

Charles Schell

### Journey's End

Sometimes my home is on my back. I carried two Nalgens, scraped, rugged, stickered with past mountains, each holding two liters of iodized water, almost nine pounds; a three-person hammerhead tent with dirt and grime encasing the floor, lopsided to carry; two military-grade cooking gas canisters, heavy but still hoping they won't leak; and a deck of cards, blessedly light. Some would not be unfamiliar to steppe nomads: a foldable Sven-Saw to cut kindling or the loosely-tied emergency-meal bag of rice. In a deep recess, there is an unused medkit that smelled of plastic wrap and its factory. Home is about 70 pounds, over half my body weight. At least I was not carrying the block of pungent cheddar, sweating as much as us. Somewhat faster than snails, our line of seven other boys hail from rural Maine, metropolitan California, and far-off Hong Kong. Over eight days, we covered the northern 100 miles of Vermont's Long Trail, Headmaster James P. Taylor's inspiration for the Appalachian Trail, and hoped to end our journey past Jay Peak, short of the Canadian border. Young and confident in our abilities, we assured ourselves that we were seasoned professionals with a Wilderness First Aid certification under our belts. Do you ever come home if you already carry a tent on your back? Under heavy packs in the wilderness, even assured boys dream of making each night's campsite a home away from home. Yet, that day, our anticipated homecoming never occurred.

Throughout the prior night, rain whipped our tents and covered the trails with water. As dawn appeared and touched the sky with roses, proclaiming that morning had arrived, we quit the warmth of our sleeping bags, cracked our backs, struggled over the sticky tent flap zippers, and walked out into the early rays. We would not have known inside our homey tents that the

night's storm had enveloped the trail in thick mud making the rocks as slick as ice or, that not all of us would return to our cozy sleeping bags that night.

I woke the rest of the crew: "Morning boys!"

A somewhat less than excited "morning" came from my phlegmatic group.

"Fantastic start," I grumbled to myself.

Ten minutes behind schedule, the day's leader, Ben, announced "Everybody put your packs on, let's go, let's go."

Slow and steady, we snail-paced over our first 20-mile day. The sun beat down hard, the trail was dangerous, and the day ached on. At half past noon, we reached the jagged slopes of Camel's Hump, the steepest mountain on the Long Trail. Thankful for a break from the exertion, we chowed down on cucumber, hummus, summer sausage, and pita bread wraps. With the hardest portion completed, confidence pulsed through our veins. For us, the home we created at each night's campsite was an oasis, a haven from the labors of the trek. The pack's burden during the day transforms into tools to make a sanctuary in the night, and that is the home to the hiker. Like Heraclitus' flowing river that is never twice the same, our homes altered and did not stay the same. Each day brings a new location, a new water source, different tent-mates, and changing weather. Unlike a permanent home, the previous night's abode was just a memory the following day. Yet, the fleeting nature of each camp made me long to return to my family and my permanent home, where my routines were cemented as words inscribed in stone.

Our lunch break was over and it was time to hit the trail. So, with a deep bellowing sigh, I announced: "Pack up, we need to arrive at camp before dark."

Our hastiness must have angered the gods who then cursed our expedition. Ten minutes below the wind-torn peak, Ben started running downhill and lost his footing on a slippery rock. He fell six feet down the path hitting the backside of his head on a crag.

Rushing to his side: “Are you all right?” I worried.

“My head hurts,” Ben whimpered.

Lucas arrived: “GET THE MEDKIT!”

I ripped open my pack and slashed free the kit. With blood smattering the rock and dirt, I pressed a bandage to Ben’s head while taking off his pack. Even my gentle pressure brought on a wave of groans from Ben.

He moaned, “Skittles, I want Skittles.”

Lucas was saving a family-sized pack of Skittles. Ben acknowledged the gesture with a weak nod. My thoughts were not sanguine: Ben needed a hospital. Consulting the map, we determined that the closest evacuation spot was two miles down the trail. En route, thru-hikers stopped and gazed at Ben’s blood-splattered face. Ben must have looked like a zombie, stumbling down the trail, with a blood-stained bandage covering his wound. Eventually, our motley crew arrived at the junction between the campsite and the evacuation point. Ben and two others left for the emergency room.

The rest of us staggered our way down the darkening trail, finally reaching the campsite sign that announced our arrival: “Journey’s End.” We set up our tents and bear bagged our gear. I cooked ‘spammies,’ a combination of SPAM and Annie’s Mac & Cheese. With three less people and diminished appetites, there was way too much food. We had Ben’s gear, but our campsite felt different that night. Our group had bonded over the campfire with spooky stories and shared

experiences. We made each night feel like home. Worried for our injured companion and uncertain about the continuation of the trip, hinted at by the name of the camp, the damp night slowly passed without merriment or happiness. I missed my nightly card game with Ben.

Looking back on that distinct night, I see reasons why that campsite did not feel like home. The act of coming home is similar for every human being. They enter a space that is familiar and natural to them. It is an area that is hopefully away from the turbulent and hectic sphere of the outside world. Most of us do not live on the trail even though our packs can contain everything we need to create a temporary home. The day's accident and continual worrying about Ben intruded upon our oasis. I was alone in my three-person tent. Less noise, emptier tents, and fewer boys tripping on the tent cords while arguing over a game of blackjack, made the camp different, strange, and uninviting. I longed for the warm welcome I receive when entering my family home. Ben's absence made the campsite feel frosty and unwelcoming. I now understand that same coldness would enshroud me if I returned to my family home and no one was there. I am not a snail that can carry home on my back, my rucksack needs the company of friends and family to be called a home.