

# Lying On The Trail-

A collection of lies told by a liar.

Just Bill

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The Beginning-

*White lines on your mind*

*Keep it steady*

*You were never ready*

*for the lies*

*Regina Spektor, "Edit"*

## This book is a work of fiction-

Everything in this book is a lie, including this paragraph. This is an entirely fictional book; everything in it was spewed forth from the highly disturbed mind of the author and transcribed by an orderly hired by the author's estate to attempt to recover some portion of the cost of his continued care. The author shared the following statement during a brief spell of lucidity; "You should not believe anything that I say, or attempt anything I suggest. I am a mentally unstable liar not suitable to provide any advice or guidance."

This book is a work of fiction for your entertainment only.

## Ya know what's annoying?-

When you read a book and it has all kinds of insider terms you don't understand. It's no fun to try to enjoy the story when you don't speak the language. Ya know what's more annoying? When you read a book and you do know all the insider terms and you have to sit through the author explaining everything.

Well, you can't please everybody. So I have favored my own preference, and not bogged down the tale with over-explanation.

If you see a term you don't recognize, there is a glossary in the back. An if'n you get going and start excessive head scratching on the wording, mayhap best to read it first.

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# Thanks-

**You-** Somebody has to read this thing! Without a reader, an author is just a crazy person talking to themselves in a rubber room. Thank you for breaking me out of the asylum.

**Me-** Somebody had to write this thing! I have a Mom, Dad, Brother, family, friends, the woods, and the trail. Without any of them there would be no me.

**Ina-** To the woman who knows every lie I tell and the whole sad truth, yet loves me still.

**The Beta Readers-** Mags, Mike, Kevin, Janel, Karen, Jeanne and my Mommy.

**Aaron Zagrodnick-** Thanks for swapping some Esbit with me. Long days, pleasant nights, and may you always find your groove.

**Steven Lazarus-** One of the greatest compliments I've ever received was paid to me on my wedding day. I was a "groomzilla." It was a complex operation; with dozens of subs, slim budget and a demanding client. Deemed a memorable event for all, due to some lasting, yet intangible, sense of energy and emotion only found when something truly, magically, exceeds the sum of its parts. Near the end of the evening, around the fire, a dear friend shook my hand and said, "You Sir, are an Architect."

To excel in your profession is a rare gift. Thank you for helping transform the rough sketches of this carpenter into a set of plans and specs suitable to build a dream. You were worth every ounce of Jerky!

*A book is made from a tree. It is an assemblage of flat, flexible parts (still called "leaves") imprinted with dark pigmented squiggles. One glance at it and you hear the voice of another person, perhaps someone dead for thousands of years. Across the millennia, the author is speaking, clearly and silently, inside your head, directly to you. Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew one another. Books break the shackles of time — proof that humans can work magic.*

*Carl Sagan*

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# The Campfire, and the Liar-

*The trout are browned to a turn, and even the Old Woodsman admits that dinner is a success. When it is over and the dishes are cleaned and put away, and the camp slicked up, there comes the usual two hours of lounging, smoking, and storytelling, so dear to the hearts of those who love to go a-fishing and camping.*

*Nessmuk-George W. Sears, "Woodcraft and Camping"*

One of the pleasures of camp is a fire. It could be shared with old friends as you pass the flask and tell some tales: catching up with your fellow travelers and discussing the latest news or outright gossip, sharing the wonders of the world with your child as you roast a marshmallow, falling in love, or simply sitting by yourself having deep and meaningful conversations with your companion. Fire is a true friend indeed.

Sitting a fire you may hear people share deep thoughts, sage advice, personal details, humor and often the deepest secrets of their heart. Around a fire you may tell stories- some scary, some ancient, some new, some fun, some sad. Some tales are taller than the tallest tree, and a few are outright lies. Around a fire you sit for warmth, fellowship and entertainment.

And so good reader, as fellow travelers, though strangers to each other we may be, I invite you to sit a fire with me for a time if it do ya kindly. For after all, no matter if you've only strolled across camp or tramped these backwoods some untold distance; the campfire calls to us alike. It's in our bones. As sure as the scent of the smoke on the wind, we've each left town and drifted to these woods. Likely we will at least find ourselves on common ground and in pleasant companionship, if not fast friends.

Whither this fire be in some busy corner of a crowded State Park, miles from town on some backpacking excursion, on the shore of some unnamed lake deep in canoe country, or even in a humble pit in my backyard, you are welcome. Regardless of the locale, somewhere in the depths of the coals and dancing of the



flames we can find ourselves in any of these places as the evening unfolds. As this is likely to be a one sided conversation with a long evening ahead, afore you settle in too comfortable I feel I should pass on a warning.

Some folks concern themselves with the truth of the tale too much, forgetting that all good campfire talk lies somewhere between the light of the fire and the darkness of the night. There is an unwritten rule of the campfire. Let no hard feelings exist. While I can't claim to take a great many things seriously, a campfire is one of the few.

My name is Just Bill. If you're feeling kind you may call me a storyteller. If you're feeling less diplomatic I'll save you the trouble of dancing around it; I'm a liar. If you sit afire with me I'll tell you some tales of travel on the trail. This isn't your typical ball of yarns concernin' life on the trail. No step by step story of a single walk taken. It's a haphazard collection of my bright and shineys for your entertainment. Keep in mind I may offend, disgust, or displease you from time to time and for certain; I'll lie to you.

So now that you know, maybe this particular campfire ain't for you and you'll be moving on. Or maybe your manners are a bit better and you'll politely turn in early and say goodnight. No hard feelings. Happy to make your acquaintance and may you walk this fine land in peace.

But if you'd like, yer Ol' pal Bill has a seat here for ya next to the fire. I take a pleasure in the telling, and perhaps you'll take a liking to the tale. If not that's fine too. It's just for fun, a little warmth to pass the time. If you don't like the talk let it pass like smoke in the wind.

But if you're amiable, toss another log on and pass the flask. That last one you told reminds me of a tale I once heard. Let me tell you a lie about the time I lost my watch...

# Flash-

*I knew my feet were moving, but I couldn't feel them. I thought of the Taoism I had studied, one of the many teachings that had nothing- and everything- to do with running. Specifically, I wondered if I was at that moment practicing wu wei, or "doing without doing".*

*Scott Jurek, "Eat and Run"*

Time.

The sharp reminder of Father Time's greedy and restless fingers clutching at our lives. The traveler often seeks the peace of the woods to evade his tireless grasp. At work- appointments, deadlines, commutes, schedules and of course plain ol' punching the clock every day. At home- juggling schedules, keeping kids busy, getting to bed on time, finding time to be healthy and attempting to carve out a few minutes for yourself. We are always out of time in town.

To attempt to master this desperate situation we have even attempted to create the greatest modern wonderment of all: Quality Time. When we attempt to pack all the lost hours we have failed to spend with our loved ones into one quality packed fifteen to thirty minute block of stressful interaction with the expectation that carving out this special time will work if we just really concentrate on it.

And so we that love the woods make time to escape. To turn off the phone, unwind the watch, coldcock the clock for a brief bit and take a stroll. Some even get the chance to commandeer the calendar and escape for a few days or even months at a time. The longer we can go, the more the shackles of town's time constraints melt away. The longer we go, the more the minutes and hours fall apart. Time breaks down into the gradual movement of the sun across the sky. The elongation, elimination, and rebirth of shadows as the day moves along.

If you go long enough even the calendar breaks down. The days of the week become just days, the name little more important than the designations we associate with them. Mondays aren't the crappy day you go back to work, Friday isn't date night, Saturday isn't the day you have for you or your loved ones, and Sunday is not the day you practice religion. Every day is just a day, no more or less important or given to a special purpose than the day before or the next. Only the big things matter on that great wheel of time: the next full moon, the turning of the seasons, the passing years.

It turns out Ol' Father Time is really just a doddering fella who was only grasping at you because you were running away from him. He just wanted to grab ahold of you to ask you to stop, maybe take his arm and stroll a bit. Tap you on the shoulder, apologize, and remind you his boss didn't mean for town to turn out the way it did. But now that you're out here, he's happy to shake your hand and give you a wink, "This is the way the boss intended it to be."

You will often meet outdoors folks who've met this fella, and rightly so, are proud to have done so. They are calm, relaxed, assured, unhurried and even aloof. They are shocking to their more civilized companions. Cell phone, no I don't need one of those. Watch? What fer? The sun wakes me up, my belly tells me when it's lunch time, my feet tell me when the day's work is done and my head knows when to lay me down to sleep. They may even stop wearing a watch in town. They have shaken that good fella's hand and figured out how they want to spend their time from now on.

But these folks are liars. Don't get me wrong, the outdoorsman has a certain luxury of timelessness rare among the common folk, equaled only perhaps by those with so much money they don't even have to care for themselves, let alone know what time it is. While there may be no particular rush to cook dinner, hell, some days you may wait til sunup if you're in a particular mood; you still have to eat eventually.

You are subject to whims of the weather, the shifting of the seasons, a muddy stretch, steep trail, thorny bushwhack, or even

the occasional tree that up and fell down quite inconveniently. You're still a human, with no store or currency that would buy the necessities of life in the woods. You still have a few things that need to get done. While a timely fashion isn't quite accurate, meeting your needs has to get done in some fashion.

Even Jeremiah Johnson had to figure out when to come to the rendezvous to sell his furs. So at some point the traveler must resupply, get a good wash-up, make some repairs, grab a beer, or even return home to the town he's left behind. Even watch-free nomads miss their loved ones.

So I guess after all, even the outdoorsman doesn't escape for long, if at all. Entering his home he flips the hourglass on the mantel and sees the sand quickly drain before his eyes once more.

Oh for a time...the traveler was blissfully ignorant of the seconds, the minutes, the hours. But that time is ended. Although you shook that fella's hand, turns out it's only because you're his co-worker, not his master.

But this is a lie too.

Not everyone is so lucky, but a few of us are. No, we don't cheat death or discover immortality on some lost trail leading to the fountain of youth. There is no secret really, you can't learn it, or seek it, buy a map or read a good guidebook. Ironically you must devote a fair bit of time to do it. It comes easier over the years, but it can be years before it comes at all. The longer you're away the longer it takes to get back, and even then there's no guarantee you'll find it. There's a bit of danger to it as well. But somewhere in the long miles, find it you will.

It often sneaks up on you in small bits. Some wonder is found; a mysterious track, a quiet brook, dancing waterfall, scenic vista, or sometimes just a peaceful bit of woods with nothing particular about it. These bits pile up, taking up and stealing away the seconds, minutes or hours. There is a thoughtfulness to it at first, much like we occasionally lose ourselves in an interesting task at home or work and look up to the clock to see that the last few

seconds have somehow lasted an hour. At first it's just a perception, getting lost in thought. Really nothing most of us haven't had happen at one point or another.

In the woods, though, there is an added bit of depth. Much like the monks that practice seated meditation in order to progress to walking meditation, so too does the traveler begin to find these bits sneak in while in motion. You find at some point no effort in the motion, no concern in the thought, no awareness of time's passage.

Your feet land softly but rhythmically, the air moves cleanly from tree, to cloud, to lung. The birds chirp their greeting, colors get brighter, the deer no longer skitters away, the trees pass you by. The sun seems to pause its endless motion. You are no longer you, becoming instead a part of the whole. And all is in motion.

Flash.

Not of light, of time. Suddenly, a millisecond later you are you again. Sometimes you note the position of the sun, the dryness of your throat, a hunger in your belly. You may even pull out your watch. Sometimes a few minutes have passed, sometimes hours.

Time, distance, metabolism, life. All the natural things have continued well enough without you, but for a brief bit, they were not your concern. For a little while you weren't just on a stroll, but were a part of the woods themselves. Or yourself. Or I suppose it just gets confussing at that point and you simply move on.

Reviewing the map you find your bearings. Occasionally the distance is minimal, or at least respects the old formula; distance equals speed multiplied by time. But every once in a while that formula breaks down. I suppose in theory, when time is infinite, it should follow that distance is as well. In practice perhaps science hasn't solved every mystery. It matters little really. It's just a feeling.

It doesn't matter if it happens when you sit on a stump for half a day bewildered by beauty or transport yourself twenty miles

across the face of the planet. Perhaps it's just in your head.  
Perhaps for a second or two, you mastered time.

Either way, if you get lucky:

Give a nod and a shake to Ol' Father Time when next you meet.

If you get really lucky:

Maybe you'll get to peek over his shoulder and trade a brief  
nod with his boss.

# No Backpack in Maine-

*“Throw a loaf of bread and a pound of tea in an old sack and jump over the back fence.” John Muir*

Twenty three boxes were sitting in a basement. Each box carefully cross referenced against a handwritten list in a five ring notebook scrawled with chicken scratch notes. The complete set of guidebooks and maps, all three hundred bucks worth, split up into sets and packed up. Stove fuel, pills, fresh socks, first aid supplies, batteries, water filter cartridges, BIC lighters and sundry other consumables strategically placed sporadically with the best guess as to when they will be needed.

And the food. It's not often one gets to see a six month supply of food in one location. Less often one gets to buy bulk packages of it in such quantities. When, I ask you, was the last time you bought a ten pound tub of cashews? Two of them? A case of cases of Snickers? Enough Ramen Noodles to justify receipt of a personal written warning from the surgeon general?

A six month pile of hiker food is an obscene spectacle. Paired with cases of plastic and paper bags the lengthy process of splitting, portioning, mixing, and distributing into each box seems an endless process. One that is somehow quite satisfying and pleasant.

Estimating, purchasing, shipping, logistics- all admirable professions. With pride you face the venerable Mt. Box. Having conquered this mighty obstacle and completing diligent research of the nuances of the "Consumer Commodities ORM-D" postal code, it's time to send a few out and head for the trail.

I'd be flying this trip, so box #23 was reserved for shipping my gear to Shaw's directly. It seemed like a solid plan; safer than a delayed flight or facing the loss of well selected and hard purchased gear to the mystical place where lost luggage goes on its own private journey.

After explaining the carefully rehearsed postal code to the workers of the local post office, boxes #1, #2, #3, and #4 headed out to places I dreamed of seeing for the first time in the next few weeks. UPS was deemed to be the correct choice for shipment to Shaw's per Sai Keith Shaw his-self. Being in the Chicago suburbs where walking for pleasure is a clear sign of mental illness I failed to impress the importance of the package and its contents. So with extra care I explained the meaning of ORM-D to the woman in the brown shirt and begged her to ensure safe passage of my gear to the wonderland of Maine. Monson being little more than another five digit zip code to the folks in brown; I purchased insurance.

A little cash, a few snacks, and a book were packed into a cheap little pouch with a shoulder strap. A disposable little nylon freebie from some company picnic that could be tossed out once it served the purpose of man-purse while I travelled. Hugs and kisses. I walked out the door. A train to the city, an El to the airport, a plane to Boston, a smaller plane to Bangor, a quick meal as I waited for Keith Jr. to pick me up. A two hour car ride that should have taken an hour was little bother as I took in my first views of Maine. I soaked up the Mainer speak as Jr. and his ride-along buddy bullshitted while we drove along through country he'd seen a few too many times to find it as wondrous as his passenger.

Two days and about 1400 miles later I got out of the car and breathed deep the Northwoods. One of the most famous places to stay on the most famous trail in the world and I was here! I made arrangements with Junior to shuttle up to Baxter tomorrow. I went to retrieve my gear from Keith Shaw his-self so I could pack up and prepare to face the Greatest Mountain in the morning.

Only one problem. "Your box ain't heah." Between a few missing "teath" and his hard Mainer accent I stared at Keith until he carefully repeated the bad news and it sunk in deep enough for me to comprehend.

It was pretty late in the day. I went to the payphone up the street and tried to get the boys in brown to explain to me where my gear was. Too late in the day for a good answer or a manager.



While not 1950, this was still before the days when instant tracking numbers were issued that informed you that Tommy in Toledo had put your package on Bobby from Buffalo's truck at precisely 13:48. I'd have to wait until the morrow.

There are worse places to be stuck than Shaw's in late July. The weather is good, Northbounders are streaming in and Southbounders are moving through. Slow moving flip-floppers have changed direction, concerned with the dwindling season. In short; there was no shortage of good company, good country, decent enough beer, and plentiful food. Keith his-self is an entertaining enough fella in his own right. "Don't pet that dawg. It's a ball bittah. Toald a hiker laast week not to pet the dawg, and still he pet it. Just like that he got his balls bit, hyuh!" Isn't a ball biting dog bad for business? "Ayuh, Pat got a soft spot fer it, so now I gotta ball bittin dawg in muh yard."

Day one with no pack and surrounded by hikers passed in pure frustration as I burned up the first of two calling cards I had planned on using for the next month or two on hold while box #23 among the hundreds of thousands of boxes was searched for. In between calls I sipped beer and watched Keith profess to have a lame back, bum knee, and fifty other crippling injuries that would preclude him from playing horseshoes with the hikers. I watched him chat up the hikers, encourage a little competition, get them to bet each other a bit, and work up the pot as the day passed like a Maine summer.

Finally when the prize pool had reached enough volume to satisfy Sai Shaw he talked up the winners a bit before professing how much he missed playing shoes and would love to add to their winnings if they'd be so kind as to treat him to a game. Keith packed his two cows into a garden shed barely big enough for a ride on mower and a few shovels. It quickly became evident how he'd learned how to pack 'em in tight as he tossed those shoes home time after time with a ring clearer than the dinner bell on the porch. The toothless 'ol Mainer shucked off his case of the

"stiff an cripples" and cleaned out every hiker foolish enough to play.

Day two with no pack, calling card two running quickly short, and roughly one case of beer later I finally reached someone who had a vague inkling of the location of my gear. Georgia was eventually narrowed down to Atlanta. "Wrong end of the trail." I complained. My odd collection of nylon, metal, a knife, tent stakes, and poles had piqued the curiosity of some brown shirted fella or another and my pack was in some form of quarantine. This explained neither how it got to Atlanta nor when it would arrive at the correct end of the trail. "Check back tomorrow, maybe it will have cleared inspection by then."

Day three and the ass end of my calling card brought me eventually in touch with the inspector in charge of my case. My package was no longer a box, but a case. Apparently a phone interview was required, along with a brief explanation of my trip and intentions regarding the contents of the package. In addition my permission to open the box was required and hastily given. I was given a direct number for the first time and asked to call back in two hours to determine the results of the "visual inspection".

For the umpteenth time I wandered into the Monson General Store on the corner. Before refreshing my beer I wandered the small store to kill some time. I noted the small section of camping gear. Some plastic ponchos, emergency blankets, cheap pocket knives, plastic match cases and do-dads that no self-respecting hiker with aspirations for completing the trail would ever be likely to carry. I carried my brown bag of beer and some chips back to the hostel and sat down next to Keith as he chatted up another group of unsuspecting hikers around the shoe pit.

"Good news Mr. Townsend, your package has cleared inspection and will be sent to repackaging for delivery." While on the surface it appeared that some good news was to be had a bit more explaining of the process quickly erased the silver lining from the beautiful cloudless Maine sky. After repackaging (perhaps today), the package would be rerouted to proceed to its final

destination. After giving them the now lost address again I was informed my package would speed on its way, eventually arriving safely in my hands in one week. "A week? After all this delay you can't spring for expedited shipping?"

At which point the gentleman calmly, carefully, explained the restrictions and ground delivery method required for packages labeled "Consumer Commodity ORM-D." As he spoke, I softly banged the receiver on my head.

The news clearly called for more beer. Once more I found myself staring at the camping gear on the way to the cooler. Facing another week in town, and the calendar's page turn into August, the supplies suddenly looked infinitely practical. A plan of sorts fashioned as my hands found a small basket and began to place items into it. A pound of shelled sunflower seeds, a pound of jerky, a pound of trail mix, a handful of Snickers, a pound of rolled oats, and two cans of chunky soup. A cheap pocket knife, 100' of twine, and a P-51 can opener went into the basket. Two emergency blankets, and an emergency poncho would complete this emergency pack job.

I went back and found Keith pocketing his winnings as he headed in to get dinner rolling. I told him the bad news about the pack, and asked him for a ride to Baxter in the morning. He gave me the look any proper Mainer who'd run a hiker hostel just outside the vaunted 100 Mile Wilderness ought to give a hiker with no gear. Polite excuses flowed. Junior was running a shuttle, he had a full house; he even generously offered a discounted rate to help out while I waited on the pack.

We went round a bit, but finally I hit him with the clincher, "Keith, if I gotta sit here one more day without hiking I'm going to sit by the trail and warn every hiker I see about you and your horseshoe pit." Damn Smart Yankee he may be, but this time I'd hit the ringer. "Ayuh, you'll half to wait til afternoon, but I'll take you tomorrow." I thanked him profusely and as he walked away I thought of one last item, "Keith? One more thing, could I borrow a spoon?"

After a complicated recharge of my calling card I called home to let them know I'd be off. I packed up my man-purse, leaving the book on the shelf to give me just enough room. Thankfully I had brought the first two sections of trail map with me to study on the plane, but I went up to the store one last time to grab a cheap long sleeve shirt to go with the t-shirt and shorts I had been travelling in.

And that was that. A few months of planning, agonizing over gear selections, tune-ups, returns, final selections: and my first real long distance hike on the world famous Appalachian Trail would boil down to a half hour in a twenty foot deep two isle corner store in a small rural Maine town.

I helped Keith with his midday chores and he drove me up to Daicey Pond as promised. "Are you sure?"

It was a good question; despite my enthusiasm and impatience it was a pretty serious question. I looked out the window at the tranquil pond, the woods, and a sleepy looking giant looming over this section of the great Northwoods. I'd actually spent a few practice nights in Scouts with the type of gear I was packing. A few of the older boys gave it a shot every once in a while; comfortable in the knowledge that the rest of the troop and adequate gear lay a short walk away if our skills proved unfit.

Katahdin is no joke, any time of the year. This marked the first time in my life I had seen a mountain worthy of the name in person. Climbing it would be the first time in my life above 2000'. The Hundred Mile Wilderness isn't quite the trackless no-man's land the name implies, but it's more than deep enough to cause a fella a bit of trouble. Toss in the mountains, chill waters, sneaky weather patterns, and a geography far outside the Midwestern states where all my experience came from and this was a risky proposition no matter how you put it. Not Mount Everest by any means, but a "Damn serious stretch of woods" as my companion so eloquently put it.

Keith kept the level, straight, neutral, patient look of a Maine lifer as he waited. I picked up my little pouch from the floor. "I'm sure I'm trying...guess the rest is up to the trail." He nodded and we shook hands. "Ayuh." Parting word of wisdom from the great Keith Shaw. He spun a quick U turn in the gravel lot and raced back to his house. Likely he hoped to make it back for another game of shoes.

I meant to go check in, or something, but I couldn't. Almost unconsciously I found myself sitting on the edge of the dock and staring at it. My feet dangled in the water. I thought briefly of the pictures of Devil's Tower I had seen in climbing magazines, that freaky tower rising strangely from nowhere like some giant petrified tree that God planted- eventually chopping off the top one day when he tested his latest creation; the chainsaw. Katahdin rises solitarily as well, but it is no freak of nature.

It appeared to me a natural continuation of the great Northwoods that I would come to love so much. It's just the right scale to fit the enormity of the land surrounding it, complimenting the power and depth all around as the land gathers its medicine to form this unique mass. If you're not familiar, the translation of the mountain's name from the native tongue is "The Greatest Mountain." Sitting on the dock, dreaming of the trail, and face to face with it at last: how could the greatest woods not contain the greatest mountain?

I finally noticed the canoes sitting on the shore, their sight jogging a memory from the guidebook. I rushed into the cabin and inquired after them. Indeed they could be rented, and indeed I could have one. I filled out the paperwork, nodded politely through the rules. And for the first time in six years, I shoved off the shore and dipped paddle into a still Northwoods pond, no comparison to the local puddles of my Midwestern home.

I glided and lost myself for a time as I reconnected with the land I loved. Kneeling in my graceful craft I paddled back towards shore after a brief swim. As I approached the shore I leaned far

out in a low brace and with hardly a ripple spun my canoe back to the north for one last look.

Maine can be a harsh land. One of the toughest parts of the Appalachian Trail. Katahdin rises as lord of this land, king of its harshness in the minds of many. It was avoided by the Penobscot who named it. The mountain famously thwarted Henry David Thoreau who wrote, "Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends." It is deadly enough that the rangers routinely close the mountain to hikers. It contains the infamous Knife's Edge, a trail that can only be traversed in good, windless weather. A trail that has claimed more than a few lives.

But it is the northern terminus of the most famous, and perhaps the greatest, backpacking trail in the world. Hands down, the Greatest Mountain is the greatest finish to any trail in North America. It is a mountain of dreams, a mystical place in the heart of any long distance hiker. A formidable legend. Massive, deadly, powerful. As my canoe spun around I glided like a loon; the late afternoon light washed over the mountain. From this angle, the multi-peaked mountain was not intimidating or foreboding. It didn't loom ominously or menacingly.

Rather than the home of some deadly thunder god striking men down by the dozen, I knelt on the surface of a quiet Maine pond and faced this sleeping monster at a comfortable distance. Looking up towards Baxter Peak and the dip as the deadly Knife Edge traversed the spill of loose rock, I could see how this sight could intimidate. But at this angle, at this distance, in the right light: the formation looks like a heart in the center of the mountain. The mighty heart of the mighty land visible to all those who seek it. On this sunny day, on the cloudless peak, floating on the still water, disconnected in connection with all around me- I wept at the sight.

Content with my choices, feeling welcomed by the land, I headed over to the campground to set up for the night. Despite the season I only shared the site with a Northbound couple about

to finish their journey. Caught in the void at the end of the trail they had little to say as we shared the fire. I got funny looks and stares as I cracked my can of soup and heated it over the fire. It was a simple matter to scrape up the plentiful leaf and needle forest duff to build a debris bed and small shelter with my space blankets. We all turned in early, anxious for adventures just about to end or begin.

I rose early, scattered my camp and packed my little satchel up; the fresh space blanket a noisy item in the early morning quiet. I retrieved the empty soup can from the fire pit, where I had left it in the coals to burn off any remaining food odor. I used a bit of duff to scrub off the soot and packed up my new cook pot. I smiled and offered premature congratulations to the Northbounders who were just exiting their bags and stretching. They were bleary eyed and grumpy looking, as they looked me up and down. Sizing up the new guy I thought. "People are going to hate your guts." said the fella to me. A mildly uncomfortable way to start the day, but I assumed he was referring to a little envy over my super duper ultra-light gear. I smiled again and headed out.

My speed increased as I was buoyed by the first day excitement and spectacular woods around me. I quickly arrived at the base of the mountain and drank my fill directly from the cold pure stream as I marveled at its tumbling beauty. The ascent was a welcome thrill that took me back to my rock climbing days. Another perfect day greeted me as I floated across the open views of the tableland. I stood at the sign marking mile 0.0 and the start of the trail. The mountain was relatively empty as I took in my first views above treeline.

I didn't linger long. The previous day on the water had acquainted me intimately with the mountain, and despite its pull, the two thousand plus miles stretching away to the south proved to be the bigger draw as my hike began in earnest. A soaring day ensued as the wonders of Maine unfolded and I raced south out of Katahdin's gravity and exited Baxter State Park. Arriving at Hurd Brook Lean-To I greeted the hikers there. They were cheered by