



A Trail UNBROKEN

All three girls — Katie, Caroline, and Marjorie — on a section of the International Appalachian Trail in Gaspésie National Park in Quebec

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I'D NEVER HEARD of the Appalachian Trail. It seems long ago now, but my ignorance lasted a good while, maybe 35 years. I grew up across an ocean from it, and then lived continents away from its sinuous line. Even when I first came to the United States to live, and my first daughter was born just 60 miles from Delaware Water Gap, I am not sure that knowledge of the Trail made it through the haze of new parenthood. This spring, nearly 21 years on, that first daughter and I drove down to the Great Smoky Mountains to hike. As we drove, we pointed out where the A.T. was — on that ridge between us and Gettysburg, crossing the Potomac River well downstream of I-81, right beside

us as we detoured through Shenandoah National Park. And it struck me on that drive that it was our very good fortune that the A.T. grew into our family life just when Katie, and the sisters who came after her, were growing up.

We went overseas again soon after Katie was born, but by the time we settled in Connecticut 15 years ago, the A.T. was on our radar. I don't remember exactly how it got there, but it predated *A Walk in the Woods*. Anyway, we were delighted to discover that the Trail entered Connecticut from New York less than an hour from our new family home. This proximity did not make us thru-hikers, or even regular section backpackers, but from then

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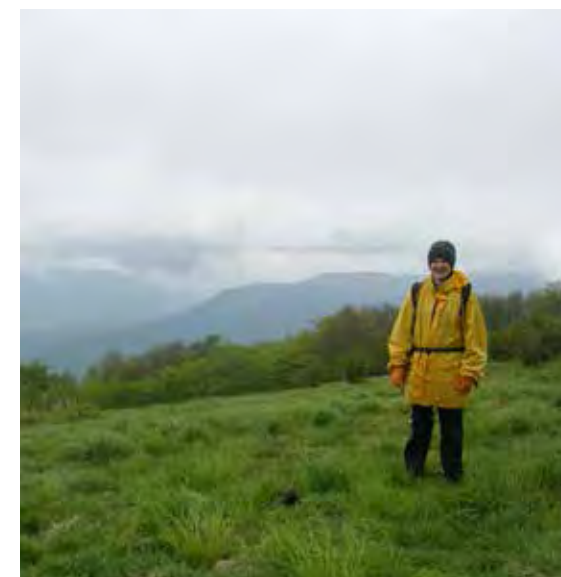
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We got acquainted gradually. I remember taking the older girls to Baxter State Park soon after their sister was born. They were seven and five then, and I thought Katahdin would be too much. So we climbed a lesser peak, looked out over ponds and woods to the hazy summit of “the Greatest Mountain” of the Penobscot, and talked about the unimaginably long Trail that ended there. Two years later, the whole family dropped me off near the Massachusetts line, and I climbed alone to Sages Ravine to begin the 52.3 miles of Connecticut A.T. I had only some of the right gear, not including the right socks. I walked too far on my first full day out. It poured incessantly. The next day, my knees ached on steep downhill and my feet had blisters. When my family came to pick me up, short of the New York line, daddy “smelled like a horse.” But he had stories.

In the years that followed, our visits to the A.T. multiplied. There were hikes up Connecticut's Bear Mountain and the surrounding Taconic summits (the girls, quiet on the climbs, were transformed at the tops, wowed by the views, their achievement — and relief). Once, on a camping trip a stone's throw from the Trail, at a time when our middle daughter was learning to play Doris Gazda's *Appalachian Sunrise* on her violin, we rose before dawn to see the sun come up (haze, foliage, and the enclosing hills made it less than dramatic). Then, years later, we came across the International A.T. up in Quebec, and followed it all the way to alpine tundra on a rainy mountain called Pic du Brulé.

At one level, it is obvious why all this was such good fortune. Wild, beautiful places to exercise and unwind are, even in our relatively uncrowded country, not easily accessed by all. But the A.T. is more than scenery; by its very nature, it challenges. The fact of 2,180 miles of unbroken Trail, and of the thousands who set out to hike it all, challenges us to make our own adventures a little more, well, adventurous. And then we find so much of value out on the Trail — autonomy, perspective, peace — that

we challenge the assumptions of our everyday lives, and perhaps make them more adventurous too. Maybe this is just fancy, but as Katie and I looked out over the Smokies, I could not help but be glad that the A.T. had grown into our lives. ↗



From top: Katie at Gregory Bald above Cades Cove just off the A.T. in the Smokies; Katie and Caroline on Bear Mountain in Connecticut

