said I was limping in. I met Brace, who said I had a familiar hiker's hobble when I walked in. Julie, Joe, Pete, shit-eating grin Nick, Martin (named Marty Poppins for his carrying an umbrella for shade), Mark, Derek and the girls were all there ready to go eat at the much-talked about Monte Alban. It was a let down, but the grocery store was much better. Back at the hostel, I crawled into the hot tub with Brace and Matt, who is from Indiana.*

. . .

Mom wrote on April 11:

*Oh Baby –*

*Looking at the Weather Channel, tomorrow afternoon doesn't look good for you. It makes me feel guilty to be inside and dry. I talked to Liz and we decided that since I didn't hear from you today, you must be feeling better. We'll both sleep better thinking that anyway. I'm hugging you in my heart.*

April 12 to April 15

Zero Days

Cloud 9 Hiker Hostel (Georgia)

I woke up on April 12 to find my right knee still hurting and my left foot swollen from limping over thirty miles. I decided to rest on a zero day (as in zero miles hiked – a day off). I wasn't the only one. Cloud 9 was full of people hobbling around, which is why over twenty-five percent of hikers walk off the Trail by Neels Gap. One guy had so many blisters, he hardly had any skin left on either foot. He just sat in agony, forcing his raw feet to soak in a tub of hot salt water. Others iced hurt knees like me and another nursed a back rubbed raw from his pack chaffing.

It is estimated that between two and three million people spend time on the AT every year. Of these millions of day hikers and weekend campers, about 1,500 of them were aspiring thru-hikers in 2008. At that time, less than 10,000 total had claimed a successful thru-hike and registered it with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy since Benton MacKay's vision of the Trail was completed in 1937. The first thru-hike was completed in 1948 by Earl Shaffer, a World War II veteran. Approximately twenty-five percent of thru-hikers are women, though it is unknown how many women venture onto the Trail alone. The first female to complete a thru-hike was Mildred Norman in 1952. Of all the historic Trail women, I found Grandma Gatewood to be the most inspiring thru-hiker. A mother of eleven children with twenty-three grandchildren, Gatewood completed her first solo thru-hike in 1955 at the age

of 67. She thru-hiked the AT three times, always wearing her signature Keds sneakers and carrying a canvas duffel bag over her shoulder.<sup>2</sup>

By the time I reached Cloud 9, everyone was injured and in pain, our bodies resisting the idea of becoming a pack animal. Determined to make myself useful, I did a lot of cooking and cleaning for everyone alongside Brace, a former thru-hiker working at the hostel for the hiker season. He was interesting and we clicked pretty easily while my original hiking “family” watched on carefully.

Hiking groups are funny things. I started alone at the beginning in the first week of April because I would be in the thick of the crowd and figured it was a safer bet for a lone female. You meet a few people in your early days and see each other at the same shelters every night. After a couple of days, people start taking on roles in the loose group and the next thing you know, you have been inducted into some kind of clique – a hiking family.

My little group had grown to include about seven of us – five men all just out of college and Julie, who was in her late twenties. Once at the hostel, I met other hikers and discovered new characters. My family was not so indulgent, choosing to hang out in a small circle to themselves looking at others like they were strangers.

After my first zero day, my knee began feeling better, but my foot was shot. I wasn’t going anywhere and the owners of Cloud 9, along with Brace, were not allowing me to leave until I lost my hiker’s hobble. My family was irritated; they turned to me for answers. “Becca, when are we going to hike out?” “Becca, where should we stay our first night out?” “Becca..?” “Becca...?”

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<sup>2</sup> “2000 Milers.” *Appalachian Trail Conservancy*. [n.d.] Viewed Nov. 21, 2014. <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail/2000-milers>

I thought, *Hey guys, I can't even walk – figure it out*, but it would have been rude to say. So I told them, “Guys, I’m hurting here. You can take off when you’re ready and I’ll see you down the Trail.” It was my resignation as the family leader.

I had been in a similar situation during my three months of training in the Peace Corps. I was a few years older than most of my group and became a big support to each member. It was a compliment to have so many people believe in me, but there was never anyone to support me. I successfully completed training at the top of the group and was assigned to Corn Island, a speck of land off the east coast. Weeks later before I resigned, I called my Program Director and told her I needed help. That was her job – *to support us*. She told me I was the strong one, that I would be fine, that the other members of the group were weaker and needed a visit from her before me. I told her I was in trouble and needed a visit, that I had been lied about to the entire island of 2,000 inhabitants by my counterpart (with whom I was required to live with her and her family) after I did not meet her demands for money; that my host family was violent and beat the children to a point that I felt threatened. Again, she said the other volunteers were weaker. “Then arrange my travel. I’m leaving the Peace Corps,” I told her at the end of our phone conversation.

It wasn’t a rash decision, I thought about it for a week. When I was in the main office in Managua for my final physical exam, the Medical Director, with whom I had a great camaraderie, said she was shocked to see my name on the schedule for discharge. She said, “Then I thought about it and it made sense. What happens when no one takes care of the caretaker?”

It’s not that I wanted to be alone all the time when I was on the AT, but I did want some freedom. I continued socializing with Brace and Matt to get some distance from my

hiking family. My hiking family began displaying juvenile mentality, which can run amok anytime you get a group of people together of any age that find themselves somewhat isolated from society, and they began to shun me.

Reminiscent of the islanders during my final days in the Peace Corps, Julie, the girl I had been hiking with since we met the first day, virtually stopped speaking to me. The family stuck so closely together that everyone found it off-putting. I felt it more liberating that night to catch up on some Trivial Pursuit with everyone else between Epsom salt foot baths.

The next day I was unable to get my shoe on my left foot. We ate breakfast and my disapproving family hiked out. No one said much of anything when they left. No enthusiastic hugs. No “Best of luck! I’m sure you’ll make it all the way!” Part of me was sad to see them leave without me and the rest of me was relieved.

The day was spent welcoming newcomers, preparing salt baths, cooking. Brace said he thought he might hike out with me in a day or two when I was ready, saying his time was coming to an end at Cloud 9 because most of the hikers had passed through for the season. He said if we made it to Katahdin, he would propose. And though I am known to be very rational and frighteningly practical, Brace’s idea didn’t even make me blink. Why not? Maine was a long way away. If we could be together that long, then maybe we were meant to be together. Kevin said he wanted to spend his life with me and to consider marriage when I finished the Trail. We had known each other since we were kids at summer camp and that ended with one simple phone call on his way home from work when he said he had a gut feeling we wouldn’t work out. That was it. No discussion. No – *I need to think some things through*. It just ended. The break-up left me wondering what really constituted a *secure* relationship.

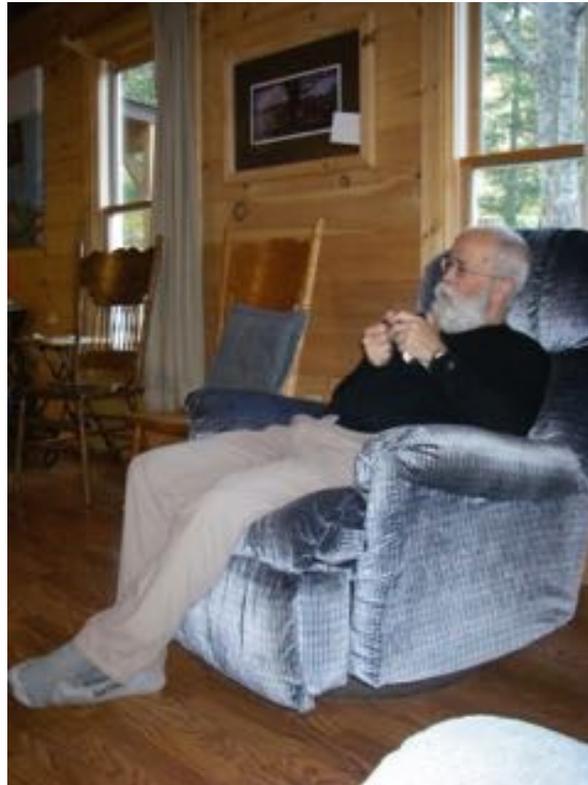
That afternoon I called Mom and Dad. Mom was feeling low after tangling with my bully of a sister. Her voice lifted when we started talking about the Trail. She said it gave her something to look forward to. I hated that she was having a rough time.

I found it funny when I was on the Trail that day hikers – generally kind, enthusiastic and interested – always made the same two comments: *Oh, I wish I had time to hike the AT* and *It must be nice to leave it all behind and go hiking*. First of all, no one has time to take six months off to go hiking – you have to *make* time and that *will* involve sacrifices. Secondly, you never leave it all behind. Everything you have, you carry in your heart and your mind.

It would take one more zero day (four total) before I could leave Cloud 9, which most of us began referring to as “The Vortex.” More salt baths, more cooking, more characters. I wouldn’t regret it. My last night at Cloud 9, an older gentleman perfectly able to pass as Papa Smurf or Burl Ives arrived carrying a big, Merlinesque walking stick. His name was Skipper and he was the first southbounder I met.

About ninety percent of the 2,000 or so who attempt a thru-hike every year walk northbound like me. Northbounders are hiking with the seasons. A chilly start in the south, summer along the mid-Atlantic, and finishing just before winter sets in early in Maine. Southbounders are often thought to be going the wrong way, as they must wait for Katahdin to thaw (at earliest around Memorial Day), spend the North in the peak of black fly season, then race south to try and beat the snow before the Smokies are impassable around Thanksgiving. Skipper had reached the Smokies the previous fall too late and was forced home for the holidays. To complete his thru-hike, which must be finished within one calendar year from his start date, Skipper returned to the place he walked off due to weather to continue his

hike. And I had the privilege of meeting him when he was merely four days shy of becoming



an AT thru-hiker.

(Skipper)

*April 16*

*Mile 67.5 to Mile 76.5*

*Bly Gap (North Carolina)*

*I hiked out of Cloud 9 with Brace. We took it slow because my right leg was still a bit bothered.*

*MADE IT TO NORTH CAROLINA!! I walked to North Carolina!*

*I called and talked to Dad to tell them I crossed my first state line. I hope Mom is doing okay. We camped right over state line at Bly Gap. It was my first time ever sleeping in*



*a tent (Brace's). Cozier than expected.*

(Georgia/North Carolina state line)

...

Mom wrote on April 16:

*Hi Sweetheart!*

*Can't believe you've walked to North Carolina! Don't forget where home is! We miss you so much, but were really proud of you. Wow!*

Chapter 2 – North Carolina/Tennessee

*April 17*

*Mile 76.5 to Mile 84.1*

*Standing Indian Shelter (North Carolina)*

*The morning was too cold for fuel to start – cold breakfast and no coffee. I had some sharp back pain going into Deep Gap, so I sent Brace ahead. He's beginning to have problems with his knee. It was a pretty afternoon, except for so many biting flies. The wildflowers and leaves are finally budding. Brace introduced me to ramps (wild onions) – yum!*

. . .

*Lesson #7 – Pain is present everyday, but as long as the pain moves around to different parts of the body, there's no injury.*

*April 18*

*Mile 84.1 to Mile 98.5*

*Big Spring Shelter (North Carolina)*

*Brace fell and was okay, but he became really irritated over the small tumble.*

*Hmmm.*

*We hiked up Albert Mountain – really steep and rocky. Brace said it's a taste of New Hampshire. Everyone talks about New Hampshire. Okay, so it's going to be tough, but I'm in North Carolina right now.*

*We stayed in the shelter for convenience. Tomorrow we'll be in Franklin for a shower and real food! For now, my feet are tired and my shoulder is bothering.*

*April 19*

*Mile 98.5 to Mile 103.9*

*Rock Gap (North Carolina)*

*We were picked up by regular trail angel Ron Haven in his bus, formerly a short school bus that is now used to haul smelly hikers to Franklin.*

*I met other hikers already staying in town. Long Haul is retired and it turns out he lives down the street from my parents in Florida. Bird Man, an American living in Australia, spends time on the AT every year and knows Brace.*

. . .

Brace, Long Haul, Bird Man and I walked down to the Rathskeller for dinner and drinks. Franklin was a small town I never knew existed and the tiny Rathskeller acted as an all-in-one bar, coffee house, restaurant, and live music venue. We found the last open table and were quickly asked by other patrons if we were thru-hikers, probably due to the clean, yet unruly hairdos and the men's growing beards. Upon learning we were heading up the Trail, the evening quickly became a supportive send-off party.

I was starving, literally. Thru-hikers burn somewhere between about 3,500 and 6,000 calories a day. It is impossible to carry enough food to replace all the calories lost and needed, which results in an insatiable hunger sensation. My mouth waters at the thought of how hungry I was. It usually begins in North Carolina or Virginia and only gets worse further up the Trail. It's the very reason one hundred percent of all conversations on the Trail eventually turn to the subject of food. "Hiker Porn" is a name used to describe conversations about really good food – steak, seafood, a favorite pizza or dessert.

The boys began drinking beer and whiskey, but one item on the menu captivated my eyes – Espresso Milkshake. I drank three only pausing to take in a mouthful of food from time to time. Brace and Bird Man laughed at me.

Bird said, “I think her appetite has kicked in.”

“No doubt!” said Brace, “This is about the time it starts.”

I grinned, shoveling another half a sandwich into my mouth.

Bird looked at me, his blue eyes clear in the low light, “Sweetheart, it only gets worse.”

I nodded and smiled, but I couldn’t respond. I was still eating.

Long Haul was a tall and slender, quiet man in his sixties out for a couple of weeks on the Trail. His beard was dark gray speckled with stark white. Bird Man was a former thru-hiker. Maybe in his early fifties, his light and wavy strawberry blonde hair and beard were as carefree as his outlook on life. He returned to his motherland from Australia every year to hike part of the AT. It was only later down the Trail I would learn that he had been fighting cancer for years. I wondered if he moved to the other side of the world for treatment and if he was always so carefree or did he have a change of heart when he began facing death.

Earlier that day, I had called my parents to check in and see how they were doing. Mom sounded weary. She wanted to hear every detail and her speech began to match my enthusiasm. I realized they were on an adventure with me. I even told her about how her careful, responsible little girl had accepted Brace’s proposal to get married if we made it to the top of Mount Katahdin. She laughed and it reminded me how she trusted me with my own life.

*April 20*

*Mile 103.9 to Mile 111.3*

*Siler Bald Shelter (North Carolina)*

*I'm freezing my ass off at Siler. We're on track to hike into Damascus, Virginia just in time for Trail Days. I hope to see everyone that got ahead of me when I was laid up at Cloud 9.*

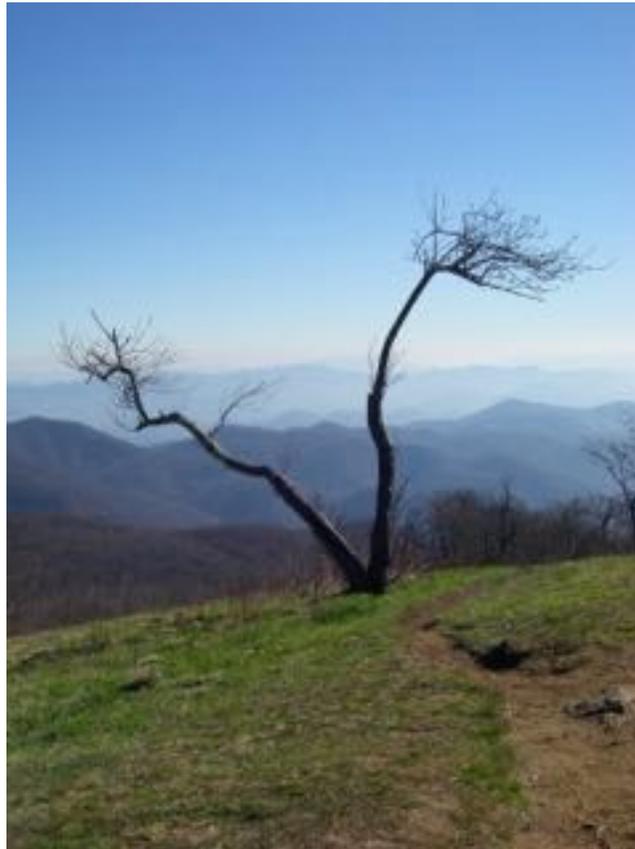
*We met Slush, a tall, kinda burly college kid from Texas with beautiful dark, curly hair and small wire-rimmed glasses. He looks like a frat boy, but not in a bad way. Slush was enthralled listening to Brace and all of his Trail stories. A lot of the young hikers like to listen to Brace – he does love to bathe in the attention. Brace made a horrid dinner made of something that looked like dehydrated dog food.*

*April 21*

*Mile 111.3 to Mile 118.6*

*Wayah Shelter (North Carolina)*

*I awoke to an upset stomach and a paralyzing headache. Then I broke into a cold sweat after breakfast. It might be that the terrible dinner didn't sit well or that I'm dehydrated. I walked up to Siler Bald to try and move a little in the fresh morning air. There were 360 degree views of the mountains – a good place to be on a Monday. There was a lot of uphill all day and we sat up on Wayah Bald Tower for a long time. I had to lie down for a bit*



*after setting up camp.*

(View from Siler Bald)

*April 22*

*Mile 118.6 to Mile 129.2*

*Wesser Bald Shelter (North Carolina)*

*It's been a hot day – nice change. We met a legendary trail angel called Apple at Burlingtown Gap, who gave me an apple and a Sunkist. Brace got overheated and grumpy by the end of the day. I made the mistake of affectionately calling him Baby and he bit my head off saying that he doesn't like pet names. Two other hikers at the shelter worked in politics and reminded everyone it was the Pennsylvania primary. Who gives a shit? Being on the AT during a nasty election year is a perk. I should finish the AT in time to research and vote in the general election.*

*Politics. I'm so happy to be in the woods right now.*

*We're hiking into the NOC (Nantahala Outdoor Center) tomorrow and restocking, so*



*everyone made the rest of their food and we had a big buffet dinner.*

(Apple's Trail Angel set-up)

*April 23*

*Mile 129.2 to Mile 134.8*

*Nantahala Outdoor Center (North Carolina)*

*We left only a short hike to the NOC and my right knee hurt on the downhill. I picked up a big package from Mom and Dad they sent to the outfitter. We did the usual shower and laundry. I had a long talk with Mom. Later, we set up camp by the water with other hikers where I met Apache, a nice guy my age with sandy hair and a matching beard.*

. . .

A couple of days before we reached the NOC, Brace began discussing the idea of my mailing my tarp home to save on weight since we had only been using his two-man tent. I was uneasy. I intended to mail home the tarp once the warmer weather and bugs arrived, but I planned on mailing the tarp home when I bought a tent, not because I met a guy in the woods who didn't like to be called Baby.

Once we arrived at the NOC, I couldn't stall the conversation any longer. What would I do if things didn't work out? Brace was emphatic and proclaimed he would *never* leave me or any other hiker without shelter – it's just not done. He said if things weren't working out with us, then he would stay with me to the nearest town with an outfitter where I could buy a tent.

I did enjoy the time I was having with Brace. We laughed a lot. I did have questions about his apparent moodiness. I think calling oneself moody or claiming that you just have a temper are excuses to be an asshole and it doesn't work with me. At the same time, frustration and bad days happen. They're hard to cover up in private when you're stuck in the woods with someone else. There was never another room to take space in and never a car to jump into for an errand. And what was the worst that could happen? I was left without my

own shelter sleeping under the stars or in one of the AT shelters with the mice for a few days until I reached a town.

After completing my risk assessment, I neatly packed up my tarp and the stakes in a little box to mail home. Risk is necessary to move forward and measured risk is a good thing. Without it, I would have still been sitting in that cubicle back in Tallahassee.

*Lesson #8 – Always leave less than 5 miles when hiking into town for supplies. You're there by breakfast and it feels like a day off.*

*April 24*

*Mile 134.8 to Mile 141.8*

*Sassafras Gap Shelter (North Carolina)*

*We got up late. Trip's achilles is badly swollen and she can't walk. Brace called the owner of Could 9 and arranged for her to be picked up and taken back for rest.*

*The wildflowers are really popping – purple, yellow, white. Black and blue butterflies are everywhere. I saw a golden lizard! It looks like there might be a big storm. I'm testing out a new pillow contraption – town clothes dry sack wrapped in my fleece vest. It's a little slippery, but has potential.*

*I'm still good with my decision to mail the tarp home. I just hope my heart doesn't get smashed again. It could happen, but risk is everywhere. I'll enjoy my time and see what*



*happens.*

(Wildflowers)

*April 25*

*Mile 141.8 to Mile 157.0*

*Cable Gap Shelter (North Carolina)*

*There was a bitch of a climb out of Sweetwater Gap, but there were welcomed sprinkles, cloud cover and a breeze. Brace showed me wild wintergreen – smelled wonderful.*

*My feet hurt and the right knee is acting up again. We thought about pushing the whole 21 miles to Fontana Dam for pizza, but stopped at the shelter. Apache made another great campfire. Glad to see Grins again (he's always smiling). I met him at Cloud 9. An older, lone gentleman, he carries a walking stick he picked up when he climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro and uses a poncho instead of a rain jacket and pack cover that gives him knightly appearance. He has sparkly hazel eyes and great character in his face.*

*Saw Cherokee again. I met him my second night on the Trail. He's middle-aged, divorced and recently lost everything. I was happy he was tenting – he snores like no one I ever met.*

*Everyone should be so lucky to experience all this – wildflowers, scenery, hills, and the people. No age differences, we're all in this together. A snoring symphony created by Apache, Grins, Slush, and Brace kept me awake.*

*April 26*

*Mile 157.0 to Mile 163.6*

*Fontana Dam Shelter (aka The Hilton) (North Carolina)*

*We woke up to thunder and rain and waited for it to calm down to sprinkles and mist before hiking to Fontana. Everything is turning green.*

*I can see why it's nicknamed the Hilton – the Fontana Dam Shelter is huge! It overlooks the dam and Fontana Lake with the Smokies jutting up behind it and it has a gravel landing complete with fire ring and seating. The shower at the Visitors' Center had the best water pressure yet. Everyone talked about Trail gossip and drama. Crest, a little guy with horrid blisters covering his feet, walked off (left the AT). Slush is missing Trip, but we had a good night by the fancy fire ring.*

*April 27*

*Zero Day*

*Fontana Dam Shelter (North Carolina)*

*Brace said his knee was in bad shape. Mine is really sore, too. Fontana Dam Resort allows hikers to eat there, so Brace, Slush, Saw Man, Grins, Jason (birthday boy), Ben, Apache and I went in for the breakfast buffet. A couple (Toni and Randy) came up to our table asking if we were thru-hikers. They wished us the best and said our bill and a tip were taken care of. People are generous.*

*Brace and I walked to the Visitors Center and assessed the situation. The Smokies begin just after you walk to across the dam from the Center. Brace said his knee was hurting and that Shuckstack Mountain, first climb to put you up into the Smokies, is a steep three miles. I reluctantly agreed on a zero day.*

*I'm constipated for the first time since early childhood. Slush offered Ex-Lax. I've never taken it before. He's a big believer, but it's a little troubling that such a young man carries Ex-Lax with him. I took two pills.*

*April 28*

*Mile 163.6 to Mile 167.0 and back to Mile 163.6*

*Fontana Dam Shelter (North Carolina)*

*Yup. Still constipated – no results from the Ex-Lax. The big question was to hike or not to hike. Personal problem or none, I wanted to get out of there and start hiking! It was still raining and we saw a light layer of snow in the Smokies. Glad we took a zero and didn't have to sleep in that. Blue skies started peeking through, so Brace and I slung our shit together and flew out of the shelter before the weather could change. We crossed the damn, started up Shuckstack and Brace's knee gave out. We discussed our situation and wanted to stay together. Moving backward might just be moving forward, so we went back to Fontana Dam. The Ex-Lax kicked in. Happy I wasn't in the woods for that. It was another good campfire with good people. Brace has ice on his knee and a new wrap. No plans to hike to-*



*morrow – I don't like this.*

*(Debating on whether or not to hike, Fontana Dam Shelter)*

...

*Lesson #9 – Avoid Ex-Lax. However, if absolutely necessary, take a half dose and wait.*

*April 29*

*Zero Day*

*Fontana Dam Shelter (North Carolina)*

*It was a sunny day, but cold and more snow was visible across the lake in the Smokies. The Ex-Lax is still working. Think I've lost 3 pounds. Brace's knee was still hurting. We went to the resort lodge for unlimited free coffee.*

*Blondie has joined the group. He's a super fit, thirty-something 2006 thru-hiker with straight blond hair and a matching blond beard and glasses who is just out on the Trail for a month or so. Great energy. Brace and Blondie talked Trail all night. There's always an instant kinship with thru-hikers.*

*I didn't sleep well.*

. . .

By our third zero day in Fontana, I was getting worried about not hiking – frustrated, too. There is a time limit. Mount Katahdin closes at some point in mid-October due to ice on the mountain until it thaws around Memorial Day the following May.

I looked at Brace, then looked at his knee.

“I'm worried your hiking season might be through,” I said still looking at his knee.

Brace's sad, brown eyes were silent, so I continued, “If it is done, then I'll start walking to Katahdin on my own and you can meet me in Maine.”

“I'm not done, Becca. I just needed a couple of days for this knee – been messed up for years. I'm not going anywhere for a long time.”

“Okay then. A couple of days.”

*April 30 through May 2*

*Zero Days*

*Fontana Dam Shelter (North Carolina)*

*April 30 – Brace said his knee is not getting better, but he kept telling me everything will be fine. The weather, however, is improving. I went into town with Blondie and Brace and found Mini Coopers everywhere! We learned it was their annual convention. We saw Long Haul again. His back is hurting him a lot and he might walk off.*

*Blondie and Brace are having a blast. Good people are coming and going (and going) from the shelter.*

. . .

*May 1 – Brace spent time walking up and down a few stairs. He looked better. I was sad to hear Long Haul walked off.*

. . .

*May 2 – Blondie and Brace returned from the village and told me about a bluegrass fest there in a week. A week? They kept joking that they might stay. STAY? No, thank you. Brace could see I was irritated and is hardly talking to me. It looks like he has a new hiking partner – Blondie.*

May 3

Zero Day

Fontana Dam Shelter (North Carolina)

*It was my lowest day yet. Brace is still hardly speaking to me. He told me that I'm not allowed to be grumpy. That's bullshit! I asked him for a definitive answer – would he be staying another week for the music fest or did he want to hike?*

*He's staying. I'm going. Decision made and I finally feel better. Blondie is concerned that I have no shelter. Brace doesn't seem worried. Bastard.*

*If I make it to Maine, it will be because of me. If I don't make it to Maine, it will be because of me and not because of some dipshit guy I let hold me back or anyone for that matter. I spent most of the day alone and felt even better by nighttime. Brace said that he'll catch me up the Trail – right. Brace and Blondie can have each other. I'm out. Brace said that he wasn't discarding me (I never asked him) and that I would know it if he was. I'm more charged than ever to hike out in the morning. Called Mom to give her a heads-up.*

*May 4*

*Mile 163.6 to Mile 186.6*

*Derrick Knob Shelter (North Carolina)*

*I woke up before sunrise excited to hike again! I glanced over at Brace, who acted like he was sleeping. I packed up and took one more look at Brace, then left a note in his boot that said, "Gone for a hike. Becca"*

. . .

Everyone was still asleep when I left at first light. I had more energy than I had had in over a week. My legs felt tremendous. Thoughts fueled me as I crossed Fontana Dam and walked into the Smokies. At first they were self-damning thoughts over how I got mixed up with Brace. Normally, I would have seen that asshole coming from miles away. He was everything I avoid – narcissistic, temperamental, boastful. He was a taker, a con-man capable of spotting my vulnerability and using it for his own gain. Our short fling lasted about ten days.

No one is tougher on me than I am. And I was kicking my own ass – hard. *Brace? Seriously? What the hell is going on with you? Get it together!* My mind charged ahead and my body flew up the Trail to keep pace. I cried. I gritted my teeth. I shook my head a lot. I was two miles past the top of the dreaded Shuckstack Mountain before I ever realized I had finished climbing it.

I stopped briefly to get my bearings. I hadn't been paying attention to anything other than my thoughts – a tricky phenomenon when hiking. Once my body had a break, my mind paused long enough for me to answer my question. It had been a rebound. I have painfully

watched friends get involved with someone worthless after a big break-up knowing it was not going to end well, but I had never experienced it until now.

I thought about Kevin. I didn't feel sad anymore when I thought about him, I didn't feel anything until I stopped for brunch at Mollies Ridge Shelter. There was a ridge runner at the shelter and he asked if I was thru-hiking and from where I started that morning. When I told him I left out of Fontana at dawn, he looked at me in silence with a sweet smile. He looked at his watch. "Eleven and a half miles in just over four hours mainly uphill and alone. I'd say you're going to be just fine," he said. I was still in deep thought and didn't yet register his words. We wished each other well and the runner left.

Alone again, I started crying over my Clif Bar. *He dumped me over the phone on his daily commute home the night before my last day of work in that damned cubicle. I was supposed to drive up after work to his place and we were planning to celebrate. Who does that? He didn't even sound upset when he did it! And he wants to be friends?*

I had been in love with Kevin. It was a good thing to be in love. And it was okay that it was over. He swept me off my feet and I allowed my feet to leave the steady ground. I had been hanging on to something that was gone. It was difficult to go from being desired and cared by someone to nothing. The whole scenario had left me with a small void I acknowledged in my excitement to begin hiking. That's why I had allowed Brace to creep in.

Relief. Those simple admissions made me feel so much lighter. In that moment, I let Kevin go. The ridge runner was right. I picked up my pack and headed on, basking in the sunlight for another twelve miles.

. . .

Mom wrote on May 4:

*Hooray! You're on your way again. I feel like I'm walking right next to you. Be careful, Sweetheart, and walk happy.*

*Lesson #10 – Rebounds happen.*

*Lesson #11 – Rebounds don't mean you're stupid or worthless.*

*Lesson #12 – Movie moments of coming to a grand conclusion while walking down a trail in the bright sunlight can happen in real life.*

## Artist Statement

I never thought of myself as a writer. Teachers always commented on my good writing ability and I rarely received less than the highest marks on any paper or writing assignment from grammar school straight through college. But I still never thought of myself as a writer. Writing was a means to balance the mediocre grades I received on standardized tests. I never wrote anything just for the act of writing until much later in life.

As a child, my distinct point of view was expressed through photographs. It still is today. Back in the days of film, my enthusiastic parents had dozens of rolls of film developed even though the results were a photographic collection of the dog and various outdoor critters. Because of their support, I was able to develop a strong eye for editing when looking through the viewfinder.

I entered the MLAS program in 2010 to continue my beloved liberal arts education, in part, to enhance my employment opportunities and more for the pure enjoyment of the experience. Due to my love of the outdoors and my adventures thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail, I felt strongly that I would write a thesis on some aspect of recreational lands. That was until I took my first class with Tommy Hays, *The Discipline of I: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction Workshop*.

The process of writing about whichever subject I desired using simple writing prompts was daunting. How do you find a topic when you can write about anything? However, through Tommy's encouragement to use my own experiences as prompts, I found that I have been writing all my life. All those research papers and essays I wrote throughout school and college were *my* chosen subjects. I kept a daily journal for the first time during my 2008

AT thru-hike. It is a treasure-trove of personal writing prompts – character profiles, emotions, travel, nature – prompts about existing in the world and not merely on it. Too, as discussed in Holly Iglesias’s class, *Images of Upheaval: Where Art Meets Politics in 20th Century America*, my photographs each tell a story. When those photos are combined with my writing, they tell a larger story.

The MLAS program has taught me that all stories are valuable and important and that the key to good writing is finding what is important to me. This story, *Free Chickens*, is presently most important to me. It is a creative non-fiction work that is part of a larger project. It is part memoir and part travelogue based on the daily journals I kept during my Appalachian Trail thru-hike.

I have wondered why I have chosen to share this story – my story. I do not enjoy being the center of attention. My answer lies in a passage from Dinty Moore’s *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction* where he quotes Scott Russell Sanders, author of the essay *Buckeye*, “I choose to write about my experience not because it is mine, but because it seems to me a door through which others might pass.”

Other influences include Henry David Thoreau and Joe Simpson. Both of these writers wrote about their experiences of living simply and of their outdoor adventures. In *Walden*, Thoreau masterfully demonstrates how his mind wanders while spending so much time alone. He reaches many conclusions about his life and society. I had a similar experience during my time on the Trail. Furthermore, Thoreau captured the scenery around him beautifully. In his description of Walden Pond Thoreau wrote:

The water of our river is black or a very dark brown to one looking directly down on it, and, like that of most ponds, imparts to the body of one bathing in

it a yellowish tinge; but this water is of such crystalline purity that the body of the bather appears of an alabaster whiteness, still more unnatural, which, as the limbs are magnified and distorted withal, produces a monstrous effect, making fit studies for a Michael Angelo (115).

Joe Simpson rose to literary fame after publishing *Touching the Void*, his account of survival after falling into a crevasse during a mountaineering trip in South America. His writing is a more conversational style, which allows the reader to almost hear Simpson telling his story. In *The Beckoning Silence*, Simpson recalls being a passenger on a commercial flight where the captain alerted everyone to the fact that there was a potential problem with the landing gear. After assuring passengers that everything was alright, Simpson wrote, “*Fat chance of that*, I thought. *And why is he* [the captain] *so damn cheerful?* Remember, when someone annoys you, it takes forty-two muscles in your face to frown, but it only takes four muscles to extend your middle finger (94).” Simpson’s writing style makes him accessible. Regardless of his great mountaineering achievements, he is a human who walks through life with thoughts and experiences similar to his reader.

I found further inspiration for *Free Chickens* in the essay *Booking Passage* where Nicholas Howe laments what he believes is a shift away from travel writing. Due to our more recently-developed Bucket-List mode of thinking, Howe believes that shift is born of an obsessive desire to record experiences. He says, “Movement is about burning fuel so you can say you have been somewhere and have safely returned. Travel, especially as it is given form by matter, is about observing and recording. In this distinction, the place of destination hardly matters.”

Writing *Free Chickens* has not only a mental process for me, it has been a physical experience involving each of my senses. Revisiting my journals and looking at photographs from my hike provided many memories. However, the smell of dirty socks, the taste of instant oatmeal, the sound of a backpack belt being cinched up, the feel of Phil's Trail bandana and the worn pages of those journals were all sources for memories. Concerning this project, my goal was to share those mental and physical memories and take the reader for a hike.

*Free Chickens* is written in the first person voice, a natural choice because my journals are the key component. Initially, I included only those journal entries for which I had a desire to add narrative to enhance the experience. The result was confusing and disjointed. In the project's current form, the journal entries are a constant running throughout the piece. Every day is included. Too, photographs are included as they may enhance the reader's experience.

The editing process has been an exercise in shutting my mouth and opening my feelings. My writing is described as conversational, which can be engaging, but it can also become wordy and redundant. At the other end of the spectrum, I am a naturally private person and sharing vulnerability has been difficult. I found myself telling or implying how I felt until my instructors and classmates pushed me to *show* how I felt.

I have learned to trust my reader, but thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail is a technical endeavor. The subject matter is vast and includes gear, logistics, the constant change of characters met along the way, and events occurring back home that directly impact the story. Preliminary workshop exercises with classmates who have not been long-distance hiking provided me an insight as to how much technical explanation needed to be addressed. My

character is literally a moving target in the story and keeping focus on that target was key to the story's effectiveness.

Henry David Thoreau concluded in *Walden*, "I learnt this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours." Writing *Free Chickens* and, by extension, my experience in the MLAS program have been unexpected successes.