



The Not So Beaten Path

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Cory Bordonaro



“This is child abuse!” I moaned, dramatically dragging my feet over the leaf-blanketed ground. My arms flopped at my sides, and with shoulder shrugged, I cast my numbed gaze downward towards the dirt. We’d been on the trail for miles, and my little-girl stamina had more than maxed out. As far as I knew, this case was one for Social Services.

My parents were conducting foot research for a hiking guide they’d been assigned by an outdoor press, and I was much too young to appreciate the adventures the opportunity afforded. After buying a log cabin in the North Georgia Mountains, the two of them had unearthed their inner pioneer, hitting the ground hiking to bring light to the untold gems of the area. At the time, I was seven years-old and on a completely different page. I was less than enthused when at the close of every week, my sister and I were hoisted from our metro-Atlanta home base and whisked to uninhabited woodlands of the Southeast.

For months, we bounced around in the minivan backseat during lengthy car rides on bumpy mountain roads. Mom and Dad mapped every landmark, clocked every mile. My father had always been good in reverse, but he now had his chance to hone in on the skill, as we often missed our turns the first go-round. I was carsick prone and inclined to let my woes be known. My stomach-wrenching cries coincided with the sound of the car horn, as with each turn about the mountain roads, my New Jersey born father blew a warning to oncoming cars. The narrow sharp-turn stretches certainly wouldn’t accommodate two vehicles and, as far as he was concerned, this was the best way to avoid a run in.

When we finally reached each trail head, we’d throw back the car door and suck down deep draughts of fresh air. It tasted as sweet as any I’d ever breathed. Better than city air by far, and certainly a step up from the recycled and dusty van oxygen.

Starting off down the trail, we all walked energetically, simply thankful for the chance to stretch our legs. When we loosened up, we’d kick the stick, sing songs, tell stories. We even had a tradition of rotating as “bridge riddler.” The first to cross the threshold of the bridge would have the chance to deny passage to those that couldn’t answer correctly. For years, the standard ques-

tion asked of me was: “What comes between the number 13 and 15?” I would shuffle my feet and think with heart pounding. I had an aversion to the number 14 and for years, just preferred to leave it out of my count.

Our journeys continued with lighthearted fun as we trekked towards each trail’s pinnacle: the waterfall. Our jovial moods carried through until it was time for a picnic lunch. I would venture to say I had a right nice time. But, it was those post-lunch, on-the-way-back-steps that nearly did me in. Every. Single. Ever-Loving. Time.

My dad was forever leading us down rabbit trails, off the beaten path. He’d succumb to an idea to “rock hop” across the river a while, and before I knew it, he’d be skipping precariously over a slippery log, beckoning the rest of the family to follow. One particular afternoon, a hard rain fell on the already-slimy surface of a fallen tree. To him, it appeared the perfect bridge. To me, it looked like a whispery invitation into the icy water below.

“I’m not going over there, and you can’t make me!” I declared, putting my foot down. It wasn’t down for long. Within minutes, I was roughly plucked from my stance and cradled under my fathers arm to be carried across. My juvenile gusto didn’t stand a chance against his determination.

He was always blindly focused on our destination. And I was a stubborn naysayer. Years before my diminutive strides could complete the 7-mile path to Panther Creek Falls, my dad was scheming up plans for our steady growth and progress. I had painted a mid-sized rock with an acrylic version of our small family. Encased in plastic, the rock accompanied us on our first attempt to complete the arduous hike. When we’d made it as far as my little legs could carry us, we buried the rock beside the foot path before turning back. Faithfully, we returned to the spot the next year, dug up the treasure with the promise of carrying it a bit further. It was years later that our rock made it to the waterfall.

Almost two decades afterward, I sit at the base and let the lacy spray spit droplets onto face. I visually trace a stream of water from the top, letting my eyes follow it over the craggy surface. I watch it tumble over the rocky face before it finds the peace of the idyllic water below. I am stirred by memories made on the path of my obstinate resistance, remembering *nos* softened into *yeses*. City air now has me thirsting for a taste of the sweet mountain variety. The course to here wasn’t smooth, nor was it direct, but I am better for the bumpy road.