

I took one look at you this morning at the trailhead and I thought, “This girl is never gonna make it,” my tenth-grade history teacher told me after we reached the top of Mt. Lafayette in New Hampshire. I had been the first of 20 high school students and two teachers to summit, and I sat cooling my heels in smug satisfaction in the crisp September air as the others reached the top.

I had never been hiking before, and I knew nothing about gear (I was wearing sneakers), hydration (I was out of water), or trail ethics (I was sitting on the vegetation). However, that day I knew that I had found what I loved. As a 15-year-old in the throes of adolescent misery, this mountain offered something that nothing else at the time did—a sense of possibility. I sat inhaling the fresh air, my body pleasantly tired, looking out over the Pemigewasset Wilderness (I had no idea it was the Pemi) and I had the most unusual feeling: I was *happy*. The world looked different from on high. My perspective was changed. I felt redeemed.

I continued day-hiking in the White Mountains throughout high school and, when I could, in college. When I graduated, I decided to section-hike the A.T. from Hanover, New Hampshire, to Caratunk, Maine, the toughest part of the trail (I had no idea it was the toughest part). I may have been a strong day-hiker, but I was no backpacker. I didn’t know how to filter water or set up a tent. The stove I borrowed

terrified me. But I went because I loved the Whites, and I knew that I could do it.

On my first day out, I met a bald, middle-aged thru-hiker just south of Smarts Mountain. My filter had broken, and, as he helped me repair it (although he really only dropped an essential part in the stream, making it completely useless for the rest of the trip), he muttered, “Some people need all the help they can get.” Later, “Combover,” as I silently referred to him, ridiculed me on the way to a packed shelter and said that I wouldn’t last another day. The Appalachian Trail was teeming with thru-hikers on their way up

from Georgia. They had been in the woods for months; they were lean, strong, and fast; and it felt like they deserved to be on the trail more than a novice such as me.

Combover was right in a way. I injured myself trying to prove that I could keep up. After all, hiking was what I was good at. I wasn’t used to being the slow one. I made it only as far as Mt. Lafayette. I paid silent homage to Guy Waterman, the pioneer of backcountry ethics who took his life near the summit in February 2000. I then hobbled down the Old Bridle Path and hitchhiked home. The injury was severe enough that I thought that I would never hike again.

But the Whites proved me wrong. I loved them so much that I was willing to do anything to get back. So for months I stretched and rebuilt my strength. I learned everything I could about my injury and how to minimize it. A year after Combover declared me hopeless I was back on top of Lafayette. This time, I had hiked 1,800 miles to get here, on my way up from Georgia. I sat on top of Lafayette, the first person of the day, and looked out over the Pemi. I once again paid my respects to Waterman. But this time I thought also of his wife, Laura—his hiking partner, coauthor, and survivor. I was overtaken by the same feeling I had eight years past. The world looked different from on high. All was not lost. The world is full of possibility.

I now work in environmental conservation in West Africa. After I thru-hiked, it felt like time to give something back to the natural world that has given me so much. And working in Africa is wonderful in many ways. Still, when I lay outside on a mat at night, the insects buzzing in my ears, and the ground hard beneath my body, I like to imagine that I am somewhere else. I am resting on a rock on top of Lafayette, the air is fresh, my body is pleasantly tired, and the world is full of possibility.

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