A Long Trail Tale

Written by Liz Anjos

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The Approach

A rainbow appeared just a few hours before I hiked up the Journey's End Trail to the northern terminus of the Long Trail at the Canadian border. The rainbow, at least as I know it from my Mennonite upbringing, signifies a covenant, or promise. In my ongoing relationship with the trails I set foot on, seeing this brilliant rainbow light up in the sky reminded me of a promise I made to myself and the trail that I would do my best, keep on keeping on, and roll with whatever it threw at me.

I've often talked with friends and fellow runners and hikers about how I speak to the trail, trees, animals, storms, rain, wind, and pretty much everything else out there. Forests are living, breathing things and I'm nearly positive that as a whole they sense my presence as much as I feel what's out there all around me. Maybe that's getting a little woo-woo, but it's what I believe to be true. Last summer when I spent nearly every hour of the day for 51+ days on the Appalachian Trail, I remember calling my dad and sharing with him that even in the darkest hours physically and mentally, I never once felt alone on the trail.

There's a certain amount of trust I put in myself and my crew, but there's another leap of faith one takes every time they step out into the elements. There are plenty of moments I've felt afraid on these ridiculous adventures I can't seem to stay away from, but for every obstacle I've feared, the way has always opened up somehow, even if it's not in the way I would have liked.

Earlier that evening, Warren, Jen, Adrienne, and I shared a meal together at the local joint in the little town of Troy, Vermont. We put David Horton on Facetime to say a quick hello. Horton asked if I was nervous, and I said no. It wasn't coming from a place of confidence or cockiness, but more of a place of... well, anything could happen, so what's the point in getting nervous about it?

After oohing and ahh-ing over the brilliant rainbow, we continued caravanning up the forest road to the Journey's End Trailhead and made camp there for the night. I settled in for the evening in the support van, leaving the back doors wide open to try and let some air in. It was warm outside, and the air was stagnant and humid. I pulled my blanket up over my chest to feel somewhat tucked in, but otherwise kept my legs and arms sprawled out to stay as cool as possible. I must have slept for about two hours, which was pretty good, all things considered. I thought of the plenty of times I'd done hard things on less sleep, including the Hellgate 100K and most of my time on the AT.

At 11:15pm, Jen, Adrienne, and I snapped a photo with Warren at the trailhead, then began our hike up the 1.3 mile Journey's End Trail to the northern terminus of the Long Trail. I paused to sign the register, which was full of entries from south-bounders beginning their hike and north-bounders ending theirs.

With absolutely zero wind or breeze, the pitch dark forest was eerily quiet as we made our way up the trail. The air was sticky and my loose-fitting tank clung to my skin. You could hear every
tiny rustle and snap of a twig. With the huge task ahead and knowing I'd be alone once I started
the journey, I began to feel a little nervous and jumpy, wondering about the animals or people I
might encounter in the night. I didn't have those fears in the throes of my time on the
Appalachian Trail, but I think as time passes and the more removed one becomes from nature,
those unknowns and possibilities become scary once more. Since the actual attempt hadn't
begun yet, I tried to keep my pace leisurely in an effort to conserve my energy, but still found
myself pulling ahead of Jen and Adrienne. I was glad I had brought my hydration pack even for
that short section, as I was sweating bullets and found myself constantly drinking. I was glad we
were moving uphill, with the hope that perhaps once we got to the top, there would be a breeze.

Glancing at the time on my watch, I let Jen know I was going to hustle ahead to get to the
terminus with enough time to pee before my midnight start. I hiked up the last bit of uphill, took
care of my business, rounded a corner, and there it was: just a quick hop down a rocky
outcropping to the modest monument marking the northernmost point of the Long Trail; US on
one side, Canada on the other. Jen took a few photos of me by the monument, then shortly after
Adrienne arrived with time to spare. I was so glad they made the hike up there to see me off.
With about six minutes to go until midnight, it became a waiting game.

Remembering how the scenery looked from my last time up there in the daylight, I knew that
there was an expanse of mountains, hills, and trees. It also meant we were somewhat exposed
on the little outcropping. I heard what I thought sounded like a nice (and much needed) breeze
heading our way, but as the whooshing sound grew louder, I asked Jen, even though I full well
knew the answer, "Is that a strong wind or a wall of rain heading our way?" She looked at me
with a soft, but grim, smile and said, "It's rain."

Moments later the whooshing rain was upon us. The rocks that I had so easily skipped down to
get to the monument became dotted with raindrops, then were totally wet and slick in mere
moments. At least I'll be a little cooler now! I waited the few more minutes 'til midnight, giggling
at how perfectly timed the wet weather was, and thought, Okay, Long Trail. I see you. I see how
it is. You're not going to make this easy on me, are you? That's alright. I'll roll with it. This is your
first move and pretty soon I'll show you mine. Let's dance.

The numbers on my digital watch flipped from 11:59pm to 12:00am and off I went. I tip-toed
carefully up the slippery rocks while Adrienne and Jen gave some yips and whoops. I clicked on
my flashlight and started down the much more forgiving dirt trail into the dark, deep forest.

The Decision

Just moments after midnight and wishing Adrienne and Jen a safe hike back down to the
Journey’s End trailhead, I began a light, gingerly shuffle south on the Long Trail. The steadily
falling rain, though not ideal from a footing standpoint, was a welcome relief from the stagnant,
warm, and humid conditions we'd hiked up to the northern terminus in.

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I made a point not to hurry, but to move smoothly and steadily over the earth and occasional rocks and roots. The first bit of the Long Trail is deceiving as it starts out relatively tame, with little dips and turns and only the occasional climb-y bit. I still felt some pangs of nerves being out in the wilderness by myself, but felt reassured knowing that Warren would be waiting for me at the first road crossing merely 2.6 miles in.

Right on cue, I heard a "YO!" from the road as Warren spotted my headlamp and flashlight shining through the dark, shadowed foliage. Normally I would have responded with some kind of lively, "Hey!!" but in my nerves and focus I couldn't bring myself to do even that. He called out again and I let out a diminutive, "He-ey..." and made my way down the trail to where he was waiting. He commented that I was making good time and asked how I was feeling. I responded that I felt nervous. I think he remembered that a day or two before, I had commented about how the strong winds forecasted made me worry about falling trees. At that moment, however, I was just apprehensive about all of it. I knew that many things had to go right in the first two days over some of the most difficult terrain if I wanted to stand a chance of reaching my goal of setting an FKT. He offered some words of encouragement and let me know I'd see him and the rest of the crew in 9.6 miles. He also reminded me to mind the tricky turns up to and on Jay Peak.

From there I just tried to breathe and focus as I continued along the trail. I hadn't realized until reaching the road crossing that the rain had stopped; it only seemed like it was continuing because raindrops were still falling from the trees. I emerged into an open ski area up near Jay Peak and felt glad I'd done recon in the daylight the month prior, because I knew exactly where to go. Up near the peak there was a building and perhaps the top of a ski lift (it was dark, I don't remember exactly). I saw some flashing lights and heard some voices, but they disappeared as I got closer. That was a little spooky, but I reassured myself that they were just hikers that had found a sheltered spot out of the rain for the night.

Beyond that I climbed onto the exposed Jay Peak and tiptoed my way over the rocks, which thankfully weren't too slick as there was no tree cover and the rain had stopped a while ago. There was some swirling mist and fog that made the visibility a little bit sketchy, but I never got turned around or felt unsure of where to go. There were white blazes painted on the rocks which marked the trail. I made sure to never leave a white blaze until I could see exactly where the next one was.

I was relieved to be reunited with Jen, Adrienne, and Warren at Jay Pass, then I saw them again for the first time in daylight 18.8 miles in at Hazen's Notch. To that point I had been feeling pretty somber and worried still, and I think the crew could sense that. At one point I had called Adrienne from my cell phone and told her that I didn't feel good, that I felt a little sick, and just overall felt kind of off. No doubt being awake at odd hours and hiking long miles while pouring out sweat in the heat and humidity the entire way contributed toward me feel a little funny.

It wasn't until reaching VT-118 at Eden Crossing that I think I cracked a smile for maybe the first time. Warren offered me an icy-cold can of Ginger Ale, and I felt an actual breeze and some
airflow for the first time that day. I no longer felt weird and sick. I could feel that my thighs were beginning to chafe a bit so I slathered some Squirrel’s Nut Butter (an anti-chafe balm) down there to be on the safe side. Jen asked how my feet were doing and I told her I could maybe feel a tiny blister forming but that we could take care of it later on. I strapped on my hydration pack and announced to the crew, "I'm feeling better!" and they erupted in a little mini-cheer, full of relief.

I felt good enough to run most of the way from Eden Crossing down into a boulder-filled notch called Devil’s Gulch. Though I had treated my inner thighs for chafing, running seemed to exacerbate that, so I switched to a hearty, steady hike instead. After carefully making my way through the notch, I resumed power hiking on what I’d call relatively easy trail.

One could call what happened next, "death by a thousand paper cuts". I don't know if it was something from the slight shift in weather, the sheer amount of time that I'd been sweating to that point, or perhaps the salt content in my sweat was getting higher and more abrasive on my skin. However it came to be, I started to slowly and steadily feel my skin chafing in places and nether-regions quite unlike anything I'd ever experienced before—not even during my 52 days on the Appalachian Trail in the heat of the summer. At first it was just a little uncomfortable, then it got a LOT uncomfortable. I began to audibly gasp at the sensation that my skin was being swiped over and over again with sandpaper. It was happening to my inner thighs, my butt cheeks, the back of my upper thighs just under my butt cheeks, my lady parts; not to mention my ankles, inner heels, and outer heels, were being rubbed raw by the sprinkles of dirt trapped in my socks.

As I continued to hike I began to cry out and shriek in pain. I was in the midst of a 14.4 mile section and still had around an hour until I’d see my crew. With every step the chafing got a teeny bit worse, to the point that it felt torturous. By the time I made my way down to the road crossing at Coddington Hollow where the crew was waiting, I was full-on bawling. Jen, who had hiked in a bit so she could notify the crew with a bird call when I was close, could see something was wrong and hiked in the rest of the way with me. I told her right away, "I know I sound really dramatic right now, I'm actually okay but I'm just chafing really really badly; I'm not freaking out, my body is fine, I feel okay, but the chafing REALLY hurts!"

She helped me into the van so that I could strip down and clean the dirt and sweat off my skin before applying anti-chafe balm to my wounds. I grabbed a baby wipe and started to clean my skin, until the wipe touched some raw skin which invoked sharp, searing pain. I let out an involuntary scream and my tears continued to flow. Jen jumped in to help, having me continue to clean my non-chafed skin while she tended to the raw parts. It took around 45 minutes from the time I arrived at the road crossing, but in the end I had clean(ish) skin, thick and pasty lubricant on all my chafed areas, and had on long tights which I’d switched into instead of shorts for the sake of my thighs. We threw an emergency tub of lube in my pack for good measure. I couldn’t imagine going on if the chafing got worse, but I had to at least try and see. Knowing there was another road crossing 2.4 miles away, though we had planned for the crew to skip it, I asked them if they could meet me there just in case. Warren questioned what I could possibly
need after 2.4 miles; I didn't know how I was going to feel, so I hoped to see someone there in case I was still experiencing unbearable pain. Adrienne and Jen agreed to meet me, while Warren would head on to the planned meeting point at VT-15 in 7.2 miles.

I made my way up the trail, letting out a few last cries and whimpers, but miraculously the chafing balm Jen had let me use seemed to work its magic and within a few minutes my skin ended up feeling okay. I wouldn't be surprised if some kind of endorphin rush was involved as well. I breezed into the next road crossing, gave Adrienne and Jen a wave and a smile, and continued merrily enough on my way.

Between navigating slippery rocks throughout the day and my abnormally long stop at Codding Hollow, I was well aware that I was behind my intended pace. Based on how I did in my practice hikes through these sections, I'd anticipated reaching Bear Hollow Shelter at mile 53.7 by 6:00pm or 7:00pm. From there I'd planned to sleep for a few hours, then continue on as early as 11:00pm that night, knowing there was a big day ahead of me including the high peaks of Sterling, Mansfield, and Camels Hump. Back at Eden Crossing, considering my slowed pace, the crew and I had come up with the same alternative plan that I'd plan to stop for the night slightly earlier at the gate at West Settlement Road at 51.7 miles, take a catnap, then continue on.

My chafing issues were kept at bay through the next 4.2 mile section to VT-15. From there I'd only have another 0.6 miles to West Settlement Road, and then another one mile or so walk up to the gate where we'd planned to end the day. I felt weary, but mostly in good spirits. I was disappointed that the day didn't go perfectly, and felt concerned about how the next day would go, but felt prepared to do whatever the crew thought I should do to stay on track, which likely meant getting just an hour or two of sleep, then climbing away at the next day, one mountain at a time with possibly some sleep breaks interspersed throughout. My brain felt foggy, I felt indecisive about how much sleep I should allow myself that evening, and I remember even telling myself, "Just do whatever they tell you to do."

As I shuffled along a grassy area toward the parking area where the crew would meet me, there was Warren, perched on a large rock alongside the trail. He motioned for me to sit down, but I chose to stand and lean forward on my hiking pole. He said something along the lines of, "Here's your option. You're going to have the same hot and humid weather tomorrow. Saturday it's going to rain. Your chafing won't have the opportunity to heal. Structurally you're okay. You can take tomorrow and Saturday off, get a hotel or airbnb, let your skin heal, and start again on Sunday with cool, dry weather. Take this next section to think about it and decide."

I told him that I wasn't going to lie and that the same thought had crossed my mind earlier. I wouldn't have been the first person to stop early on in a record attempt only to go back and start from the beginning; that's what Andrew Thompson did in the summer of 2005, three days into his third AT record attempt when snow, swollen rivers, mud, and swarms of black flies thwarted his plans. He stopped, took a little vacation, and in a month's time he was back at Katahdin. He went on to break Pete Palmer's AT record on his fourth try. I started to visualize my calendar.
and schedule for the next week, wondering if I could actually make that work. Technically speaking, I could, and getting a "do over" sounded very tempting given the circumstances and knowing my ability wasn't being reflected in my time and distance for the day. I was receptive to the idea, though the thought of starting over also felt overwhelming. It would mean doing that entire 50 mile section again, that I had just worked so hard to complete. Besides, what was I going to do sitting around in northern Vermont for two days? How would Jen and Adrienne feel, and who was I to ask them to stick around and start over?

I kept walking, feeling a bit dazed–no doubt from having 50 miles and a long day under my belt, but then also having this unexpected option being posed to me to start over from the beginning. I was broken out of my trance when I looked up and saw the familiar, friendly face of Steve Feller (If you've read Jennifer Pharr Davis' Called Again, he's New York Steve!), who I'd shared many miles and sang many show tunes with on the AT through New York with last summer. Running toward me with arms outstretched he sang at the top of his lungs a line from Fiddler on the Roof, "ALL DAY LONG I'D BIDDY BIDDY BUM..." and I ran toward him laughing, smiling, and joining in, "IF I WERE A WEALTHY MAN!" We gave each other a great big hug and walked the remainder of the trail to the parking lot together, chatting like old friends. He just happened to be in Vermont and wanted to stop by and say hi. It was certainly a bright part of the day.

Once I reached the parking lot where Jen and Adrienne were parked, I let them know what Warren told me. They seemed a little shocked, as they didn't realize Warren had gone out to talk to me, and it wasn't something they had gotten to process or discuss together or with him prior to seeing me. Adrienne walked with me for the next half mile section to talk through it, then I spoke with Jen about it once we reached West Settlement Road. Part of me was leaning toward just starting over, but I also felt that there were many reasons to keep going and do my best; still with the possibility of achieving a record, but also regardless of the outcome. Adrienne suggested that I at least finish up the last mile I had planned for the day so that I could keep my options open, so I did that.

Between all of the conversations through the last 1.6 or so miles, including my desperately calling a friend while I was walking to see even what they thought, by the time we reached the top of the road, it was dark. We all got into the support van to discuss the options of whether to stop or keep going. Warren felt very strongly that I should start over. Jen and Adrienne made it clear that they'd gladly support whatever I wanted to do, but wanted me to at least consider going on and making the best of the circumstances, as it was still so early and the record was still technically within reach.

I think I got caught between a place of what part of me selfishly wanted to do and what felt like the right thing to do. What kind of message would I be sending if I just gave up and started over because the weather wasn't perfect? What person that has set a record on the Long Trail hasn't had to deal with adverse conditions and situations? On top of that, there was the group to consider. If I started over again on Sunday, that meant Jen and Adrienne wouldn't have been able to be there for the end of the hike, as they had family and work obligations to return to. I had my own life and work obligations to return home to. Warren asked what people would think...
if I made the choice to continue on with a lesser chance of getting a record, considering the announcement I’d made was specifically that my goal was to achieve a record (opposed to an announcement that I was going to "do my best", or even announcing anything at all).

Considering all of the planning that had gone into this attempt, I would have felt sad and selfish leaving out part of my crew to roll the dice on starting again, knowing that they would only be able to stay for the first few days. I also didn’t know if I could wrap my head around just starting over and doing everything I had just done for a second time on such a quick turnaround. Up until I encountered Warren sitting on the rock, though the idea had floated in my head for a moment prior to seeing him, I had been focused and planning to continue on and play every card I had.

That back and forth was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of what I was mulling about in my head and what was discussed among the crew in the van. I was becoming emotional and upset by some of Warren’s sharply worded comments and responses. I felt like I was leaning maybe 55% one way and 45% the other way. In general I am a people pleaser and I had a very hard time sorting out what I wanted to do, versus what I thought would make everyone happy and make for a harmonious group environment. Then I felt ashamed with myself for considering making a decision that would have been solely to please others and keep the peace. It brought up the dilemma of what my ultimate priorities and morals were.

It was the end of a very long day. I was tired, dehydrated, hungry, and could not land on a decision. I had been finished with the day’s hike for some time and still hadn’t eaten anything (we realized this and Jen scrounged up a bagel for me), then we decided it would be best if I slept on it for a little bit and made a decision in the morning. At that point, I didn’t even know what time I should set my alarm for, because there was not a plan in place for the next day. How far would I need, or try, to go? I knew to stay on the planned record pace, I would need to complete 58 miles that second day, going through some difficult and exposed terrain in hot, humid weather.

We had spent so much time deliberating that my chances of getting a little bit of sleep then achieving that goal had dwindled considerably. Eventually I just picked a time to wake up—maybe 3:00 or 3:15am—and went to sleep, but not before dwelling more on the decision of what to do and talking about it with Warren some more, which in hindsight only made things worse, as it only made me more upset. The later I stayed up, the lesser chance I was giving myself to achieve a record. There was a very slim margin of error to begin with, and there I was, emotional and trying to make an impossible decision.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, my morning alarm went off and I heard Warren open the door and sit down in the driver’s seat. It wasn’t as if sleep had brought on any new or profound thoughts, because unfortunately, one can’t think while they sleep. However, I did feel in my gut that there was one clear choice. I texted Jen and Adrienne, who were in their car next door, then said to Warren, "I’m going to keep going."
The Fallout

I stepped out of the support vehicle into the dark night once more. I let the crew know I was ready to start. Adrienne and Jen walked over to see me off. Warren remained in the driver seat of the van. I asked if he was going to come out, and he simply responded, "no."

In all of our time during my AT record attempt and practice hikes, Warren had never remained in his vehicle without seeing me off at the beginning of the day, even in the pouring rain. So, a clear message was being sent about what he thought about my choice to continue on, and it stung.

I spent the first mile or two fighting back tears while running and hiking up the forest road, feeling hurt and frustrated. I passed by Bear Hollow Shelter, my intended stopping point of the first day, in what felt like no time at all. I was moving well. The first rays of light appeared as I went up and over Sterling (Whiteface) Mountain, the first more difficult and steep climb of the hike. Beyond that I hiked up one of my favorite parts of the LT to that point, Madonna Peak, a steep, open, grassy ski slope filled with wildflowers. I paused to take a photo at the top, with the mountains I had yet to climb looming in the background.

I remembered that the descent into Smuggler's Notch, the next road crossing, was particularly taxing on my feet and knees during my practice run the month prior, so I took care to step lightly,
knowing I had Mt. Mansfield and Camels Hump up ahead, with plenty of other mountains dotted in between.

I arrived at the parking area at Barnes Camp Historic Site in Smuggler's Notch later than expected based on my predicted pace for that day; however I remembered that even during my practice hike, I had been pretty slow through that section, and had made up for it in the more forgiving and runnable section of trail between Mt. Mansfield and Duxbury Road Trailhead. I tried not to sweat it too much. I was glad I had made it that far with my body feeling good still.

The next section would be 22.4 miles without support, so I took some time to reapply anti-chafe balm, eat some proper food, and make sure I had everything I needed before moving on. Jen and Adrienne scurried in, out, and around the van to help me get ready. Warren remained in the driver seat as before, totally silent. I began scarfing down some chicken noodles that Jen had prepared for me, then I broke the silence and said to Warren, "I feel like you're disappointed with me." He responded that he wasn't. I brought up how I felt hurt that he didn't see me off that morning. What ensued was a conversation that I don't wish to relive. I think I hoped for some kind of understanding or resolution, but instead got standoffish and curt responses, which invoked an emotional response from me. I felt unsupported by Warren in my decision to continue on, and felt as though I were being punished for not following his advice to start over from the beginning.

I climbed out of the van to resume the hike, wiping away tears and taking deep breaths, trying to calm down. Warren stepped out of the van as well, then pointed out I was about to go over Mt. Mansfield in the sun, which would be bad. Adrienne ran to get sunscreen to spray on me and Jen went back to the van to rummage around for my bandana, which I could use to protect my neck and ears. Jen and Adrienne agreed to meet me on the summit of Mansfield via the toll road so that I could resupply and replenish my fluids. I took a cold soda with me to guzzle during the next 0.5 mile section of boardwalk and trail between the parking lot and the highway. Jen and Adrienne met me to collect my empty can and see me off into the next section. I told them I felt concerned about the new dynamic among the crew and myself, as tensions were running high. They offered encouragement and reassurance that they were okay to keep rolling with it, and they each gave me a hug before I crossed the road to begin the ascent up Mansfield.

Once again, I left a road crossing emotional and distraught. When something goes wrong, I want to fix it immediately. When there is tension, I want to smooth it over. Between hiking Mansfield in peak sun (whereas in the ideal schedule I created I would have been climbing up before dawn), and having this interpersonal conflict with Warren, I could neither fix the pickle I was in in terms of the hike, nor resolve the conflict between the two of us by continuing on. I suppose I could have stopped right there, called it off, and started over in two days time; it would have been an opportunity to do better on a second go-around and it would have placated Warren.
There are many times in my life that I’ve put my would-be choices, feelings, and opinions aside for the sake of keeping the peace. I want everyone to be happy and don't want to be responsible for anyone’s hurt, displeasure, or disappointment. However, at the end of the day, it's myself that I have to look at in the mirror. I would have felt icky and disappointed with myself to go to such great measures as to quit a hike almost 70 miles in and start over to be back in Warren's good graces. To go back to the original dilemma, I was receptive toward starting over, but backing out of a commitment I had made to the rest of the crew to hike the trail within a certain time frame (with some wiggle room at the end if the FKT were not to happen), not to mention personal and work commitments I had made following the hike, didn’t sit well with me.

I continued to ruminate on all of this, my head clouded and swirling with thoughts as I made my way up Mt. Mansfield, which is a really fantastic and beautiful climb. It starts as a forested, switchback trail, then the further you ascend, the more rocky and piney the trail and its surroundings become. I giggled at the sign marking Profanity Trail and continued my way up past the "Adam's Apple" and climbed up large slabs of boulders and rocks, on all fours at times, up to the summit of Mansfield known as "The Chin", on which many thru-hikers and day hikers were resting, taking in the views, and enjoying the sunshine.

I continued along the alpine ridge line and navigated more rocks and sometimes-narrow trails with sturdy and stout pine trees lining the way. There were many day-hikers and tourists in this area, as the mountain top is accessible by the toll road that I’d soon see Jen and Adrienne at. I stepped out of the way for a mother and small child on the trail, and proceeded to jab my arm into a sharp, broken tree branch. Thankfully I didn't puncture my skin, but I ended up with a very colorful bruise that remained black, blue, green, and purple for at least a week!

I met Adrienne and Jen near the toll road as planned, and they were in good spirits. They said they were glad I had asked for them to meet me up there because they were blown away by the beauty of the mountain and views all around. I shared with them briefly about some of my continued worries and frustrations and they offered me reassurances of support, and that we'd figure out the best way to move forward. They sent me off with a topped-off hydration pack and sandwich wrap in hand, prepared for the next long section ahead.
I remembered my practice hike from Mt. Mansfield, to Bolton Mountain, then down to the next road crossing had gone very well. Beyond some goosebump-inducing drop-offs and built-in ladders coming off of Mansfield, the trail would be relatively tame the rest of the way to the next road. In the heat of the day, unfortunately, I was just not moving very fast. I worked my way steadily through the terrain and focused on just putting one foot in front of the other. I did my best to take care of myself in terms of drinking and eating frequently. At that point I was just putting in the work I needed to: maintenance and forward motion.

I had exchanged some texts with my running coach, Karl Meltzer, who had let me know he might be able to come out and see me or run with me for a bit. He had been in Maine supporting Scott Jurek in his second Appalachian Trail record attempt (the first of which was successful). Sadly, Scott had ended his hike due to a quad tear, which left Karl with some unprecedented time off. He let me know that he was on his way out from New Hampshire and that he’d meet me where the trail came out next at Notch Road.

Covering the remaining miles to Notch Road was slow going. The air, as it had been the day before, was stagnant and breezeless in the notches, or little valleys, between each mountain. I continued to pour out sweat, as I had been continuously since the beginning of the hike. I continued to eat and drink, but despite that felt lethargic and exhausted. I began to run low on
water, which worried me, as I still had quite a long way to go (around eight miles). I called Adrienne to see if Jen or Karl might be willing to hike in water to me for the last several miles of the section; she called me back soon after and said Jen would meet me from a side trail and hike the rest of the way with me.

I plodded forward, the heat feeling oppressive. Somehow I had gotten it into my head that I only had one more mountain to climb, Bolton, but I had conveniently forgotten about Mt. Mayo which came before that. I only realized my mistake upon descending Mt. Mayo then feeling my heart sink seeing Bolton Mountain rising up ahead of me. Jen meeting me with about three or four miles to go was a godsend. She brought plenty of water along with a filter in case we needed to collect more. She had me hand her one of my bottles, which she filled, then I’d walk with and drink, then we just repeated that process the rest of the time. Fill and drink, fill and drink. She stopped at a couple streams while I kept walking so she could collect water, then she’d hustle to catch back up with me and continue replenishing my bottle. We chatted and told stories the whole way, which made the time fly. We finally made our way out to Notch Road and strode down the paved hill where the rest of the crew—and Coach K!—was waiting.

Daylight was waning and finally the temperature began to cool down. Adrienne replenished my bottles and off Karl and I went for the remaining 2.5 miles of the day. I was well short of my ideal
schedule, though not completely out of the game for the record, depending on how well the next long section over Camels Hump went. The good thing was, despite being generally tired, my body felt good. My feet were okay, my legs were okay, and I even felt better energy-wise as it got cooler. Karl broke into a run and I followed along.

We talked a bit about how things had gone so far, and what I appreciated right away was his objective, matter-of-fact outlook on how the hike could proceed. He pointed out that I didn't have to make up the distance all at once, but that I could chip away and make my way back, little by little. We didn't discuss or dwell on emotions, feelings, and my conflict with Warren; just the simple task ahead. It was a breath of fresh air. He offered to stick around for the remainder of the hike if I wanted him to, to which I replied, "Are you kidding me? I would die! Of course!"

Karl turned back to retrieve a pair of sunglasses he'd dropped, and I ran the next mile or so alone. A small section of the trail joined with a road, in which Warren drove alongside me for a moment. I gave him a wave and he said it was good to see me running. The trail dipped back down off the road and into the woods for a bit, then it went through a farm. Karl joined up with me shortly after. We chit-chatted the rest of the way. I was interested to hear about his time on the AT with Scott, which he shared more about. He also came up with a resupply plan for the next section in which he'd meet me on the north side of Camels Hump to replenish my water.

It had just gotten dark as we arrived at the Duxbury Road Trailhead, where the crew awaited. I set to cleaning myself up in the support vehicle and Karl brought over a box of leftover pizza which I accepted with delight. Adrienne brought over some surprise trail magic that Ben Feinson, who'd recently set the overall supported record on the Long Trail, had left for me at the trailhead with an encouraging note. Between that and the support I'd received from everyone there at the trailhead, my friends, family, and the wider trail community, I felt humbled and determined to keep going.
While Jen, Adrienne, and Karl chatted over by their cars a few parking spaces down, I initiated a conversation with Warren, who was sitting up in the driver seat of the van. Unfortunately, the conversation went about the same way it did back at Smuggler's Notch, and I became very emotional and upset. On top of how hurt I was feeling, I felt ashamed and embarrassed by having such an outburst within earshot of everyone. That's not the kind of person I want to be, nor the type of environment I'd ever want to create for anyone, let alone the very people being so generous with their time, care, and effort in helping me.

Becoming aware of the time ticking away as I was talking in circles with Warren, I asked Jen and Adrienne if they could come over so we could talk about the plan for tomorrow. Once again, at the end of the day, I found myself feeling stressed not knowing what the game plan for the next day was, which would determine what time to set my alarm for and begin hiking. We ended up setting a starting time of 1:00am so that I could give myself the opportunity to cover a lot of ground in my third day on the trail, not to mention there was rain in the forecast and it would be better to get over the very rocky Camels Hump while it was still dry. Summiting Camels Hump in
the dark with a chance of rain seemed a little risky, but less risky than going later with a definite chance of rain. I felt reassured knowing that Jen would be starting the section with me, plus Karl would be meeting us up on a side trail several miles in.

Jen and I got started right on time, even slightly early at 12:58am. I felt determined, though also pretty frustrated with myself for how things had turned out to that point. The night was cool and I felt full of energy going up the mountain. Jen and I chatted as we hiked, and she commented about how well I was moving. I could hear her beginning to huff and puff. She told me to go on ahead if she got behind. Knowing that the navigation up ahead was a bit tricky, I let her know about a particularly hard-to-find turn up ahead, and as I continued ahead I called out, "Look for the white blazes!!"

I continued to hustle up the mountain and made good time toward the summit. While I was still under tree cover with maybe a quarter mile until reaching the top, a steady pitter patter of rain began. I couldn't help but laugh at the trail gods' dark sense of humor, as we'd planned the timing with a goal of beating the rain to the summit. Thankfully, it hardly lasted long at all. The trail wound up around the mountain and above treeline. I gasped at the strength of the powerful, whipping wind all around me. The rain cloud must have been a small one, because the only thing above me then was the night sky sprinkled with stars. My heart started pounding in what I'd call just a pure human reaction to being exposed on a windy mountain top in the dark. I felt a little frightened, but incredibly alive.

I carefully tiptoed my way from the summit, made up of wet rocks, and followed it as it wound down the other side. As I was traversing a rocky ledge, I heard a "Yeah!!" from who could only be Karl. He had made it up the side trail then hiked north on the LT to meet me. He told me I had made good time. He turned around and I followed him down the mountain and back under the trees. Much of that section of the trail was essentially downhill rock hopping and bouldering. There really was no graceful way to do it, and there was hardly ever one certain way to get down. It was sort of gratifying seeing that even for a decorated athlete like Karl, the Speedgoat, it was an awkward trail to navigate. One slip or wrong step could be catastrophic, so we took our time where we needed to.

Like the evening before, the conversation was relaxed and easygoing, which made the miles fly by and took my mind off of any negative thoughts I had. We arrived at the water cache he'd stashed, and he helped me refill my water bottles. While I had brought a lot of food with me at the beginning of the day, my hiker hunger was setting in and I had eaten a lot of it already. He offered me two packaged stroopwafels to take with me, saying, "These things are pure gold!" He turned back to meet up with Jen, then they'd hike back down the side trail together where his car was parked.

I continued, for the first time since beginning the FKT attempt, into the section of the Long Trail I'd never set foot on before. In fact, the next approximate 72 miles of trail would be all new to me, until the point where the Long Trail merged with the Appalachian Trail. I had approximately ten miles until the next road crossing where I'd see the crew. On paper that didn't seem like
much, but it was very difficult trail. I would compare it to the same kind of terrain that Karl and I had just hiked through together. There were rarely parts of the trail where I could just open up my stride and walk or run. The trail, rarely switchbacking, seemed to go straight up and down peak after peak, including Ethan Allen, Ira Allen, and Burnt Rock.

It was overcast that day, though still I just sweat and sweat in the humidity. I could feel my energy dipping and discomfort growing. The frustrations I’d had about the hike to that point came flooding back into my head. I started to whimper, which turned into crying, which turned into bawling. On top of any frustrations I had, the trail was just plain hard. That’s all there was to it. The Long Trail is a very very very difficult trail, and would have been even if I felt perfect and the weather was awesome. Though that didn’t come as a surprise, I felt so demoralized.

In writing about this hike, there are things I’ve glossed over or had just forgotten about: one thing being the amount of times I hit my head on low hanging branches or fallen tree trunks while hiking on the steep uphills. You’d think I would have learned to look up by the third day, but alas, CRACK! I hit my head on a tree for the umpteenth time.

I moved at what felt like an unbelievably slow pace. I felt broken mentally and emotionally. I had cried so much to that point I didn't have any tears left, so I walked on in silence. I then noticed how incredibly quiet and still the woods were. The trail became tamer for a bit, and for a few moments I could just walk. I looked up and took in the eerie, ethereal scenery of lush green forest filling with mist all around me.
What happened next, I can't really explain. The forest itself seemed to breathe in and out all around me. I looked up wearily at the trail, trees, and mist ahead, and heard a chorus of whispers exhale and ask, *What do you seek?* Maybe hearing voices in the woods was a result of my own foggy brain, but it felt quite real. It was a good question. I wasn't sure that I knew the answer.

Shortly after, it began to rain. I welcomed it at first, as it felt good to cool off. Then it started raining harder, and harder. I whipped out my lightweight rain jacket, which kept me warm for a little while, but the problem was that I was climbing higher and higher up Molly Stark Mountain, where it would only be colder, windier, and more exposed to the rain.

I started to plead, "Nooo no no no no! Please... please..." as if asking nicely and politely would convince the rain to stop. It didn't work. I climbed higher and higher up onto the exposed mountaintop, the rain soaking through my jacket. I started to get cold and I began to shiver. Feeling fed up with asking politely, I started to yell, "NO!" up at the sky, the rain pelting down on my face. "GO AWAY! AGHHH!!"

The trail dipped down off the mountain and I slowly and carefully made my way down in an effort not to slip. I was only about 1.5 miles from the trailhead, but I still had one more mountain to climb, and I was moving very slowly. It calculated that I might have another 45 minutes or even an hour to go. I started to feel scared about how cold I was getting and just focused on continuing to move.

The rest of the way was a cold, wet slog. Just before reaching the road, I had a bit of déjà vu as just before me on the trail was Warren Doyle sitting on a rock in the rain. I asked, "Aren't you cold?" and he smiled, shook his head, and said he was fine. I then asked, "Would it be weird if I told you the trees were talking to me?" He responded, "Not at all. What did they say?" I told him what they asked me, and he smiled again and said, "That's a good question."

He then went onto present my next options, as laid out by him. "Option A - Stop. Start over."

The frustrations of the past few days washed over me once more, a metaphorical representation of my being caught in a rainstorm. He was still not budging on his stance that I should, and could still, start over.

"Option B - Stop [for the day]. Then complete the remaining miles of the Long Trail from here to the Maine Junction, so you'll have completed every mile of the Long Trail combined with your hike from last summer."

"Option C - Stop [for the day]. Then complete the rest of the Long Trail."

I had already mulled over the idea of Option B, as I'd thought of it independently during some of my low points on the trail, and had even relayed the idea to Adrienne and Jen on a phone call.
They had told me, "Okay, but think of that as a *last* resort." They didn't want me to let go of finishing the trail so easily.

I told Warren I'd think on it, and continued the rest of the way down to the parking area. I arrived at Appalachian Gap sputtering, gasping, and still in a little bit of shock from being so cold. Karl ran up to me and walked with me to the support vehicle, where Jen and Adrienne met me as well. They told me Karl had been yelling at the rain on my behalf, which made me laugh, and I told them of how I had asked the rain nicely at first before letting loose and tearing it a new one.

Unfortunately, the section had taken me such a long time that it was clear at that point to both me and the crew that the record was definitely out of reach. No longer feeling the pressure of time, while also feeling deflated by how hard the last section was, combined with having just been giving three options which all involved stopping for the day, I changed into warm, dry clothing and ate a burrito that Jen had prepared for me while we talked about how to proceed.
Karl went to his car to rest, while Jen, Adrienne, and I got into the van. Warren hopped into the driver seat shortly after. I relayed the options that Warren had presented and said I was leaning toward just getting to the Maine Junction in two days then ending the hike. On top of feeling demoralized, now that the record was definitely out of reach, I felt like by continuing on, I would just be wasting everyone's time. Considering how much time it had taken me to get through the last section, I felt worried about how much longer it would take me to finish the entire trail. I was also having a difficult time with the dynamics of the group. Even in that conversation in the van, I felt like I had to choose my words very carefully to convey the situation and what I was thinking, without stepping on toes or being disrespectful toward anyone or unappreciative of the support I had been receiving from them.

Jen pointed out that I didn't have to stop. It was still quite early in the day, and the next section to Lincoln Gap was 11.6 miles. Warren's stance was that the pressure was off, so why not get some real rest and recovery and start fresh the next morning? I asked Warren what the section to Lincoln Gap was like, and he said point blank, it was rough. Both Adrienne and Jen conveyed that they did not consider it a waste of their time if I went on to finish the trail without achieving a record. Warren said that he was committed and available to continue driving support for any of the options.

If the next section was anything like the one I'd just done, and considering the record was off the table, I'd had enough for the day. Honestly I was ready to stop then and there. I felt stressed and emotionally drained from the entire experience. I felt embarrassed by my poor showing in the FKT attempt, and did not feel worthy of support in the distressed and emotional state I was in. At the same time, I hated the thought of walking away without reaching some kind of meaningful milestone, so reaching the Maine Junction seemed like an appropriate compromise. A decision was made.

I walked over to Karl's Subaru where he was resting, and let him know about my decision and thanked him for all of his help and support. He was very gracious about it, and said he'd probably head back to New Hampshire to spend time with family, and that we'd be in touch.

The Resolution

The crew and I stayed in Montpelier that evening. The next sections of trail were 11.6 miles and 17.3 miles long. If I could complete those, that would leave me with 29.8 miles remaining to the Maine Junction the following day (plus one more mile to the next road), making for two pretty even days. Warren questioned why I'd stress over getting up early to complete two sections, when I could instead sleep in, have a hotel breakfast, and just plan to hike the one section. He reminded me again that the pressure was off. My thought was that I wanted to at least give myself a chance to complete the two sections so the hike wouldn't drag on forever. I didn't want the crew to continue putting their life on hold for me longer than they had to, not to mention I had my own life beyond the Long Trail that I was ready to return to.

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The morning of the fourth day started in an unfortunate way, as I had missed the last step in
setting my alarm the night before, and somehow the text I'd sent Warren with the planned
meeting time did not go through to him. Poor Jen and Adrienne were up on time and ready to
go, and there I was sending frantic text messages saying, "I'm so sorry I slept in, getting ready
now!" At this point I think everyone on the crew deserved some kind of award for putting up with
me and I would not have blamed them for saying, "SEE ya!" right then and there.

We made it to the trailhead just before dawn, and off I went. I began the hike with many demons
in my head still. I replayed the hike over and over in my mind to a point that it was just an
unending negative spiral. I snapped out of it a little when I looked up and was treated to the
most beautiful sunrise over Mad River Glen.

I took a few deep breaths and just focused on the trail ahead of me. I was pleasantly surprised
that the trail was actually nothing like the previous section in terms of difficulty. After winding up
the ski area, the trail hovered along a ridgeline for a while. It was walkable, even runnable, and
really all around just pleasant, forested trail, occasionally popping out onto a mountaintop with expansive views. Since I wasn't as concerned for time in terms of a record attempt, I took photos and posted them to my Instagram story along the way, with reminders to donate to my fundraiser for Green Mountain Club, the founders and maintainers of the Long Trail.

The weather, for the first time on the hike, was completely ideal. The temperature was cool, the sun was out, and the trail was dry. Many hikers were out and about, and everyone was in such a good mood. I was making great time and made sure to call the crew and let them know so they wouldn't miss me at the next road. I jogged down to Lincoln Gap with a smile on my face. I felt confident that I could complete the next 17.3 mile section to Middlebury Gap well, knowing that the trail would be even less difficult than before based on Warren's description. He told me that my last section had been my quickest yet since the beginning of the hike. Adrienne and Jen replenished my pack for the next section. Jen insisted that I take more water than what I initially had (which was good advice), and sent me off with a peanut butter and jelly wrap in hand.
From there, the trail meandered into the woods. I walked at a steady, solid pace. I encountered very few hikers, perhaps because it didn't have the sexy views as with the previous section, so with that opportunity I whipped out my phone and called my mom. I had texted her and my dad in the past day, asking if they'd be willing to come meet me at the end of the hike and take me to the airport the next day, to which they graciously responded, "Sure!". It wasn't the original plan, but sometimes you just really need your parents. I was so glad they were willing to make the time. I filled her in on how the hike had been going, then we just started talking about life stuff. I let her know that I'd had some good conversations with Andre (for new readers, here is some context on recent life events), that we'd started the divorce process, and that I actually felt okay about everything- I'd be okay. She said she was relieved to hear that, and knew that my dad would be too. It was a really nice heart-to-heart conversation.

The rest of the section was smooth sailing. I had made good time and my mind was in a good place. There was enough daylight left even to complete the next 9.9 mile section, so I did that. Like a mirror of the beginning of the day, I was treated to a beautiful sunset as I traversed Cape Lookoff Mt. to Mt. Horrid. By the time I reached Brandon Gap I had 38.8 miles under my belt and felt... fine. I mean, of course I felt fine. The weather was fantastic, the trail was nowhere near as rugged as in the previous days, and I had gotten a lot of sleep and recovery beforehand. All the same, it felt a bit sad.

As I crossed the road to where the crew was parked, Warren congratulated me on the day and said with a little twinkle in his eye, "You know, there's still an option." This time he wasn't suggesting starting over, but simply continuing on to do another section that day, and going on to complete the trail instead of just stopping at the Maine Junction. I smiled but shook my head and replied, "Yeahhh, I know." He chuckled a bit and said something like, "Just making sure."
Of course, then, I was kicking myself that I hadn't just kept going past Appalachian Gap the day before. I had been expecting it to be a big, scary, impossible section. It wasn't. I could have kept pushing for a finish in under six days, which few people have done. It's what Jen tried to convey to me in the van when she told me I didn't have to stop. Another learning lesson to add to the giant, heaping pile of learning lessons from this hike.

I learned back at the parking area that Jen received some really sad news from home, and would have to leave the next day to be with family. Since she and Adrienne had carpooled, that meant they'd both have to leave. I would have understood if they needed to leave right then and there, and made sure to say that. Jen said if I started and finished early enough the next morning, she would be able to stay through the end. That was sound motivation to just get the thing done. It also made me glad that I had covered more miles than planned that day, which made for a shorter final day.

The next morning I began the final section of my hike: 18.9 miles from Brandon Gap to the Maine Junction, where the Long Trail joins the Appalachian Trail. It had only been a little over a year since I'd hiked past the Maine Junction on the Appalachian Trail, that time heading northbound on my way to Katahdin. Warren wished me well, and Adrienne and Jen walked with me down the road and to the trailhead.
It ended up being the least difficult section of the Long Trail to that point, at least as I had experienced it going southbound. The elevation changes were little, the trail was dry, and the rocks and roots were few and far between, relatively speaking. My mind felt sort of blank for this section. I had no profound thoughts, nor meaningful or spiritual experiences in relation with the trail. I felt a little sad that I was moving with such ease and making such good time. In fact, I slowed my roll a little bit, not wanting to arrive at the Maine Junction ahead of schedule since my parents, Jen, and Adrienne were planning to hike the mile up to the sign to meet me. My body felt good, my legs felt good, and once again the weather was just beautiful.

As I neared the Maine Junction, I heard a whistle that sounded like a bird call, and immediately knew my dad was up ahead. I gave him a big smile and a great big hug. We walked the remaining bit of trail together back to the sign where we were greeted with warm cheers by Adrienne, Jen, and my mom. I tapped the Maine Junction sign with my hand, giving it a "boop" and stopped my watch. The journey was complete.
It was a bittersweet feeling for the hike to end the way that it did, but considering all that had happened, it felt like an appropriate place to stop. I was glad that we started and finished as a team, even with all of the rocky moments throughout. This long long long recap is just coming from one perspective, my own. I kept the focus of my writing on how I was feeling in the moment, versus presenting each perspective on the situation or including asides with how I'd interpret everything now, upon more reflection. Since completing the hike, I've had some good conversations with Adrienne, Jen, and Warren after having some time to process and reflect on everything. They are each genuine, smart, and caring people, not to mention A+ crew members. I feel very fortunate to have had their support. I wish I had initiated some important conversations before the hike in terms of clarifying roles, how the decision making process would work, and if we'd consider the possibility of starting over from the beginning if things didn't start well, which would have been helpful for all involved. In fact, I have a whole laundry list of things I wish I had done better, but this story has become long enough, and I feel ready to put it to rest for now.

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For more tales from the trails, sign up for the “Mercury on the Run” newsletter at https://mercuryontherun.com. You can also follow me on Instagram @pinkfeathers.

Mercury’s Transit of the Long Trail from the US/Canada Border to the Maine Junction

Start - US/Canada Border, August 12th, 2021 at 12:00am

Finish - Maine Junction, August 16th, 2021 at 1:02pm

167.1 miles total

51,907 ft elevation gain total (310 ft per mile)

68 hrs 43 minutes of total moving time from the starting point to the ending point of each day (includes stops throughout the day)

36.8 miles average per day

15.1 moving hours average per day

2.4 mph average pace from the starting point to the ending point of each day (including stops throughout the day)

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8.9 hours of rest average per night (from the stopping point at the end of the day to the starting point the next morning)

DAILY TOTALS & STATS

Day 1 - Thursday August 12th, 2021
High 86°F / Low 72°F / Humidity 94%
Start - US/Canada Border, 12:00am
Finish - The Gate at West Settlement Road, 8:33pm
51.1 miles
16,155 ft elevation gain (316 ft per mile)
20 hrs, 33 minutes
2.5 mph

Day 2 - Friday August 13th, 2021
High 90°F / Low 66°F / Humidity 92%
Start - The Gate at West Settlement Road, 3:54am
Finish - Duxbury Road Trailhead, 8:33pm
39.6 miles
12,054 ft elevation gain (304 ft per mile)
16 hrs, 39 minutes
2.4 mph

Day 3 - Saturday August 14th, 2021
High 77°F / Low 66°F / Humidity 88%

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Start - Duxbury Road Trailhead, 12:58am

Finish - Appalachian Gap, 10:39am

18.7 miles

7,976 ft elevation gain (427 ft per mile)

9 hrs, 41 minutes

1.9 mph

Day 4 - Sunday August 15th, 2021

High 72ºF / Low 54ºF / Humidity 77%

Start - Appalachian Gap, 4:54am

Finish - Brandon Gap, 7:44pm

38.8 miles

11,654 ft elevation gain (300 ft per mile)

14 hrs, 48 minutes

2.6 mph

Day 5 - Monday August 16th, 2021

High 75ºF / Low 48ºF / Humidity 75%

Start - Brandon Gap, 6:00am

Finish - Maine Junction, 1:02pm

18.9 miles

4,068 ft elevation gain (215 ft per mile)

7 hrs, 2 minutes

2.7 mph