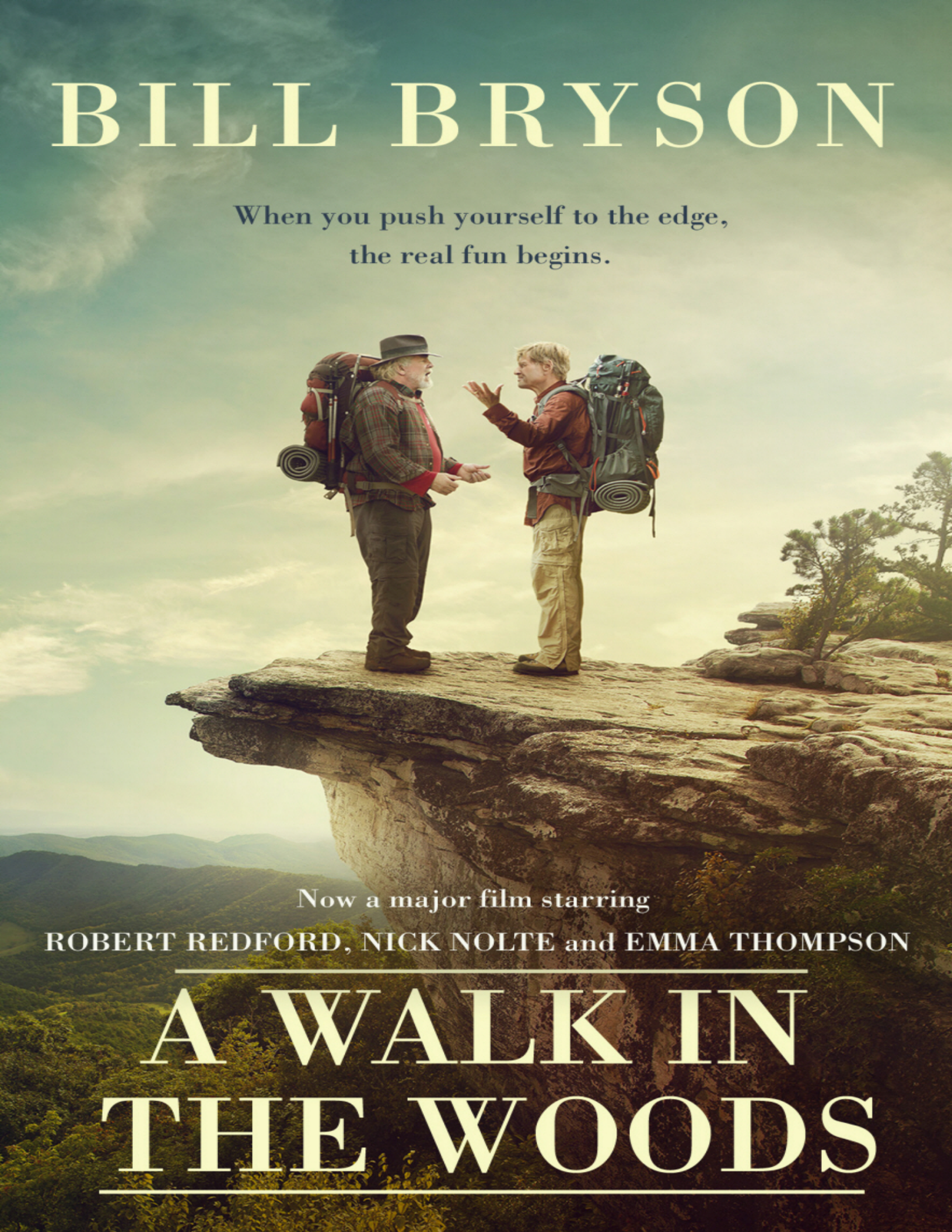
BILL BRYSON

When you push yourself to the edge,
the real fun begins.



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A WALK IN THE WOODS

About the Book

The longest continuous footpath in the world, the Appalachian Trail stretches along the East Coast of the United States, from Georgia to Maine. At the age of forty-four, in the company of his friend Stephen Katz, Bill Bryson set off to hike through the vast tangled woods which have been frightening sensible people for three hundred years. Ahead lay almost 2,200 miles of remote mountain wilderness filled with bears, bobcats, rattlesnakes, poisonous plants, disease-bearing tics, the occasional chuckling murderer and – perhaps most alarming of all – people whose favourite pastime is discussing the relative merits of the external-frame backpack.

Facing savage weather, merciless insects, unreliable maps and a fickle companion whose profoundest wish was to go to a motel and watch *The X-Files*, Bryson gamely struggled through the wilderness to achieve a lifetime's ambition – not to die outdoors.

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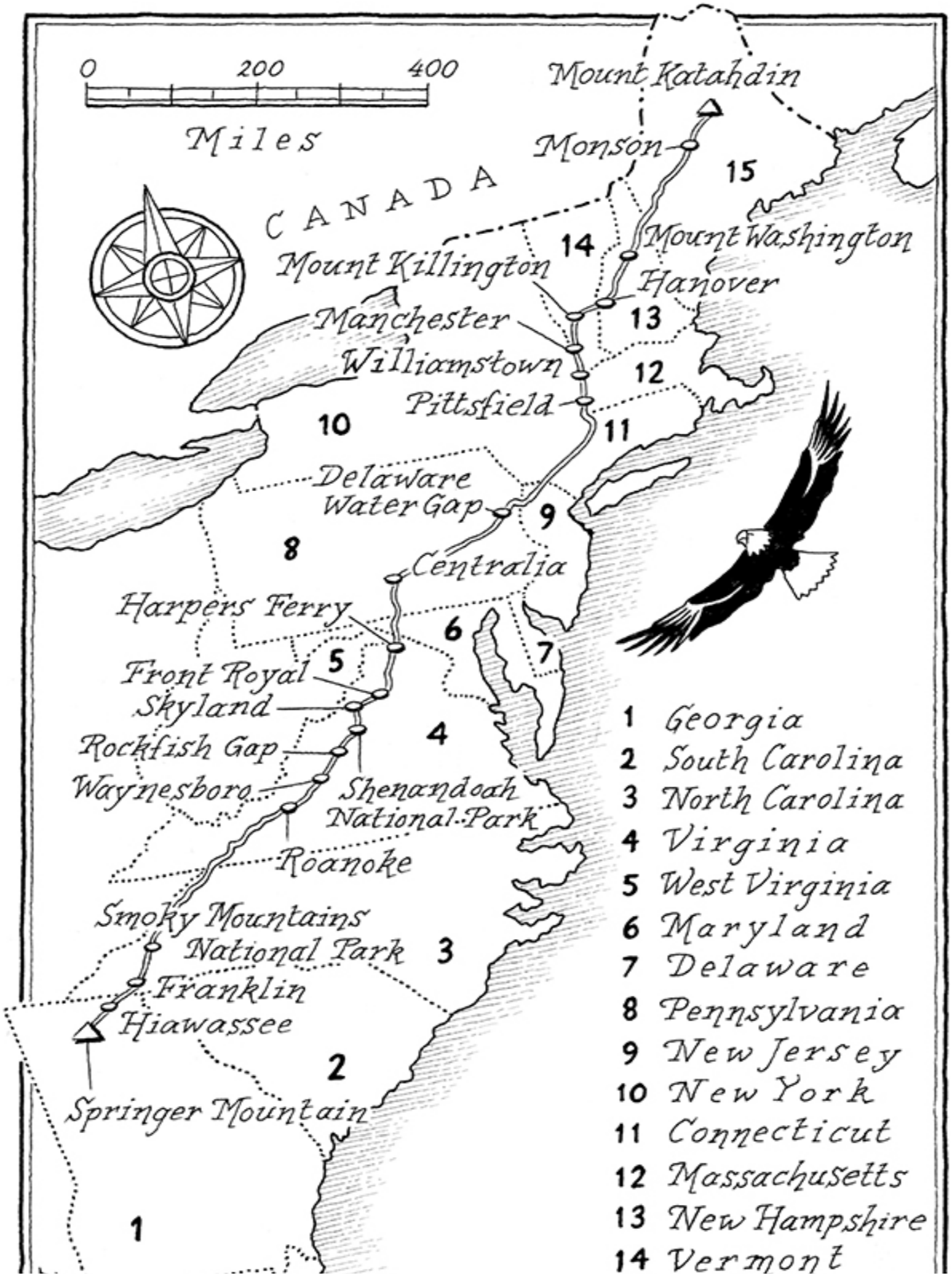
Bill Bryson
Illustrated by David Cook

To Katz, of course.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Williamstown
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Delaware
Water Gap
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Harpers Ferry
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N. G.
15 Maine

Chapter 1

Not long after I moved with my family to a small town in New Hampshire I happened upon a path that vanished into a wood on the edge of town.

A sign announced that this was no ordinary footpath, but the celebrated Appalachian Trail. Running more than 2,100 miles along America's eastern seaboard, through the serene and beckoning Appalachian Mountains, the AT is the granddaddy of long hikes. The Virginia portion alone is twice the length of the Pennine Way. From Georgia to Maine, it wanders across fourteen states, through plump, comely hills whose very names – Blue Ridge, Smokies, Cumberlands, Catskills, Green Mountains, White Mountains – seem an invitation to amble. Who could say the words 'Great Smoky Mountains' or 'Shenandoah Valley' and not feel an urge, as the naturalist John Muir once put it, to 'throw a loaf of bread and a pound of tea in an old sack and jump over the back fence'?

And here it was, quite unexpectedly, meandering in a dangerously beguiling fashion through the pleasant New England community in which I had just settled. It seemed such an extraordinary notion – the idea that I could set off from home and walk 1,800 miles through woods to Georgia, or turn the other way and clamber over the rough and stony White Mountains to the fabled prow of Mount Katahdin floating in forest 450 miles to the north in a

wilderness few have seen. A little voice in my head said: ‘Sounds neat! Let’s do it!’

I formed a number of rationalizations. It would get me fit after years of waddlesome sloth. It would be useful – I wasn’t quite sure in what way, but I was sure none the less – to learn to fend for myself in the wilderness. When guys in camouflage pants and hunting hats sat around in the Four Aces Diner talking about fearsome things done out of doors I would no longer have to feel like such a cupcake. I wanted a little of that swagger that comes with being able to gaze at a far horizon through eyes of chipped granite and say with a slow, manly sniff, ‘Yeah, I’ve shit in the woods.’

And there was a more compelling reason to go. The Appalachians are the home of one of the world’s great hardwood forests – a relic of the richest, most diversified sweep of woodland ever to grace the temperate world – and that forest is in trouble. If the global temperature rises by 4°C over the next fifty years, as is evidently possible, then the whole of the Appalachian wilderness below New England could become savannah. Already trees are dying in mysterious and frightening numbers. The elms and chestnuts are long gone, the stately hemlocks and flowery dogwoods are going, and the red spruces, Fraser firs, hickories, mountain ashes and sugar maples may be about to follow. Clearly if ever there was a time to experience this singular wilderness, it was now.

So I decided to do it. More rashly, I announced my intention – told friends and neighbours, confidently informed my publisher, made it common knowledge among those who knew me. Then I bought some books and talked to people who had done the trail in whole or in part and came gradually to realize that this was way beyond – *way* beyond – anything I had attempted before.

Nearly everyone I talked to had some gruesome story involving a guileless acquaintance who had gone off hiking

the trail with high hopes and new boots and come stumbling back two days later with a bobcat attached to his head or dripping blood from an armless sleeve and whispering '*Bear!*' in a hoarse voice, before sinking into a troubled unconsciousness.

The woods were full of peril – rattlesnakes and water moccasins and nests of copperheads; bobcats, bears, coyotes, wolves, and wild boar; loony hillbillies destabilized by gross quantities of impure corn liquor and generations of profoundly unbiblical sex; rabies-crazed skunks, raccoons and squirrels; merciless fire ants and ravening blackfly; poison ivy, poison sumac, poison salamanders; even a scattering of moose lethally deranged by a parasitic worm that burrows a nest in their brains and befuddles them into chasing hapless hikers through remote, sunny meadows and into glacial lakes.

Literally unimaginable things could happen to you out there. I heard of a man who had stepped from his tent for a midnight pee and was swooped upon by a short-sighted hoot owl – the last he saw of his scalp it was dangling from talons prettily silhouetted against a harvest moon – and of a young woman who was woken by a sinuous tickle across her belly and peeked into her sleeping bag to find a copperhead bunking down in the warmth between her legs. I heard four separate stories (always related with a chuckle) of campers and bears sharing tents for a few confused and lively moments; of people abruptly vaporized ('tweren't nothing left of him but a scorch mark') by body-sized bolts of lightning when caught in sudden storms on high ridgelines; of tents crushed beneath falling trees, or eased off precipices on ballbearings of beaded rain and sent paragliding onto distant valley floors, or swept away by the watery wall of a flash flood; of hikers beyond counting whose last experience was trembling earth and the befuddled thought 'Now what the f—?'

It required only a little light reading in adventure books and almost no imagination to envision circumstances in which I would find myself caught in a tightening circle of hunger-emboldened wolves, staggering and shredding clothes under an onslaught of pincered fire ants, or dumbly transfixed by the sight of enlivened undergrowth advancing towards me, like a torpedo through water, before being bowled backwards by a sofa-sized boar with cold beady eyes, a piercing squeal, and a slaverous, chomping appetite for pink, plump, city-softened flesh.

Then there were all the diseases lurking in the woods – *Giardia lamblia*, Eastern equine encephalitis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Lyme disease, *Helicobacter pylori*, *Ehrlichia chaffeenis*, schistosomiasis, brucellosis, and shigella, to offer but a sampling. Eastern equine encephalitis, caused by the prick of a mosquito, attacks the brain and central nervous system. If you are very lucky you can hope to spend the rest of your life propped in a chair with a bib round your neck, but generally it will kill you. There is no known cure. No less arresting is Lyme disease, which comes from the bite of a deer tick smaller than a pinhead. If undetected, it can lie dormant in the human body for years before erupting in a positive fiesta of maladies. This is a disease for the person who wants to experience it all. The symptoms begin with headaches, fatigue, fever, chills, shortness of breath, dizziness, and shooting pains in the extremities, then march on to cardiac irregularities, facial paralysis, muscle spasms, severe mental impairment, loss of control of body functions, and – not surprising in the circumstances – chronic depression.

Then there is the little-known family of organisms called hantaviruses, which swarm in the micro-haze above the faeces of mice and rats, and are hoovered into the human respiratory system by anyone unlucky enough to stick a breathing orifice near them – by lying down, say, on a sleeping platform over which infected mice have recently

scampered. In 1993 a single outbreak of hantavirus killed thirty-two people in the southwestern United States, and the following year the disease claimed its first victim on the AT when a hiker contracted it after sleeping in a 'rodent-infested shelter'. (All AT shelters are rodent infested.) Among viruses, only rabies, Ebola and HIV are more certainly lethal. Again, there is no treatment.

Finally, this being America, there is the constant possibility of murder. At least nine hikers – the actual number depends on which source you consult and how you define a hiker – have been murdered along the trail since 1974. Two young women would die while I was out there.

For various practical reasons, principally to do with the long, punishing winters of northern New England, there are only so many available months to hike the trail each year. If you start at the northern end, at Mount Katahdin in Maine, you must wait for the snows to clear in late May or June. If, on the other hand, you start in Georgia and head north, you must time it to finish before mid-October when the snows blow back in. Most people hike from south to north with spring, ideally keeping one step ahead of the worst of the hot weather and the more irksome and infectious of insects. My intention was to start in the south in early March. I put aside six weeks for the first leg.

The precise length of the Appalachian Trail is a matter of interesting uncertainty. The US National Park Service, which constantly distinguishes itself in a variety of alarming ways, manages in a single leaflet to give the length of the trail as 2,155 miles and 2,200 miles. The official Appalachian Trail Guides, a set of eleven books each dealing with a particular state or section, variously give the length as 2,144 miles, 2,147 miles, 2,159 miles and 'more than 2,150 miles'. The Appalachian Trail Conference, the governing body, in 1993 put the trail length at exactly 2,146.7 miles, then changed for a couple of years to a hesitantly vague 'more than 2,150 miles', but has recently

returned to confident precision with a length of 2,160.2 miles. In 1993, three people rolled a measuring wheel along its entire length and came up with a distance of 2,164.9 miles. At about the same time a careful measure based on a full set of US Geological Survey maps put the distance at 2,118.3 miles.

What is certain is that it is a long way, and from either end it is not easy. The peaks of the Appalachian Trail are not particularly formidable as mountains go – the highest, Clingmans Dome, in Tennessee, tops out at a little under 6,700 feet – but they are big enough and they go on and on. There are more than 350 peaks over 5,000 feet along the AT, and perhaps a thousand more in the vicinity. In a week you can cross fifty Snowdons. Altogether, it takes about five months, and five million steps, to walk the trail from end to end.

And of course on the AT you must lug on your back everything you need. It may seem obvious, but it came as a small shock to me to realize that this wasn't going to be even remotely like an amble through the Lake District, where you head off for the day with a haversack containing a packed lunch and a copy of Wainwright, and at day's end retire from the hills to a convivial inn. Here you sleep out of doors and cook your own food. Few people manage to carry less than 40 pounds and when you are hauling that kind of weight, believe me, never for a moment does it escape your notice. It is one thing to walk 2,000 miles; quite another to walk 2,000 miles with a wardrobe on your back.

* * *

My first inkling of just how daunting an undertaking it was to be came when I went to our local outfitters, the Dartmouth Co-Op, to purchase equipment. My son had just got an after-school job there, so I was under strict instructions of good behaviour. Specifically, I was not to say or do anything stupid, try on anything that would require

me to expose my stomach, say ‘Are you shitting me?’ when informed of the price of a product, be conspicuously inattentive when a sales assistant was explaining the correct maintenance or aftercare of a product, and above all not to don anything inappropriate, like a woman’s ski hat, in an attempt to amuse.

I was told to ask for Dave Mengle because he had walked large parts of the trail himself and was something of an encyclopedia of outdoor knowledge. A kindly and deferential sort of fellow, Mengle could talk for perhaps four days solid, with interest, about any aspect of hiking equipment.

I have never been so simultaneously impressed and bewildered. We spent a whole afternoon going through his stock. He would say things to me like: ‘Now this has a 70-denier high-density abrasion-resistant fly with a ripstop weave. On the other hand, and I’ll be frank with you here’ – and he would lean towards me and reduce his voice to a low, candid tone, as if disclosing that it had once been arrested in a public toilet with a sailor – ‘the seams are lap-felled rather than bias-taped and the vestibule is a little cramped.’

I think because I mentioned that I had done a bit of hiking in England, he assumed some measure of competence on my part. I didn’t wish to alarm or disappoint him, so when he asked me questions like ‘What’s your view on carbon fibre stays?’ I would shake my head with a rueful chuckle, in recognition of the famous variability of views on this perennially thorny issue, and say, ‘You know, Dave, I’ve never been able to make up my mind on that one – what do you think?’

Together we discussed and gravely considered the relative merits of side compression straps, spindrift collars, crampon patches, load transfer differentials, airflow channels, webbing loops, and something called the occipital cutout ratio. We went through that with every

item. Even an aluminium cookset offered considerations of weight, compactness, thermal dynamics, and general utility that could occupy a mind for hours. In between there was lots of discussion about hiking generally, mostly to do with hazards like rockfalls, bear encounters, cookstove explosions, and snakebites, which he described with a certain misty-eyed fondness, before coming back to the topic at hand.

With everything, he talked a lot about weight. It seemed to me a trifle overfastidious to choose one sleeping bag over another because it weighed three ounces less, but as equipment piled up around us I began to appreciate how ounces accumulate into pounds. I hadn't expected to buy so much – I already owned hiking boots, a Swiss army knife and a plastic map pouch that you wear round your neck on a piece of string, so I had felt I was pretty well there – but the more I talked to Dave the more I realized that I was shopping for an expedition.

The two big shocks were how expensive everything was – each time Dave dodged into the storeroom or went off to confirm a denier rating, I stole looks at price tags and was invariably appalled – and that every piece of equipment appeared to require some further piece of equipment. If you bought a sleeping bag, then you needed a stuff sack for it. The stuff sack cost $29. I found this an increasingly difficult concept to warm to.

When after much solemn consideration I settled on a backpack – a very expensive Gregory, top of the range, no-point-in-stinting-here sort of thing – he said, 'Now what kind of straps do you want with that?'

'I beg your pardon?' I said, and recognized at once that I was on the brink of a dangerous condition known as retail burnout. No more now would I blithely say, 'Better give me half a dozen of those, Dave. Oh, and I'll take eight of these – what the heck, make it a dozen. You only live once, eh?' The mound of provisions that a minute ago had looked so

pleasingly abundant and exciting – all new! all mine! – suddenly seemed burdensome and extravagant.

'Straps,' Dave explained. 'You know, to tie on your sleeping bag and lash things down.'

'It doesn't come with straps?' I said in a new, level tone.

'Oh, no.' He surveyed a wall of products, and touched a finger to his nose. 'You'll need a raincover too, of course.'

I blinked. 'A raincover? Why?'

'To keep out the rain.'

'The backpack's not rainproof?'

He grimaced as if making an exceptionally delicate distinction. 'Well, not a hundred per cent …'

This was extraordinary to me. 'Really? Did it not occur to the manufacturer that people might want to take their packs outdoors from time to time? Perhaps even go camping with them. How much is this pack anyway?'

'Two hundred and fifty dollars.'

'Two hundred and fifty dollars! Are you shi—' I paused and put on a new voice. 'Are you saying, Dave, that I pay two hundred and fifty dollars for a pack and it doesn't have straps and it isn't waterproof?'

He nodded.

'Does it have a bottom in it?'

Mengle smiled uneasily. It was not in his nature to grow critical or weary in the rich, promising world of camping equipment. 'The straps come in a choice of six colours,' he offered helpfully.

I ended up with enough equipment to bring full employment to a vale of sherpas – a three-season tent, self-inflating sleeping pad, nested pots and pans, folding cutlery, plastic dish and cup, complicated pump-action water purifier, stuff sacks in a rainbow of colours, seam sealer, patching kit, sleeping bag, bungee cords, water bottles, waterproof poncho, waterproof matches, pack cover, a rather nifty compass/thermometer keyring, a little collapsible stove that looked frankly like trouble, gas bottle

and spare gas bottle, a hands-free torch that you wear on your head like a miner's lamp (this I liked very much), a big knife for killing bears and hillbillies, insulated long johns and vests, four bandannas, and lots of other stuff, some of which I had to go back again and ask what it was for exactly. I drew the line at buying a designer groundcloth for $59.95, knowing I could acquire a lawn tarp at K-mart for $5. I also said no to a first-aid kit, sewing kit, anti-snakebite kit, $12 emergency whistle and small orange plastic shovel for burying one's poop, on the grounds that these were unnecessary, too expensive or invited ridicule. The orange spade in particular seemed to shout: 'Greenhorn! Sissy! Make way for Mr Buttercup!'

Then, just to get it all over and done with at once, I went to the local bookshop and bought books – *The Thru-Hiker's Handbook, Walking the Appalachian Trail*, several books on wildlife and the natural sciences, a geological history of the Appalachian Trail by the exquisitely named V. Collins Chew, and the complete, aforementioned set of official Appalachian Trail Guides, consisting of eleven small paperback books and fifty-nine maps in different sizes, styles and scales covering the whole trail from Springer Mountain to Mount Katahdin, and ambitiously priced at $233.45 the set. On the way out I noticed a volume called *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*, opened it up at random, found the sentence 'This is a clear example of the general type of incident in which a black bear sees a person and decides to try to kill and eat him', and tossed that into the shopping basket, too.

I took all this home and carried it down to the basement in several trips. There was such a lot, nearly all of it technologically unfamiliar to me, which made it both exciting and daunting, but mostly daunting. I put the hands-free torch on my head, for the heck of it, and pulled the tent from its plastic packaging and erected it on the floor. I unfurled the self-inflating sleeping pad and pushed it

inside and followed that with my fluffy new sleeping bag. Then I crawled in and lay there for quite a long time trying out for size the expensive, confined, strangely new-smelling, entirely novel space that was soon to be my home from home. I tried to imagine myself lying not in a basement beside the reassuring, cosily domesticated roar of the furnace, but rather outside, in a high mountain pass, listening to wind and tree noise, the lonely cry of doglike creatures, the hoarse whisper of a Georgia mountain accent saying: ‘Hey, Virgil, there’s one over here. Y’all remember the rope?’ But I couldn’t really.

I hadn’t been in a space like this since I stopped making dens with blankets and card tables at about the age of nine. It was really quite snug and, once you got used to the smell, which I naively presumed would dissipate over time, and the fact that the fabric gave everything inside a sickly greenish pallor, like the glow off a radar screen, it was not so bad. A little claustrophobic perhaps, a little odd-smelling, but cosy and sturdy even so.

This wouldn’t be so bad, I told myself. But secretly I knew that I was quite wrong.

Chapter 2

On the afternoon of 5 July 1983, three adult supervisors and a group of youngsters set up camp at a popular spot beside Lake Canimina in the fragrant pine forests of western Quebec, about 80 miles north of Ottawa, in a park called La Vérendrye Provincial Reserve. They cooked dinner and afterwards, in the correct fashion, secured their food in a bag and carried it a hundred or so feet into the woods, where they suspended it above the ground between two trees, out of the reach of bears.

About midnight, a black bear came prowling around the margins of the camp, spied the bag and brought it down by climbing one of the trees and breaking a branch. He plundered the food and departed, but an hour later he was back, this time entering the camp itself, drawn by the lingering smell of cooked meat in the campers' clothes and hair, in their sleeping bags and tent fabric. It was to be a long night for the Canimina party. Three times between midnight and 3.30 a.m. the bear came to the camp.

Imagine, if you will, lying in the dark alone in a little tent, nothing but a few microns of trembling nylon between you and the chill night air, listening to a 400-pound bear moving around your campsite. Imagine its quiet grunts and mysterious snufflings, the clatter of upended cookware and sounds of moist gnawings, the pad of its feet and the heaviness of its breath, the singing brush of its haunch along your tent side. Imagine the hot flood of adrenalin,

that unwelcome tingling in the back of your arms, at the sudden rough bump of its snout against the foot of your tent, the alarming wild wobble of your frail shell as it roots through the backpack that you left casually propped by the entrance – with, you suddenly recall, a Snickers bar in the pouch. Bears adore Snickers bars, you've heard.

And then the dull thought – oh, God – that perhaps you brought the Snickers bar in here with you, that it's somewhere in here, down by your feet or underneath you or – oh, shit, here it is. Another bump of grunting head against the tent, this time near your shoulders. More crazy wobble. Then silence, a very long silence, and – wait, shhhhh … yes! – the unutterable relief of realizing that the bear has withdrawn to the other side of the camp or shambled back into the woods. I tell you right now. I couldn't stand it.

So imagine then what it must have been like for poor little David Anderson, aged twelve, when at 3.30 a.m., on the third foray, his tent of all tents was abruptly rent with a swipe of claw and the bear, driven to distraction by the rich, unfixable, everywhere aroma of hamburger, bit hard into a flinching limb and dragged him shouting and flailing through the camp and into the woods. In the few moments it took the boy's fellow campers to unzip themselves from their accoutrements – and imagine, if you will, trying to swim out of suddenly voluminous sleeping bags, take up flashlights and makeshift cudgels, undo tent zips with helplessly fumbling fingers, and give chase – in those few moments, poor little David Anderson was dead.

Now imagine reading a nonfiction book packed with stories such as this – true tales soberly related – just before setting off alone on a camping trip of your own into the North American wilderness. The book to which I refer is *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance* by a Canadian academic named Stephen Herrero. If it is not the last word on the subject, then I really, really, really do not wish to

hear the last word. Through long winter nights in New Hampshire, while snow piled up outdoors and my wife slumbered peacefully beside me, I lay saucer-eyed in bed reading clinically precise accounts of people gnawed pulpy in their sleeping bags, plucked whimpering from trees, even noiselessly stalked (I didn't know this happened!) as they sauntered unawares down leafy paths or cooled their feet in mountain streams. People whose one fatal mistake was to smooth their hair with a dab of aromatic gel, or eat juicy meat, or tuck a Snickers bar in their shirt pocket for later, or have sex, or even, possibly, menstruate, or in some small, inadvertent way pique the olfactory properties of the hungry bear. Or, come to that, whose fatal failing was simply to be very, very unfortunate – to round a bend and find a moody male blocking the path, head rocking appraisingly, or wander unwittingly into the territory of a bear too slowed by age or idleness to chase down fleeter prey.

Now it is important to establish right away that the possibility of a serious bear attack on the Appalachian Trail is remote. To begin with, the really terrifying American bear, the grizzly – *Ursus horribilis* as it is so vividly and correctly labelled – doesn't range east of the Mississippi, which is good news because grizzlies are large, powerful and ferociously bad-tempered. When Lewis and Clark went into the wilderness, they found that nothing unnerved the native Indians more than the grizzly, and not surprisingly since you could riddle a grizzly with arrows – positively porcupine it – and it would still keep coming. Even Lewis and Clark with their big guns were astounded and unsettled by the ability of the grizzly to absorb volleys of lead with barely a wobble.

Herrero recounts an incident that nicely conveys the near indestructibility of the grizzly. It concerns a professional hunter in Alaska named Alexei Pitka, who stalked a big male through snow and finally felled it with a

well-aimed shot to the heart from a large-bore rifle. Pitka should probably have carried a card with him that said: ‘First make sure bear is dead. Then put gun down.’ He advanced cautiously and spent a minute or two watching the bear for movement, but when there was none he set the gun against a tree – big mistake – and strode forward to claim his prize. Just as he arrived, the bear sprang up, clapped its expansive jaws around the front of Pitka’s head, as if giving him a big kiss, and with a single jerk tore off his face.

Miraculously, Pitka survived. ‘I don’t know why I set that durn gun against the tree,’ he said later. Actually what he said was, ‘Mrffff mmmpg nnnmmm mffffffn,’ on account of having no lips, teeth, nose, tongue or other vocal apparatus.

If I were to be pawed and chewed – and this seemed to me entirely possible, the more I read – it would be by a black bear, *Ursus americanus*. There are at least 500,000 black bears in North America, possibly as many as 700,000. They are notably common in the hills along the Appalachian Trail (indeed, they often *use* the trail, for convenience), and their numbers are growing. Grizzlies, by contrast, number no more than 35,000 in the whole of North America, and just 1,000 in the mainland United States principally in and around Yellowstone National Park. Of the two species, black bears are generally smaller (though this is a decidedly relative condition; a male black bear can still weigh up to 650 pounds) and unquestionably more retiring.

Black bears rarely attack. But here’s the thing. Sometimes they do. All bears are agile, cunning and immensely strong, and they are always hungry. If they want to kill you and eat you, they can, and pretty much whenever they want. That doesn’t happen often, but – and here is the absolutely salient point – once would be enough.

Herrero is at pains to stress that black bear attacks are infrequent, relative to their numbers. In the eight decades

to 1980 he found just twenty-three confirmed black bear killings of humans (about half the number of killings by grizzlies), and most of these were out west or in Canada. In New Hampshire there has not been an unprovoked fatal attack on a human by a bear since 1784. In Vermont, there has never been one.

I wanted very much to be calmed by these assurances but could never quite manage the necessary leap of faith. After noting that just 500 people were attacked and hurt by black bears between 1960 and 1980 – twenty-five attacks a year from a resident population of at least half a million bears – Herrero adds that most of these injuries were not severe. 'The typical black bear-inflicted injury', he writes blandly, 'is minor and usually involves only a few scratches or light bites.'

Pardon me, but what exactly is a light bite? Are we talking a playful wrestle and gummy nips? I think not. And is 500 certified attacks really such a modest number, considering how few people go into the North American woods? And how foolish must one be to be reassured by the information that no bear has killed a human in Vermont or New Hampshire in 200 years? That's not because the bears have signed a treaty, you know. There's nothing to say that they won't start a modest rampage tomorrow.

So let us imagine that a bear does go for us out in the wilds. What are we to do? Interestingly, the advised stratagems are exactly opposite for grizzly and black bear. With a grizzly, you should make for a tall tree, since grizzlies aren't much for climbing. If a tree is not available, then you should back off slowly, avoiding direct eye contact. All the books tell you that if the grizzly comes for you on no account should you run. This is the sort of advice you get from someone who is sitting at a keyboard when he gives it. Take it from me, if you are in an open space with no weapons and a grizzly comes for you, run. You may as well. If nothing else, it will give you something to do with

the last seven seconds of your life. However, when the grizzly overtakes you, as it most assuredly will, you should fall to the ground and play dead. A grizzly may chew on a limp form for a minute or two, but generally will lose interest and shuffle off. With black bears, however, playing dead is futile since they will continue chewing on you until you are considerably past caring. It is also foolish to climb a tree because black bears are adroit climbers and, as Herrero drily notes, you will simply end up fighting the bear in a tree.

To ward off an aggressive black bear, Herrero suggests making a lot of noise, banging pots and pans together, throwing sticks and rocks, and 'running at the bear'. (Yeah, right. You first, Professor.) On the other hand, he then adds judiciously, these tactics could 'merely provoke the bear'. Well, thanks. Elsewhere he suggests that hikers should consider making noises from time to time – singing a song, say – to alert bears to their presence, since a startled bear is more likely to be an angry bear, but then a few pages later cautions that 'there may be danger in making noise', since that can attract a hungry bear that might otherwise overlook you.

The fact is, no one can tell you what to do. Bears are unpredictable, and what works in one circumstance may not work in another. In 1973, two teenagers, Mark Seeley and Michael Whitten, were out for a hike in Yellowstone when they inadvertently crossed between a mother and her cubs. Nothing worries and antagonizes a female bear more than to have people between her and her brood. Furious, she turned and gave chase – despite the bear's lolloping gait it can move at up to 35 miles an hour – and the two boys scrambled up trees. The bear followed Whitten up his tree, clamped her mouth round his right foot, and slowly and patiently tugged him from his perch. (Is it me, or can you feel your fingernails scraping through the bark?) On the ground, she began mauling him extensively. In an

attempt to distract the bear from his friend, Seeley shouted at it, whereupon the bear came and pulled him out of his tree, too. Both young men played dead – precisely the wrong thing to do, according to all the instruction manuals – and the bear left.

I won't say I became obsessed by all this, but it did occupy my thoughts a great deal in the months while I waited for spring to come. My particular dread – the vivid possibility that left me staring at tree shadows on the bedroom ceiling night after night – was having to lie in a small tent, alone in an inky wilderness, listening to a foraging bear outside, and wondering what its intentions were. I was especially riveted by an amateur photograph in Herrero's book, taken late at night by a camper with a flash at a campground out west. The photograph caught four black bears as they puzzled over a suspended food bag. The bears were clearly startled but not remotely alarmed by the flash. It was not the size or demeanour of the bears that troubled me – they looked almost comically unaggressive, like four guys who had got a Frisbee caught up a tree – but their numbers. Up to that moment it had not occurred to me that bears might prowl in parties. What on earth would I do if *four* bears came into my camp?

Why, I would die, of course. Literally shit myself lifeless. I would blow my sphincter out of my backside like one of those unrolling paper streamers you get at children's parties – I dare say it would even give a merry toot – and bleed to a messy death in my sleeping bag.

Herrero's book was written in 1985. Since that time, according to an article in the *New York Times*, bear attacks in North America have increased by 25 per cent. The *Times* article also noted that bears are far more likely to attack humans in the spring following a bad berry year. The previous year had been a very bad berry year. I didn't like the feel of any of this.