

The room was still—the air thick and warm with sweat. As I lay on my mat, the yoga instructor told us to imagine a happy place, which brought a smile because, for the first time in my life, I actually had one. And it wasn't a generic beach or a field full of daisies I'd caught sight of on Pinterest. Instead, it was a place of pain—a place I had only just discovered the week before—a place called Blood Mountain.

The day before my first hike on the Appalachian Trail, I questioned why I'd agreed to this crazy adventure. Heck, I couldn't even complete my iPhone's couch-to-5k jogging app. And though I loved camping and went with my best friend Trissi and our kids every year, I was accustomed to the sort with running water and bath houses in which I could use a real toilet. Carrying a ziploc bag full of toilet paper wasn't my style. But, I knew that when I traveled with her, fun *always* occurred. Having hiked a section of the trail the previous summer, she had assured me that while this quest would be a challenge, it was also going to be one of the most epic adventures of my life.

“What about your knee?” my hypochondriac mother asked. “It hasn't even been a year since your ACL surgery. How can you hike thirty miles? What if it starts hurting? What will you do then?” She was, no doubt, picturing dog sled and helicopter rescues in my future.

“It's just a walk,” I told her, repeating Trissi's words to me. “I walk all the time.”

“It's not just a walk,” she reiterated. “Call your brother. He's done it many times and will know what to do.”

She said this as if I was still deciding whether or not to go. Perhaps hoping my brother could offer his opinion on my ability. But I knew this was silly. My bestie KNOWS what she is doing. *Always*. She's a researcher and the best person to consult should you need a new juicer, a range

top, car, or vacation. She thinks of *everything* and is as thorough in planning trips as I am in revising books. She's also tough and highly skilled. This woman can tow a boat AND reverse it into small parking spaces. So if Trissi said I could do this. I COULD DO THIS. Furthermore, as my bossiest friend, I knew that she'd make sure I was perfectly prepared. All I needed to do was show up and follow her orders, which I'd done for the last six months, having purchased the backpack, ditty bags, trekking poles, and various other items she'd suggested, not to mention walking around my neighborhood and over every hill I could find with a thirty pound pack on my back.

But, I humored my mother and called not only my brother, but my uncle as well, who quizzed me about how much water I was bringing and gently inquired as to my preparation. "Have you been training?"

"Yes," I assured him. "And I'm going with my friend who is, in fact, experienced. She just got back from hiking a section of the Andes Mountains!"

I could hear the concern in his voice. It was one thing for Trissi to be well-equipped, but quite another thing for me—the writer, to be. I spend my days in my pajamas fussing around with a computer after all.

The closer we got, however, it felt like *no one* believed I could accomplish this—especially the salesman I met at REI the day before the trip.

"How cool!" I squealed as he showed me the pocket knives. "There's even a file!" Feeling rather "campy" I had decided to invest in a good ol' knife while Trissi consulted another salesperson about the merits of each and every water filter on the market.

My salesperson nodded and continued to show me the built-in screwdriver while I checked “nail file” off my list. “They’ve thought of everything,” I gushed. “My nails are *always* snagging something.”

He started to chuckle. “It’s a file,” he clarified. “Like a *metal* file. The TOOL kind.”

“Oh yes. Of course!” I felt my cheeks bloom red. “Why would anyone need a nail file on a camping trip. Duh.” I grabbed the bright yellow package from him and hurried over to the freeze dried foods—something anyone can evaluate. Screw him, I thought. I have Trissi and she’s the only tool I need. And anyway. I’m tough. I just don’t look it. I’m secret-tough. Spy-tough. And after leaving REI I was convinced we had everything we’d need for four days in the woods of North Georgia.

The plan: to hike the first section of the AT from Springer Mountain to Neels Gap. But first—a two-night “glamping” adventure to decompress from our lives as harried soccer-moms. The writer in me was also going to take a break from working because though I was looking forward to the hike, I figured nothing could be less interesting than walking on a trail for nine hours a day so I’d leave my laptop at home for this one.

I couldn’t have been more wrong.

The Martyn House Glamping Getaway sits on 18 acres of North Georgia land in the picturesque apple capital of Ellijay. It was seven o’clock before we pulled into the gravel driveway, my feet already swollen from more than ten hours in the car with a bum knee. However, before I could even become concerned, the proprietress took us on a tour beginning with her husband’s photography studio/micro-brewery. That’s right. You heard me. Her husband has a microbrewery on the property as if fabulously whimsical tented dwellings aren’t fun enough.

Beers in hand, we walked out of the studio and down a gravel walkway, past a roaring fire, a pottery studio, and an outdoor bathroom draped in twinkling Christmas lights.

“Wait until you see your tent,” the owner teased.

More oohs and ahhs fell into the forest as we followed behind her and then we saw it—nestled at the rear of the property covered in black and white vertical stripes—our tent, the fabulous “Ridge Roost.” This was to be our home away from home for two nights as we prepped for the hike. I couldn’t have been more excited.

Pulling back the fabric entrance, the proprietress led us inside, leaving Trissi and me to revel in her wake. Vibrant reds, pinks, and orange designer fabrics covered the walls. Even the ceilings were covered in fabric—like some kind of gorgeous circus big top. No detail had been overlooked. There was a shabby chic sink in the rear “room” complete with homemade soap and a standing fabric-walled shower. Two twin iron beds held court in the main area with a small table replete with coffee, tea and handmade mugs.

“Breakfast is at nine thirty,” she finished. “Have a good night!”

Tired and tipsy, Trissi and I flopped down on the beds before filming several videos we intended to upload to Facebook. We’d told our friends and family that we’d document the trip as long as we could but suspected that we’d lose cell service on the actual trail.

“This place is awesome!” I said. “I can’t believe we’re really here.”

Silence.

“Triss?”

I looked across at the other bed and noticed my friend focused on the ceiling. “Get up,” she whispered. “There’s a spider. A big one.”

There in the perfectly folded fabric corner of the tent, was what appeared to be not just a spider, but a tarantula.

“Oh my God!”

Within seconds we were both standing on her bed stabbing at it with a book until it was no more than a balled-up corpse on the floral rug beneath her bed.

—Enter my favorite food group for the week: Advil PM. Sadly, even with a beer to wash it down, sleep wasn’t happening as the fear of creepy crawlies muscled out the Advil. Proof Positive—my Facebook status the following morning:

Tent Truths:

After killing two tremendous spiders, I felt itchy all over and started getting scared---like heart-racing-can't-sleep-what-the-eff-have-I-done SCARED.

It then started to rain, which was cool for the first few drops but escalated into the Loudest Most Terrifying Rain Ever.

So there I was, shivering in the pretty tent, certain a spider was going to nest in my ear, thinking about the fact that I was going to have to sleep with BEARS and no cool composting toilet after Wednesday!

Y'all, I seriously had to start praying in order not to cry. No longer was I afraid of knee pain—I was petrified of sleeping in The Heart of Bear Darkness.

Now exhausted.

Oh btw... Trissi's fine. Sleeping like a baby. I hate her.

I would soon find out spiders were just the beginning in a long list of dangers that awaited me on this trip. Perils that would end up strengthening me instead of killing me. But at eight a.m. the following morning, I was concerned about the tall mustached man in whose car I was about to ride.

“How’d you find this guy?” I whispered to Trissi.

“The official website recommended him.”

I vaguely recalled her interviewing drivers on the phone and knew there was one she preferred. This must be the guy.

Ron Brown greeted us with hand shakes and dual phone chargers as we settled into his car and headed down the highway. I had learned that the actual trailhead is not accessible by car, and therefore, must either be entered via the eight mile approach trail from Amicalola Falls, or, the way we were doing it—starting at a parking lot near Springer Mountain and hiking backwards one mile.

“You will want to be on the lookout for copperheads, rattlesnakes and wild boar,” Ron warned us.

“Wild boar?” Trissi asked.

“Yes. And don’t be scared if you hear mortars, 50 cal, or machine guns.”

Good grief. My stomach twisted before being distracted by Ron's GPS thundering a directive in a voice reminiscent of Darth Vader. "Turn right."

"Ron!" I exclaimed, laughter replacing fear. "What on earth was that?"

"I call him Dr, Nightmare." Ron replied, prompting me to get out my phone and record it because this boring-non-journal-worthy trip was getting funnier by the second.

Forty minutes later, Dr. Nightmare started beeping and Ron said in a rather delicate voice, "The captain has turned on the 'fasten your seatbelt' sign signaling our approach to Springer Mountain." We giggled some more as he explained that Dr. Nightmare had been programmed to alert him whenever he was in the vicinity of the mighty Appalachian Trail. "And now. . ." Ron continued while pulling into the designated drop-off area. "I can say with no fear of insult, Take a hike!"

And then just like that, we removed our gear from his car, turned, and were swallowed up by the forest.

The trail itself was well worn—about two feet wide and bordered by lush fern for most of the way. Sure enough, Trissi had been right. It *was* just a walk. OR so I thought.

"My feet hurt," I said after a while. "I think I have one of those hot spot things." I didn't really know what a "hot spot" was, but had heard people talk about them and I couldn't ignore the fact that my pinky toe was feeling rather warm. Since it wasn't my knee, though, I didn't care much—just thought I should notify The Boss.

I declined the surgical tape she offered. However, by 6 pm ALL of my toes were hot and now my calves were on fire as well. I was pretty sure people didn't wrap their entire legs in silver duct tape, so I assumed flaming calves were okay. But still. I needed to stop and we'd passed the last

water source hours ago—something I would have never thought about unless Trissi had noticed and insisted we stop and carry six more pounds of water with us “just in case.”

“We need to make sure we have enough water for evening tea and morning coffee,” she’d chirped. “Breakfast in the woods with hot mugs. It’s bliss.”

Bliss my foot. Everything about this kind of camping was getting worse by the hour. Because our water now had to be rationed, washing out the dishes promised to be hard and completely took away my appetite. This was a shame as we’d carried in powdered hummus and small bottles of olive oil and herbal vinegar like some kind of gourmet hiking chefs. Still. . . I hadn’t factored in The Calves, bruised hips, and growing collar bone abrasions—not to mention our inability to make a fire. Seriously. What kind of idiot can’t make fire with a lighter *and* paper? Um that’d be me—the one who’d bragged about watching several survival shows on the Discovery Channel in preparation for this trip.

Fire aside, at the moment, all I could think about was pain and BEARS—specifically, their getting our food, or should I say getting us FOR food.

True to form, Trissi had a plan—bear bags—a pulley system to hoist our food high above the bears’ reach in a nearby tree. Problem was: we’re short. The highest we could get the dang thing lifted was so low that I envisioned bears simply reaching up and picking our bag full of everything-we-had-to-eat-for-four-days off the tree like a berry.

Getting more upset by the minute, I headed into the tent to blow up the mattress pad I’d borrowed from her son in order to save money. But by 12:30 am, regardless of my new favorite sleep aid, I was in a tight shaking ball, freezing and frightened of not only bears, but raccoons, too. “My back is cold,” I said. “I think this pad has a hole in it.”

“Impossible,” she replied. “It’s new and we just used it.” But within fifteen minutes, she concurred. I was sleeping on a defective pad in a sleeping bag I later learned was much too big for my petite frame therefore making it impossible to stay warm. By the time the sun came up, I was exhausted. Little did I know, the toughest day was ahead of me, and before we’d even made it seven miles, I was planning my escape.

“I can’t do it again,” I moaned as we scaled Sassafrass Mountain—a sweet Willie-Wonka name for a deathly horrible climb. “I can’t sleep in a tent again. I’ll die.”

She chuckled, but I soon discovered that her feet were feeling equally fatigued and she was racked with guilt over my defective equipment. “If we can go really fast,” she offered, “maybe we can get out a day early. “Let’s just try to get to the top of Blood Mountain.”

Blood Mountain. The very words felt like acid in my mouth. Had I known then that in less than twenty-four hours, I’d be welcomed back to the glamping resort with a standing ovation at their yearly farm-to-table dinner, I might have been less irritable. And if you’d told me that the fancy dinner guests would invite Trissi and me to share our story and then join them for dessert, I wouldn’t have even believed you. Instead I was focused on the pain and as it intensified, so did my prayers, leading me to silently recite the 23rd Psalm, connecting God’s rod and staff to my trekking poles, His paths of righteousness to MY path, His still waters to the streams we were passing. Still, I couldn’t ignore the feeling that due to an improper pack adjustment my shoulder now felt like it had a knife wedged in it.

“What if we can get a room at the Super 8 in Dahlonega?” Trissi mentioned sometime later. Unbeknownst to me, she’d been checking her Expedia app on the crests of the mountains and had come up with a back-up plan. If we could make it to some parking lot at Woody Gap, which was before Blood, we could hitch hike off the trail and spend the night in the nearby town of Dahlonega.

I'd heard of people hitch hiking off the trail but never really imagined I'd be one of them. Hitch hiking was the stuff of serial killings, mountain murders and abductions. Yet we'd been walking through a dense thicket for miles. Areas so black and damp that it felt like I was in the fifth circle of hell. I *had* to get out of there and was in so much pain that for the first time ever, I considered quitting the whole endeavor. And if there's one thing I'm not, it's a "quitter."

"I'm in!" I nearly shouted. And then, right before my weary eyes, the ground started to sparkle. Squinting, I refocused my eyes and wondered if calf pain or the allure of a motel could cause hallucinations. As I kicked at the trail, I discovered it wasn't a mirage. The ground was truly as glittery as my new copper eyeshadow. We had entered a section of the trail in which there was so much mica in the earth that the entire path was twinkling at me. In the midst of my aching I was struck by the beauty of this place and the complete and utter creativity of God. How surreal to be trodding on reflective dirt.

Several hours later, before I lost my will to live entirely, we saw it—The parking lot. "Dear Lord," I begged as I scanned the lot full of cars. "Please show us a nice driver who won't kill us and make garments with our skin."

Prayers answered: There, beside a wooden map marker, stood an older couple next to their perky Pekinese and the man had a large gold cross hanging over his sweater, which I seized as my sign.

"Might you be able to give us a ride?" we asked, uncontrollably laughing moments later when his sweet wife inquired as to whether we were carrying pick axes or machetes. Apparently Trissi and I looked dangerous.

We assured her that we didn't, then posed for their camera—a move I'm certain was an attempt to gather evidence in the event of their untimely deaths. "I'm going to put these on Facebook!" she squealed.

Oh Facebook will hear from me too, I thought—as soon as we get to the hotel.

IT'S ALL FALLING APART:

Sitting in a Super eight that smells like chicken vindaloo after having hitch-hiked off the trail in pain. Injuries include bruised feet, abrasions on hips and collar bones, a painful toe whose nail I've already tried to file completely off, and the feeling I have a knife wedged in my shoulder blade.

Also dropped and shattered phone

Hotel advises using the "homeless man" camped in the room below us should we need a ride tomorrow.

"He has a car?" I asked.

Mr. Patel nodded. "He's not carless. Just homeless. I let him stay here for free.

Concluded my days as a hiker are over.

Btw Trissi's fine and wants to go back and finish the hike tomorrow. I'm praying she gets the flu overnight.

By this time Trissi and I had quite a few friends following our progress and my little update caused a bit of a frenzy. Within seconds, loads of our friends were encouraging me to press on. They were so insistent that the following morning after waking Trissi, I called the front desk and asked for the homeless man.

“We don’t have to finish,” Trissi said, hobbling across the room, her sore body adjusting to moving again. “Seriously. I’m fine to go home.”

I loved my friend. Her comment reminded me of the characters in *The Gift of the Magi*. Like Della, Trissi was willing to quit hiking for me, but like Jim, I was going to insist we finish because of my love for her. “Pack up,” I ordered her. “I’m going to the McDonalds across the street and getting a latte. By damn, we’re doing this!”

As promised, the homeless man delivered us safely back to the mountain. But this time, the sun was smiling and that tiny shift in the atmosphere gave us the energy to not only hike with injuries, but hike FAST.

“Let me see the map,” Trissi said after we’d been trudging along for some time. As was our habit, I turned around and she fished the map out of one of my side pockets. “Good Lord, we’ve done seven miles in three hours! We’re going to finish this thing WAY before we thought we would! We’re almost at Blood Mountain!”

I’ve tried to recall my feelings as I write this. In retrospect, our arrival was anti-climactic because it couldn’t compare to the strength it took to get there. Suddenly, we were just there—standing on the top of a mountain enjoying the splendor and giggling as if it were easy. It was days later, safely back in Oxford, that I noticed I had taken to falling to sleep while envisioning being snuggled into those mountains. I’d even gone so far as to play the crickets chirping app on my iPhone as white noise. How was it possible that such a struggle was what I was choosing to think about in order to fall asleep? I pondered it for days more, but in my heart, I knew the answer. As hard as it had been, my primary memory of the experience was joy—joy derived from opening my heart and mind to living in the woods with my best friend—the freedom of meeting and trusting strangers—the silence of leaving technology behind—the pride of achieving a worthy

goal—and the utter, random thrill of our grand return to the glamping resort where we were welcomed like long lost rock stars.

So, yes. Blood Mountain has become my “happy place.” And yes, I will hike again, even though I cussed and swore I wouldn’t on Day Two. I no longer need to carry a nail file and have since learned that duct tape is not only good for holding my broken trekking pole together and protecting blisters, but it apparently can be used as a fire starter, too. So there. Trissi didn’t even know that fact :)