

when it clicks

One Woman's Journey From Solo Hiker to "Model" Wife

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Dedication

This is dedicated with passionate love to my adored husband. You did more than just make this book possible. Your countless hours and style of editing, fact checking, and careful reading allowed the writing process to become as fun as the project that led to it! I love you more today than I did yesterday, but less than I will each day of our two lifetimes together.

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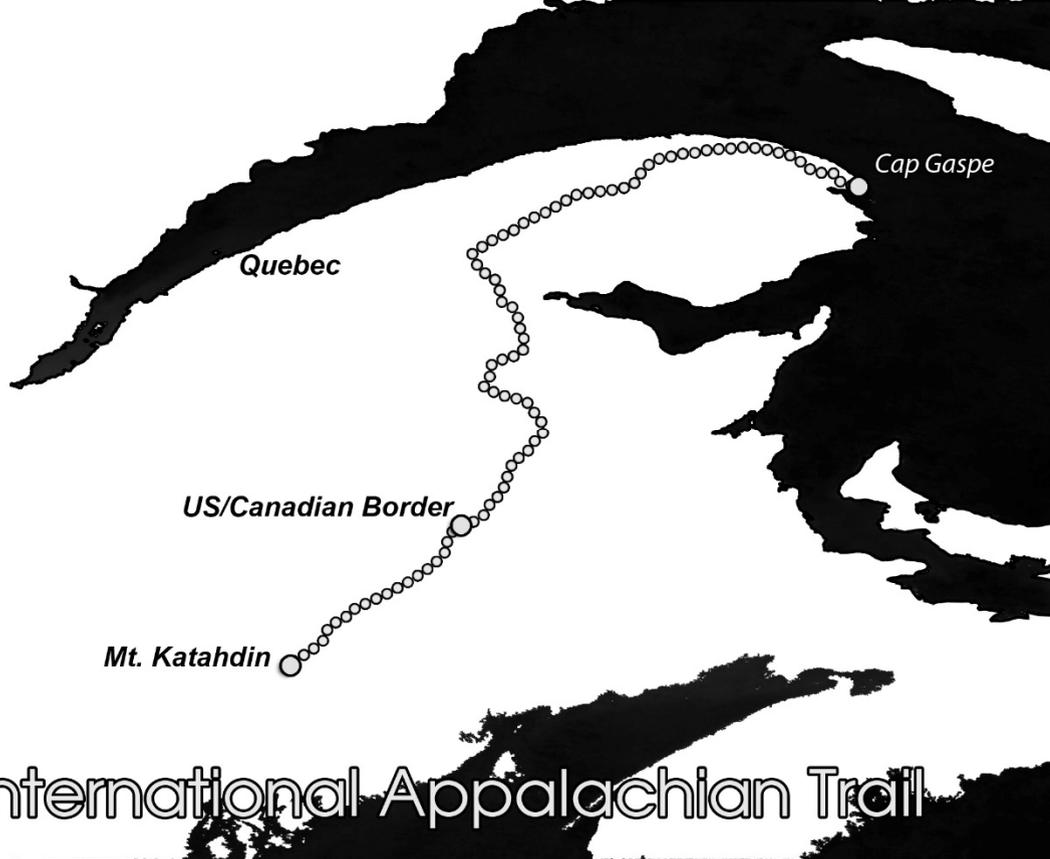
Disclaimer

There are only a few people in this memoir who appear as themselves. They include Jeff and me, as well as Wayne, the founder of Maggie Sottero Dress Company, Dick Anderson the founder of the IAT, and Tak Satosun, head sushi chef at Yosaku Japanese Restaurant in Portland, Maine. All other names and identifying details have been changed for all other characters in this book to protect their privacy.

Chapter 1 – Getting Unstuck

"Not all who wander are lost." —JRR Tolkien





Unwavering, he stands twenty feet away, eyes trained on me. Unyielding, I return the stare, half out of fear and half out of hope that a false sense of bravado will deter my unwelcome visitor. Utterly dumbfounded by my current predicament, my world stands still. The branches rustling from the wind and the birds chirping loudly are muffled as if far away. I don't feel the weight of my 45 pound pack or the cool, thick mud that envelops me. For an instant, I think of nothing. Panic creeps into my veins, slowly at first, then flooding my body with adrenaline, which crescendos to a tsunami-size wave of fear.

I'm going to die! Like a fly caught in a spider's web, I am trapped waist deep in a sinkhole and about to become this hungry beast's next meal. *I am stuck on the Godforsaken International Appalachian Trail somewhere along the US / Canada border, and I'm going to die!* Hyperventilating now, shallow, quick breaths escape me, and I can actually hear my mother wailing. She will blame herself.

A year and a half ago, she pleaded with me not to thru-hike from Georgia to Maine along the Appalachian Trail (AT) alone, calling it a suicide mission. I argued with her, "Mom you're overreacting — this is not a death wish. This is me finding my place in the world."

My father agreed with her, "Honey, I know better than anyone how serious it is to ignore depression. We're begging you to get treatment."

Mom laid on the Jewish guilt trip, “You would never do this if Nana were alive. You know how she would be worried sick.” When that failed, they strongly suggested that if I need five months away, maybe a hospital program would be better, and they tried to elicit the support of my husband, Alex. But he stood behind me and blocked their attempt. If he did have concerns, he never shared them with me. It was one of many problems in our marriage.

I met him in our senior year of college and we fell in love quickly. Ironically, it was Alex who sparked my insatiable love of hiking. During our ten years together we hiked most of the 4,000-foot mountains of New Hampshire, where we live in a rustic, wooded house with our black lab, Jetty.

There is a distance between us. Two years into our marriage, I reluctantly left my job in a public high school to work with him as a counselor at a private boarding school where he was the dean of admissions. Because we worked at the same school, confidentiality regulations prevented me from talking to Alex about my students. Where previously I would vent about the hilarious and asinine situations that arise in my profession, now there was a silent void. I was also officially on call 24 hours a day. Just two weeks before I left for the IAT, I had to ride in the ambulance with a junior, as her guardian, after she swallowed a bottle of pills. Since her parents lived in California, I stayed with her overnight. To make matters even more difficult, Alex traveled extensively during the fall to recruit students from all areas of the country, so weren’t spending time together.

It didn’t help that I felt unfairly forced into taking this job because he accepted the position more than an hour from where we used to live, after we agreed that he would decline. Instead of living in between, he felt it necessary to live on campus. What choice did I have?

The emotional space between us grew into an immeasurable chasm that felt as big as a country. So, no, I didn’t expect Alex to try to stop me from hiking, but it would have been nice if he at least expressed some distaste about our being separated for so long.

Eventually, with enough time and Internet research, my parents realized that millions of people hike portions of the Appalachian Trail each year without incident; it was not a dangerous place to be. The IAT was simply the international continuation of the Appalachian mountain chain beginning where the AT ends. Why would any of us have thought that this trail would be any less safe?

You dumbass, let me count the ways. This is a trail that opened only one year ago; it is not well marked. Dick Anderson, founder of the IAT, warned me numerous times that it is a wild trail, untouched and untamed by human presence and that I would be the first woman to thru-hike it alone. The nearest hiker is at least one week behind me, so there is no help on the way.

The emergency whistle I've carried over 3,000 miles dangles uselessly from my shoulder strap, mocking me as I realize that this hiker I'll never meet will be the one to find my remains, if there are any. *Do wolves eat all of their prey?*

Snap out of it, Eagle Eye, you know better than this. My trail name originated from something my cherished and now deceased college mentor, Mack, told my mother at my graduation. Trying to send a subtle message to her to give me some space, he said, "You're daughter is like a butterfly. She flits about bringing beauty and joy to those who see her. But she is really an eagle who needs to fly. Let her soar."

I was thinking of Mack my third day on the AT, trying to ignore every part of my 105-pound frame, which screamed from the new torture of hauling nearly half my body weight up and down hills all day. If he could deal with chemotherapy with an unyielding, positive attitude, surely I could endure some aching muscles. As I inched up the trail, a butterfly landed on my shoulder, so I stopped, pleasantly surprised. When it flew off, I gazed up after it. Far above us both was a bald eagle, soaring in circles. *Thanks for the sign, Mack.* From that moment on, I became Eagle Eye.

Reminding myself of my trail name slowly allows me to regain my senses. I start thinking about what I need to do to survive instead of how I am going to die. I know that yelling fiercely at black bears and waving your arms is standard protocol, so why not try that with this wild predator? I use my hiking poles to extend my arms and begin waving them wildly over my head. "Get out of here, Wolf, beat it! Shoo!"

He yawns in response. I don't normally curse, but I'm desperate to sound menacing. "Beat it you motherfucking, shithead, asshole! Get the fuck off my turf or I'll blast your ass to Siberia!" I finish by wailing on my emergency whistle, which I've been told can be heard for miles.

He holds a paw lightly in the air as if to contemplate whether I am worth the effort, maintains his gaze another minute, then slowly turns and takes two steps away. Turning back once more, I blast the whistle again, and he trots off. It takes several minutes for my pulse to return to normal so that I can focus on the task at hand, getting unstuck.

Casting an occasional glance toward the stand of trees where my adversary disappeared, I grab a thin, green, but tenacious pine bough for leverage and begin wiggling my foot back and forth. Over the next twenty minutes, I think of everything that brought me to this point.

Last August, when I reached the socked-in summit of Katahdin in Maine to finish my thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail, I expected to feel victorious. I'd just finished a 2,200 mile thru hike! Instead, I was consumed with despair. The hike was glorious, but I was going home to a broken world. My marriage felt as

empty and neglected as an abandoned house. Despite my pleas, Alex wouldn't agree to counseling. Being on the trail was the only place I felt alive anymore. Out in the wilderness, I had purpose, identity, and freedom. I didn't have the choking sensation that I felt at home. The only logical thing to do was plan another hike.

Newly opened, the IAT is a little over 800 miles (the trail is evolving and continues to grow), from Mount Katahdin in Maine to Parc Forillon. I figured it would be a walk in the park. My good friend and adopted sister Ashley agreed to hike the first week with me in early June. She even got her family friend to fly us to the closest town to Baxter State Park. We kicked off our journey by summiting Katahdin again, to begin where I left off on the AT.

The muck reluctantly begins to loosen as I continue to twist my foot. Frustrated, I shake my head. Why didn't I unbuckle my waist belt today like I had for the earlier stream crossings? All hikers know you keep waist belts open for water crossings to prevent drowning should you fall into the rapids. I was brimming with hubris, and it hadn't occurred to me as I hopped from one clump of brush to the next that I might miss one and sink into the muddy mess of the trail.

I remember our first day headed north out of Baxter State Park. There was a cool, steady mist of rain and a bitter chill in the wind, accompanied by stream crossing after stream crossing. The water gushed, fierce and frigid, between the large boulders that were our bridge to safety on the other side. On the third crossing of the day, I hesitated as I leapt to the next boulder and went down, cracking my chin on the rock. Ashley tried to help me by standing on the rock above me and grabbed my pack to pull me up. I was relieved for a short-lived moment. Since my waist belt was open, as it should be, the pack quickly slipped off, and I was catapulted downstream like a beach ball. The rocks were incredibly slick with moss, and I searched frantically, but there was nothing to hold onto. Ashley was running after me on the other side of the river bank. I was two football fields away before she found a spot where I could grab her pole to pull me to safety.

Mildly hypothermic for the rest of that day's hike, I was relieved to reach our stopping point for the day. Entering camp, I couldn't wait to pitch a tent and go to bed without dinner, but Ashley had other plans. Ever the social butterfly, she couldn't help but chat with a crew who were out camping for the weekend. Ashley bounced back to me excited, "Come on, Jen, they're serving up something called Maine Margaritas over there!"

"I don't know, Ash, I'm kind of a wreck, and I don't even know what that is," I hesitated, using her nickname fondly, hoped that she would let me be a hermit.

She gently ignored my refusal, "All the more reason to come with me."

Despite my mood, I appreciated the extreme serenity and lushness of the campsite. It was perched just on the edge of a beautiful pond where moose after moose came to drink, swim, and frolic. In the Northern woods of Maine, it is a strange feeling to know that moose far outnumber people. And for that night, in that moment, I was transported to a place of bliss I hadn't known for years. Several vodka Kool-Aid drinks into the night, I found myself at the far edge of the camp talking to the ruggedly attractive Randy from Portland, Maine. Suddenly, I was unabashedly yearning for a man's touch. It was such a relief to confide in someone about being hopelessly lost in my marriage.

Recently divorced from his wife, I saw in his eyes that he understood me. "You'll get through it, you know," he reassured me. For the first time, I shed a tear as my heart finally began to accept that divorce was in my future. This fact was something I fought so hard to deny. I didn't pull away when he took me into his arms to brush the solitary drop away. "I will be in Portland when you're ready. Come see me when you finish your hike," he implored, holding me tightly. I felt the warmth of our long, desperate, embrace for weeks.

Twenty minutes into my reverie, with a sudden whoosh my right leg pops out of the mud, spraying globs of muck all over my face. *Nice!* I can't help but stifle a laugh as I think about what I must look like right now. If Randy thought I looked good when I arrived to camp that night looking like a drowned rat, he would love to see this ensemble. I try to stop this line of thought, but the train is too far down the track. Randy is everything that my husband, Alex, is not — brooding, mysterious, electrifying. Alex is lighthearted, upbeat, and finds humor in every situation. It is what attracted me to him in the first place, so when did it become so intolerable? My mind wanders back to the campground, the sound of Randy's voice as he sang to me, playing guitar, the rough feel of his work-weathered hands on my cheek as he brushed the tear away, the contrast of his soft lips as he lightly kissed my forehead. *No, no, no! I will not allow this! I will not become that person.*

In that instant, my left leg is forcefully ejected from the pool of slime. As it comes up, I feel a searing pain rip through my thigh. I stand on semi-solid ground and assess the damage. For a moment I don't see anything other than mud. Seconds later, red flows out over the brown slime, and I see that a sharp branch has ripped a hole above my knee. There is nothing to do but keep moving until I reach camp. Given my typical foot speed, I know I should have arrived several miles ago, so I am concerned that I've lost the path.

Trying not to think about it, I keep moving. When confronted with adversity on the trail, I have a tendency to get mad; so, despite the pulsing pain in my thigh, I am literally stomping down the trail when I hear a sound I vaguely remember. *It's an engine!* I am not normally a fan of internal combustion intruding on nature, but today I am elated to hear the whir of an exhaust-spewing vehicle.

As the all-terrain vehicle closes in on me, I see a lime green uniform and the face of someone very excited. Wearing a “gotcha” look, he clearly thinks he's found someone illegally crossing the border into Canada. I see the expression morph as he comes close enough to see my mud/blood soaked body. Now, appropriately worried, he calls out, “Hey lady, are you all right?”

My response is simple and honest. “Well, if you tell me that I am more than a mile from the shelter, I will have a full-blown meltdown right now.”

He shakes his head laughing, “You are actually just a quarter of a mile from a new shelter they just built down the path there, but seriously, are you okay? I don't mean no offense, ma'am, but you look awful.”

“I know sir, but I'll be fine, really. I have a good first aid kit in my pack,” I add to reassure him.

“Geez, Louise, and here I am thinking I'm gonna bust you for border hopping and you're ... actually, what are you doing out here? That's a big pack you've got there.”

“I'm hiking the International Appalachian Trail,” I inform him.

He shakes his head in wonder, “Never even heard of it myself. You sure you should be doing this alone?” *Good question*, I think but don't respond.

“Well, can I at least give you a lift?” he asks.

I am grateful for the offer, but my hiker's pride won't allow me to accept. Taking a ride that cuts miles off the official trail is considered cheating. “Sorry, I have to get there on my own two feet.” I give him a quick wave and make my way toward the bliss of the shelter.

Ten minutes later, camp is set up and I plunge into a stream without considering the temperature. It is biting, freshly melted snow that cascades from the top of the mountain. My leg goes numb fast, which gives me the opportunity to scrub it well. Dressing the leg quickly with Neosporin cream and Band-Aids, I shun dinner and crawl into my tent long before dark. It's the first time since I left home that I fall asleep within seconds of zipping up my bag, and I don't stir until dawn.

The next day, I manage to avoid the sloppy mud fest and walk about a quarter mile off the official trail toward the border crossing. Unfortunately, yesterday's events destroyed the insoles of my boots. The ends now curl up and into the edges of my feet. It feels like someone is taking a fork and scraping the sides of my feet with each step. Ignoring the throbbing, I arrive at the border crossing surprised to find the trail takes me through Customs the same way one would drive into Canada. Armed with my passport, I walk up to a stunned woman at the window.

“Hi there,” I hold out my passport, but the officer does not take it.

“Hello?” she responds in a French accent, as a question not a greeting.

Seeing her confusion, I inform her with pride, “I am hiking the IAT.”

Shaking her head, she says, “I’m sorry, the what?”

I try again, “The International Appalachian Trail. I’m a thru-hiker,” I add hoping this will help. Now she looks like she’s stifling a giggle. Moving to French I declare, “*Je suis un randonneur voyageant le Sentier International des Appalaches. Vous connaissez cette route?*”

She stops shaking her head and says, “No, I don’t, but your French is perfect! Anyway, I need to get my supervisor. Sorry; this is a first for me.”

Nodding dutifully in response, I wait for her boss. Although he knows of the trail from the twenty-some hikers who previously passed, he strains to look beyond me, certain there must be another hiker on the way. “It’s just me,” I say.

He turns up toward the sky as if to complain to God for my idiocy. “You must be kidding me, Darling.”

“Nope, I’m not joking.” He rolls his eyes as he argues, “You realize what is out in those hills, Honey? It’s no place for a woman alone!”

Now incensed, I return, “Well, that is your opinion, to which you are entitled. I am registered with the IAT conference; they know my status, and they have been extremely supportive.”

Eyeing the wound on my leg, he admonishes, “Well, be very careful miss. It’s your dollar if we have to come to your rescue.”

With false confidence, I hold his gaze, “I’m doing just fine so far.”

He clucks, “You could have fooled me. Good luck to you. Godspeed.”

The next 20 miles are a road walk. I realize that I need to detour into town to replace my insoles, which are holding my feet hostage and quickly creating blisters that will be with me for weeks. Limping down the road, the second car to pass me stops, and I’m relieved to see it reverse and come back to me. “Hi there, I’m Jeanine and this is Justin,” she points to her passenger. “Do you need a lift someplace?”

They are a pleasant looking, middle-aged couple. Justin sports a pair of overalls that have clearly been out doing yard work. Jeanine has curly hair that would probably be peppered with gray if it weren’t dyed blonde. She wears a broad, genuine smile. It is truly a godsend, since I have no desire to add extra non-trail miles to get to town. I gratefully answer her, “Actually, I do! I need a gear store to replace my insoles, which are toast.”