

THIRD MOUNTAIN

It is late morning in the Hundred Mile Wilderness, a section of particularly uninhabited forestland in central Maine that is best known for containing the most challenging section of the Appalachian Trail. My family is staying at the Gorman Chairback AMC lodge near the southern end of that empty expanse. Gorman Chairback offers a surprising amount of luxury for somewhere so far from other civilization. The wonderful staff of young volunteers prepares a hearty and sumptuous breakfast and dinner for the guests and then assembles bagged lunches to order to take on excursions. The individual cabin we're staying in has no electricity, but it's comfy, warm, dry, and offers a heart-easing view across Long Pond. The main lodge—a three minute walk from our Cabin #6—has a dining room, reading room, small game room with a ping-pong table, and civilized bathroom facilities.

But I'm not writing this to sell you on Gorman Chairback. I'm writing this because I want to tell the story of how I thought my eldest daughter was gone forever.

The guests at Gorman typically spend the day either out on Long Pond or enjoying one of the many local hikes. This is our third trip to the place, and today we are hiking one of the more popular trails: the ascent to Third Mountain. It's a short 4.2 miles round trip, the elevation gain is about 800 feet, and in theory the entire there-and-back hike can be done in 3-4 hours. In fact, we've been here before, and hiked this *very mountain* with the kids a year before. We embark with no worries. The day is partly sunny and promises great views from the summit. The girls have their water bottles and lunch bags.

Joyce, at 12 years old, complains at the start that she's tired. It's par for the course that one kid or the other will gripe a bit at the start of hikes, but we know from experience that they'll be loving it before long, bounding over rocky scrambles at a pace their parents, whose knees are eroded with 40+ years of wear, cannot hope to match. From time to time one or both of the girls will stride on ahead, but they are veterans of dozens of similar hikes, and they know the rules: don't get so far ahead that you can't hear the people behind you, and if you reach a trail junction, stop and let everyone catch up.

On this lovely morning, Joyce is the one out ahead. Despite her protestations of weariness, she is a powerful hiker, tall, strong, seldom wanting to pause for snacks or water. I'm not worried about her. Why would I be? The trail upward is marked with clear blue blazes on trees at regular intervals.

At about the three-quarter mile mark, we pass what is technically a fork in the trail; a branch splits off to the left. But that is not the way we want to go, the sign calls it "Gorman Loop," and the blue blazes continue forward on what is obviously the main trail. Joyce's absence there is not particularly alarming. The rest of the family—me, my wife Jane, and my younger daughter Robin—hikes on.

According to the map, at the 1.4 mile mark, after twenty minutes of a steep uphill climb, we are going to reach the next junction. I know, as surely as I know anything in this life, that Joyce will be there waiting for us, probably a little bit out of breath, possibly pretending to be bored, and she will wonder out loud what took us so long.

Except, she's not.

She's not there.

Right. No need to panic. Perhaps she's in earshot. We call her name, loudly, all three of us. The forest answers us with silence.

My first emotion is annoyance, of the "Ye gods, how could she have done something so irresponsible?" variety. But it doesn't take long for the reality of the situation to set in. The junction is four-way. Left (east) and right (west) is the Appalachian Trail itself. Eighty-odd miles to the east is the summit of Mt. Katahdin, the northern terminus of the AT, but before that, only a mile distant, is our destination, the peak of Third Mountain. Westward takes one to Georgia, eventually. To go back obviously returns us to our car, and to go straight forward (and up) would take a hiker to something the signpost tells us is the Indian Head Campground.

The problem is, none of the signs specifically say "Third Mountain This Way." The east-west sign only says "Appalachian Trail," which I'm sure is of more significance in the grand scheme of things, but wouldn't have done Joyce any good. More troublesome is that the trail we've been on, and which heads up into the woods toward Indian Head Campground, is marked as the "Third Mountain Trail." And it has the same blue blazes as the trail we've been following.

Jane and I share a moment of rising frustration, though we're both still expecting a good outcome. Robin understands that This Isn't Great but is willing to follow her parents' lead. We discuss plans. Our sharpest hope is that Joyce will realize she's left her family behind, and backtrack until she returns to the junction. We are unwilling to send Robin off by herself, and we have to leave someone here in case Joyce comes back. My anger at Joyce grows as we talk things through. How could she have done this? *What was she thinking?* I may say that particular phrase aloud several times, thinking to burn my anger and nascent fears down to simple exasperation, but it doesn't work.

So, the plan: Jane and Robin will continue on to Third Mountain, hoping that Joyce figured out, or remembered from last time, or was told by a passing stranger, which way to go. I will stay camped at the intersection so that when Joyce inevitably returns, I will be immediately on hand to berate her to within an inch of her life. The three of us punctuate this strategizing with regular calls into the wilderness. Joooooooooooooyce! There's never an answer.

Off go Jane and Robin, calling as they walk. I sit. I fret. I fume. I stand and pace. I shout Joyce's name. Left alone with my thoughts, I start to entertain some grim scenarios. She's just too experienced a hiker to have blown through this intersection without stopping. She's a very mature twelve-year old, independent, usually level-headed, so if she didn't blindly strike out in a random direction *on* the path, what could have happened? I can hear the sounds of my remaining family's shouts for quite some time, which suggests that Joyce must be far away indeed not to hear them.

After about ten minutes, during which I grow ever more agitated, an AT through-hiker comes down the trail from the west. He's heard the shouting, and has been hoping to discover we're calling for a lost pet. He is very sympathetic and concerned to find it is instead a lost 12-year-old. I find the act of explaining what has happened to be strangely calming. Oh, yes, my daughter seems to have taken a wrong turn, that's all. Nothing serious, surely. The hiker hasn't seen her

and promises to keep an eye out, but he's heading in the same direction as Jane and Robin, so it's not clear how much help he can be. But he does, before leaving, point upward toward Indian Head Campground. "All else being equal," he says, "kids will go uphill."

That does seem to be the most likely explanation. Joyce interpreted the sign as indicating a continued southward direction, and ventured off to parts unknown. In that case, any minute now, she'll come back, having realized that none of her family is behind her.

Then, an idea. The through-hiker had not encountered her from the east, and we've just come from the north. Jane and Robin have the west-to-Third Mountain trail covered. There's no reason for me not to spend some time trekking southward to Indian Head, perhaps accelerating us toward the moment of joyful reunion wherein, somehow, I hope to not kill my own daughter out of sheer frustration.

I shoulder my pack, grip my hiking poles, and head uphill as fast as my aged knees will go. I'm hopped up on Naproxen and adrenaline, so my speed is considerable. My plan is to go for twenty minutes, shouting at regular intervals, then turn around (ideally with Joyce in tow) so that Jane and Robin do not discover the junction abandoned.

Inside of ten minutes I reach the top of the wooded ridge and start to descend. The trail becomes narrow and overgrown, difficult to navigate, though still marked frequently enough with blazes that I know I'm on the right track. It's a beautiful, moss-shaggy stretch of trail that I would normally stop to admire, maybe take pictures. Every minute or so I stop and shout, but my voice, growing hoarse, vanishes into the greenery and is not answered. After twenty minutes there has been no sign of Joyce, and the path has become ever more thin and abandoned-looking. She hasn't been this way. Surely she would have realized she was *descending* without having reached a summit. I give a last fusillade of shouts, a last listen to the surrounding silence, and then I head back.

I tell myself, repeatedly, that Joyce must have gone onward to Third Mountain. Jane and Robin will have either found her there waiting for us, or met her coming the other way. It has to be that. The alternative is that Joyce left the trails altogether and is lost, injured, kidnapped, or some unthinkable combination of those that makes it impossible for her to answer our hollering. I maintain my fast speed, knees be damned.

I arrive back at the intersection; no one is there.

I wait. I wonder if a bear could have taken Joyce unawares, knocked her out. I wonder if a crazed through-hiker has her at knife-point. I wonder if she went off-trail to pee in the woods, tripped, and cracked her skull against a tree trunk. I wonder how silly I'll feel about these doomsday scenarios when Jane and Robin show up having found her.

A few minutes later Jane and Robin show up.

They haven't found her. She wasn't at Third Mountain, and no one at the summit had seen her.

She's gone. Just...gone.

Time does that funny slow-down thing that comes at times of great stress. Jane is nearly speechless with worry. "This is really, really, really, really not good," says Robin. By the greatest

of miracles, I am able to make myself think calmly. I realize what we have to do now.

“Jane, take Robin and go back to the car. When you get to Gorman Chairback, tell them Joyce is missing. Have them call the Greenville police, or whatever else needs to happen to have a search party formed. We have to assume she’s off trail and unable to get back here. In the meantime I’ll head back uphill and not stop this time until I’ve reached Indian Head Campground. Except for that Gorman Loop branch, it’s the only stretch of trail left we haven’t looked.”

Jane agrees with the plan. She takes the car keys and our nine-year-old and heads back toward the trailhead. I have my cell phone, but Jane’s is back at the lodge, charging. We agree that she will text me when she gets there, and I will do likewise with any updates. The signal out here is sparse, a single intermittent pip on my phone.

According to the map, Indian Head Campground is about 2.5 miles from the trail junction, at the shore of Indian Head Pond. Given the poor trail conditions, I’ll be lucky to get there in an hour even if I hurry. And I am certainly going to hurry. In a short time I have again crested the ridge of the mountain and am on my way down, passing the landmarks I recall from an hour earlier.

Soon I am in unfamiliar territory. The trail is terrible, a footprint wide, overgrown, muddy in spots. Though I am still hiking quickly, the footing is doubtful and I need to stop every minute or so to check for blazes, since the landscape doesn’t always offer an obvious route. (I also make myself turn around and look for blazes on the opposite side of the trees; I’ll need to come back this way, after all.) With each passing minute I know, more and more clearly, that Joyce never came this way. No one has come this way in years. I check for footprints in the muddier sections. There are none.

A mile down toward the distant pond, the trail is blocked by a fall of birch trees, the bottommost too low for me to crawl under. The top one is at the height of my shoulder. My arthritic knees ache even through the adrenaline and complain bitterly as I clamber over the treefall. On the far side I keep walking, quickly, mechanically, keeping as much an eye out as I can to the woods beside the trail in case Joyce has fallen there. It’s been steadily downhill since the ridge, and my knees would have long since given up if not for my trekking poles. I walk, and walk, and walk.

But it’s pointless. It’s midafternoon, the sun is on its way down, and Joyce is not here. I know it. A stubbornness for completing things is all that drives me now; I can’t come back without knowing I had checked the entirety of this dubious route. Part of my brain is telling me I should stop, turn around, that I’m heading in the opposite direction of wherever Joyce is and so wasting precious time I could be spending on a more productive search. The rest of my brain, having reviewed every disastrous possibility, has moved on to questions like “how will Robin react to her sister’s death,” and “what will we tell her school, which starts in a week?”

I have gone over two miles, and am likely only minutes from the pond, when I suffer a hallucination. Over a rise and down into a more lightly wooded stretch, a stream runs beside the trail.

There is a large boulder in the stream.

There is a girl on the boulder, like a strange Arthurian figure about to offer me a sword.

Joyce is sitting up as though something has woken her, a curious smile on her face as she looks

at me.

For several seconds I am absolutely certain I am imagining her.

“Dad? Where’s mom and Robin?”

I lean my head into the closest tree and sob into my arm. For thirty seconds I am wracked with a mixture of laughter and tears.

“Dad? Are you okay? I can’t tell if you’re laughing or crying.”

She hops from the boulder to the trail beside the stream, and I compose myself. I grip her in a fierce hug.

“Joyce,” I whisper. “I think I ought to warn you. As soon as I’m done hugging you, I’m going to *murder* you.”

My firstborn child had no idea. She had been too tired to think things through clearly, and figured she had gone the obvious right way at the junction. Every so often she had stopped and waited, but always figured we were just coming up behind her and would catch up eventually. She loves resting on boulders, and had actually *fallen asleep* on this one. Gods help me, but while I was falling apart with worry, she was *sleeping*. I now understand how Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli felt upon discovering the hobbits Merry and Pippin among the ruins of Isengard.

I texted Jane immediately with the news of my discovery, which was good because a search party was only minutes away from heading out when she received it. As for Joyce, she was extremely apologetic afterward when I explained the fallout from her error. She followed me back up the hill while I speculated out loud about how her mom would react. By the time we were done with our 4.2 mile hike, I had logged almost 9 miles, over half of them at a near-jog and with a heart rate I don’t like to think about.

In the comic *Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin’s father opines that “being a parent is wanting to hug and strangle your kid at the same time.”

Yes. Yes it is.