

CALLED AGAIN

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A STORY
of LOVE
AND
TRIUMPH

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JENNIFER
PHARR DAVIS



BEAUFORT
BOOKS

FIRST EDITION

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davis, Jennifer Pharr.

Called again : a story of love and triumph / by Jennifer Pharr Davis.—

First edition.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-8253-0693-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)—

ISBN 978-0-8253-0694-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)—

ISBN 978-0-8253-0653-2 (ebook)

1. Davis, Jennifer Pharr. 2. Hikers—United States—Biography. I. Title.

GV199.92.D37A3 2013

796.51092—dc23

[B]

2013002077

For inquiries about volume orders, please contact:

Beaufort Books

27 West 20th Street, Suite 1102

New York, NY 10011

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Published in the United States by Beaufort Books

www.beaufortbooks.com

Distributed by Midpoint Trade Books

www.midpointtrade.com

Printed in the United States of America

Interior design by Elyse Strongin, Neuwirth and Associates, Inc.

Interior illustrations by James Pharr

Cover image by code6/E+/getty images

Design by Oliver Munday

Lyrics from Mumford and Sons

First to Him,

Next to him,

And then, these four women:

Mom, Maureen, Meredith and Margot.

HEARTACHE

JULY 2007

When I was twenty-four years old, I learned that heartache is consuming. There was a pain in my chest, my body felt weak, and my bottom eyelids were a tired dam trying to hold back a river of tears.

In June 2007, I was stuck in the thick, shoe-sucking mud of my own disappointment. I was ankle deep in despair, and I couldn't move forward. The only thing that came easily was sleep. I retreated to that liberating darkness as often as I could. When I was forced to leave my bed and face the world, I struggled to keep my lips from trembling. My fake grin was like a small Band-Aid placed on a wound that was much too large to conceal.

I had lost my first love.

It didn't make sense to me. We had found each other on the Appalachian Trail, and we had shared hundreds of miles that melded us together like the seam-seal glue on our backpacking gear. Over the past two years, we had hiked to the highest point in the lower forty-eight states, we had forded rivers with torrents of water that rose past our waists, we had crossed snowfields where only our ice axes prevented us from sliding to our deaths. If we could overcome all that, why couldn't we overcome ourselves?



In the midst of this pain, the only thing I wanted to do was return to the trail. The trail provided me with a purpose. It was a catharsis and it provided a way to move forward physically, even if my heart was held captive. And if miles were the best medicine, then I wanted to hike as far and as fast as possible.

I needed guidance. I emailed the legendary hiker Warren Doyle for advice.

Warren,

I can't believe where the trail has taken me since attending your Appalachian Trail Institute in 2004! It was great to see you briefly last summer on the Pacific Crest Trail. I don't know if you heard, but I finished the 2,633-miles in late September. I have been able to thru-hike some other, shorter trails, and now I want to try a new challenge. This summer, I want to go back to the Appalachian Trail and try to see how fast I can hike it. I think that I could set the women's record. I know you set a trail record in the 1970s. Do you have any suggestions for me?

Thanks so much!

Jen

Warren quickly replied:

Jen,

Trail records are about endurance, not speed. If you are interested in doing an endurance record, you should try for a record on a shorter trail and see if you like it before attempting it on a trail that is over 2,000 miles long. Are you currently in Virginia? I am traveling up I-81 this evening. We can meet at the gas station on your exit and have a planning session. I should be there at 12:30 AM.



Just before midnight, I started driving toward the interstate. I struggled to keep my eyes open. I knew from my previous interactions with Warren that his internal clock was different from most people's. I respected that, but I couldn't really relate to it. All my body had wanted to do for the past few weeks was sleep—especially in the middle of the night.

When I arrived at the gas station, Warren was already there waiting for me. We each bought a large coffee and then sat down at a table to talk.

“Why do you want to try a trail record?” he asked.

Ugh, Warren and his questions! They were never about gear, or logistics, or a schedule. The first thing he always wanted to know was *why*. I knew I had to make it through this test before he would talk to me about hiking specifics. But how could this sixty-year-old man understand a twenty-four-year-old woman's broken heart?

I sighed deeply, staring at the steam rising from my coffee, then I began. “Well, I love thru-hiking and now I've hiked over 6,000 miles on my own. So I want to try something different. Plus, I'm having a tough time right now, and I think going back to the trail and trying for a record would be healing.”



“Healing?” Warren scoffed. “You think physically hurting and reaching new levels of discomfort is going to be healing?”

The inquisition had begun.

“Well, yeah,” I replied. “Emotionally, I have a lot of weight right now, and I know that the trail has a way of stripping off the excess layers of worry, fear, and even pain. I was hoping that a record attempt would help me get to a better place faster.”

I looked up at Warren, expecting to see a frustrated sage trying to deal with a young woman’s melodrama. But when I caught his eye, I saw a friendly glimmer and a knowing smile on his face.

“So this is really a conversation about lightweight backpacking?”

“Well, yeah, I mean, most of my gear is lightweight,” I replied.

“No, not your gear —your heart.”

Warren spent the next hour telling me about how the trail had helped him through different joyous and painful milestones in his life. The trail helped him process his college graduation, the birth of his children, a divorce from his first wife, and a new marriage. He explained that every time he visited it he was a new person, and even after forty years and over a dozen completions of it, he was still learning from each new day he spent out there.

After he helped me understand the healing and reflective role that the Appalachian Trail had played in his life, Warren then looked me in the eyes and told me I should consider the Long Trail.

The Long Trail is a two-hundred-seventy-two-mile footpath that runs the length of Vermont. It is the oldest long-distance trail in the country, and it contains some of the most tedious and difficult hiking terrain. I had heard enough about the Long Trail to know that it was composed more of roots and rocks than dirt. It contained numerous exposed summits that seemed to attract high winds and violent lightning storms, and some sections of forest were so dense that not even the sun could penetrate the trees. Plus, the remote northern portion of the trail was isolated to the point that one simple mistake could have huge consequences. It sounded like it might be just what I needed.

Warren took out a twenty-year-old guidebook and helped me plan an eight-day itinerary for the trail. Finally, I had a plan and a schedule. But before I could leave, Warren had one more thing to teach me.

As we exited the gas station and headed to our cars, Warren turned to me and asked, “Do you know how to waltz?”

“Waltz?!” I repeated. “I thought you were here to help me walk, not waltz.”

“They’re very similar,” he replied.

Warren put a tape in the cassette player of his rusted old car and turned up the volume. He walked over to me and bowed. Then, with the grace of an eighteenth-century English gentleman, he stretched out his hand. I put my fingers in his palm, and together, at three o’clock in the morning, we danced in the dark parking lot of a gas station off Interstate 81.

My feet occasionally stumbled or stepped on Warren’s toes, even though I looked down and tried to will them in the right direction. But Warren softly instructed, “Look up. Listen to the melody. If you want to dance, then you can’t fight the music; you have to flow with it.”

THE LONG TRAIL

AUGUST 2007

One of the thru-hikers who finished the Appalachian Trail with me broke my heart; the other helped mend it.

On my way to Vermont, I stopped in Connecticut to see Mooch. After my first hike on the Appalachian Trail, I hadn't expected to stay in such close contact with him (or to continue dating Nightwalker). But our experience had been so intense and our bond so unique that we couldn't figure out how to move on without one another. Like me, Mooch had sworn off thru-hiking at the top of Katahdin. And like me, he had spent every summer since on a long-distance trail. In fact, he had completed the Long Trail just a few weeks prior to my visit.

After ten hours of driving, I pulled into a driveway in Trum-bull, Connecticut. Mooch was sitting on the steps to his apartment. I was disappointed to see that he no longer had the long, curly hiker-hair or shaggy beard that he sported on the trail.

As soon as I stepped out of the car, he walked over to me and engulfed me in his long, lean arms. He whispered into my ear, "Oh, Odyssa. Sweet, sweet Odyssa. It's so good to see you." He paused. "But you are a *mess!* You're going through heartbreak, not a thru-hike. You know you *can* still take showers, right?"

My friend laughed, grinning from ear to ear. I smiled too. I was pleased to see that Mooch still had the same kind spirit and offensive sense of humor that had made even the worst situations on the trail seem tolerable.

Next, he lowered his nose to my synthetic tank-top and inhaled near the crook of my neck. "You know, dressing—and smelling—like you do on the trail isn't going to bring Night-walker back. Come on, Odyssa. Let's get you inside and under a showerhead."

I heard what Mooch was saying, and I appreciated the unique way that he was able to console my aching heart with criticism, but in that moment all I could think about was how nice it was to hear the name Odyssa. I missed trail names and the personas people took on when hiking. Odyssa embodied strength and adventure, the ability to overcome adversity. I felt that if Odyssa could overcome the challenges of the hike, if she could find a way to traverse the Long Trail in eight days, then Jen could somehow overcome her broken heart.

That afternoon, after a much-needed shower, I sat in Mooch's apartment going through my pack and separating my food into zipper-lock bags while Mooch sat on his couch humming and strumming his guitar.

"So you really think you can finish the trail in eight days?" he asked indignantly.

"Yeah, if things go well."

"Odyssa, you know it took me three and a half weeks to hike the Long Trail, and I was going at a solid pace. The northern half is as difficult as the Appalachian Trail in Maine and New Hampshire." Then, prodding me, he continued, "I don't think you can do it."

I looked up at Mooch and saw a smile reaching almost to the bottom of his ears. He knew me well enough to know that being told I couldn't do something was the best motivation I could receive.



The next morning, after cooking me a large hiker breakfast of eggs, pancakes, and bacon, Mooch

drove me to the Vermont-Massachusetts border and the southern terminus of the Long Trail. When I arrived at the trailhead, the last thing I wanted to do was get out of my friend's air-conditioned car and step into the late-summer heat wave. I should not have hesitated. It was like looking off a bridge before BASE jumping.

Suddenly, none of this made sense. How was hiking a difficult trail with an impossible goal going to solve anything? I didn't want to face my problems or the trail. All I wanted was to go back home, back to my bed, and sleep.

Mooch looked over at me, reading the doubt in my eyes, and quickly responded, "Oh no you don't."

He got out of the car, removed my pack from the trunk, and then walked around to the passenger door. In a last-ditch effort, I tried to push the lock button, but it was too late. Mooch lifted the outside handle and the warm blanket of humidity wrapped around my body.

My friend reached in and grabbed my elbow to help me out of the car. "Remember, this is what you wanted," he said. "Plus, I like to see you suffer. So c'mon, out we go."

With a little more pulling and prodding, I climbed out. Mooch hoisted my green backpack—filled with gear and several days' worth of food—onto my shoulders. I tightened the straps around my chest and the buckles around my waist and gave Mooch one last long, wistful hug. Then, just like the day before, he whispered softly in my ear, "It's time. Let go."

So I did. I let go and started slowly up the hard-packed dirt trail littered with worn gray rocks and surrounded by verdant outstretched arms of mountain laurel. Within seconds, the thick green tunnel hid Mooch, and I was on my own.

I took one step after another. My breathing fell into a rhythm, and after hiking a mile, all of the anxiety that I had experienced at the car vanished. I felt better than I had in weeks. I felt at home.



My euphoric return to the trail lasted all of seventeen hours. After leaving Mooch and camping at the border, I began my trek the next morning at six a.m. and hiked forty-six miles that day. Forty-six miles! It was the farthest that I had ever traveled by foot in a twenty-four-hour period.

During the morning, I felt light and the miles passed quickly. By the afternoon, my legs started to stiffen and my pace decreased. And as the daylight turned to dusk, my shoulders ached, my hips were sore from my pack weight, and the lower half of my body cried out with pain and fatigue. My skin was cold to the touch and my stomach was empty. Even my brain felt tired. As simple as walking was, it was hard to focus on putting one foot in front of the other for sixteen straight hours.

But I didn't feel completely horrible because my chest felt warm and full. I was proud of coming so far in such a short amount of time. I had made it to the north side of Stratton Mountain, and now the disappearing sun and my exhausted legs told me it was time to find a camping spot.

As the forest faded into darkness, I continued to walk, searching for a flat spot to lie down. But I was not paying attention to the path in front of me, and as a result, I stepped on a large, loose rock. The stone rolled out from under me, and my left leg twisted as I fell.

My first response was to get up as quickly as possible. I never liked to assess injuries sitting down because things always seemed worse from the ground perspective. If I could self-diagnose while standing or walking, then the prognosis was never as bleak. I put most of my weight on my hands and unfolded my lower limb as if I were trying to come out of a difficult yoga pose. Then I transitioned back to a Homo erectus stance. My knee was sore but steady, and everything seemed to be okay. I took a few more steps to rebuild my confidence and loosen my knee, then I found a place where the shoulder of the trail was wide. I unrolled the light foam pad and unpacked my thin down sleeping bag.

I crawled inside my bed and took a brief moment to look up at the stars. It was a very comforting scene. ~~The twinkling lights were far more magical and hopeful than the pale white ceiling of my bedroom.~~



When I awoke the next morning, I knew even before I sat up that my left knee was *not* okay. It felt hot and stiff, and I was barely able to contort it to get out of my narrow sleeping bag.

When my kneecap came into view, it was swollen and pink. I poked at the bulging flesh with my finger. It now looked and felt like a serious injury, and based on previous ailments that I had incurred on the trail, I realized that there was only one cure: I had to keep hiking.

While doctors recommend rest, ice, compression, and elevation, I knew that increased circulation, a large range of motion, and gritted teeth had fixed many of my trail injuries in the past. The pain might increase before my knee felt better, but that was part of the healing process.

I reached for my shoes and carefully placed my left foot into the sneaker, but something inside didn't feel right. I figured it must be from the altered state of my knee, and I reached for my other shoe. Then I noticed something orange underneath the tongue. I looked closer and spotted a pinky-sized slug adhered to it.

"Uck." I picked off the slug and hurled it onto a nearby tree. Then I reached into the toe-bed and found two more slimy creatures. Chills went down my spine as I unlatched them and flung them into the woods. I was not scared of slugs, but I didn't care to handle them, especially first thing in the morning. I put my shoe on and started to stand up when an unpleasant thought crossed my mind.

"Nooo!" I took off my other shoe, and just as I had suspected, my sock was completely covered in opaque orange goo. Judging from the high concentration of gunk, there had been at least as many slugs in my left shoe as in my right—and none of them had survived.



That morning was miserable. Every other step hurt, and walking on uneven terrain intensified the pain. During a treacherous descent down a boulder field, I placed my hands on two neighboring rocks to brace my step, and as I eased my foot down into a small crevice, I felt something bite my ankle. I looked down and saw a large yellow jacket. Suddenly, I was overcome with adrenaline, and I ran the next forty yards down the trail.

I have a moderate allergy to bees, and the thought of my throat swelling shut trounced the pain of my aching knee. Once I was a safe distance away, I looked down and saw two red bull's-eyes. I immediately took some Benadryl and put my EpiPen in my hip pocket in case I started wheezing. The ache in my knee returned, now accompanied by a sharp pain in my ankle. I kept hobbling down the trail and watched my shin change shades of red and then swell until it resembled a doughnut just above my low-cut sock.

For the rest of the day, I was not focused on a trail record. I was only focused on putting one foot in front of the other. I didn't care how slowly I hiked. I just wanted to keep moving forward. As the sky grew dark, I came to a cold creek where I submerged both of my legs. The muscle definition in my left leg was gone. It was red and swollen from my toes to my lower thigh, and it was hard to look at, let alone bend.



After completing two and a half days and over a hundred miles on the Long Trail, my leg was still inflamed, I was still in pain, and I was coming to a road. Few long-distance hikers would quit their treks if it were not for the constant presence of roads. Roads are a reminder of creature comforts, food,

and social support. Physically and emotionally, roads are the most dangerous place on the trail.

As I approached U.S. 4, every part of my body was yelling at me to abandon the hike. I was willing my feet down the north slope of Killington, listening for the roar of the highway and contemplating what to do, when I heard an adult voice singing “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.” It was an appropriate serenade considering how many spiderwebs I had hiked through that morning, but where was it coming from? I turned down a switchback and saw a grown man jogging up the trail with a toddler on his shoulders. Both the man and the little boy smiled and said hello as they passed me, and they continued to sing as they turned up the next switchback.



At first, I was frustrated by the encounter. I was having trouble walking downhill, and this man was happily pacing uphill with a sixteen-month-old on his shoulders—while singing! But despite my bitterness, there was something too innocent and joyful about the encounter for me to stay sour. In fact, in a strange way, I felt attracted to the man—or at least to what he represented.

I thought about my ex-boyfriend and my broken heart. As miserable as the pain in my left leg had been, it was all consuming. And that had been a blessing. But now, after passing the father and son on the trail, something inside me felt hopeful. I had been part of a great relationship with a great guy who loved life, loved me, and loved the trail. But there were other great guys out there. Guys who would run up a trail with their child on their shoulders, singing corny kid songs. That was my type of guy.

As I spotted my first car through the trees, I no longer wanted to quit. And just as I exited the woods, I heard a voice calling from behind me.

“Hey! Hey, wait up. Are you a thru-hiker?” It was the father and son bounding back down the mountain. And I could tell just by the way the man said “thru-hiker” that he either was one or wanted to be one.

“I’m thru-hiking the Long Trail,” I replied. The first hundred miles follow the same path as the Appalachian Trail, so I wanted to differentiate my 272-mile journey from the 2,180-mile one.

“That’s awesome,” he said, smiling. “My wife and I thru-hiked the A.T. for our honeymoon several years ago.” *I knew it.* “We’re up here vacationing with our kids. Do you need any trail magic?”

I thought about that question. The first time someone offered me trail magic, I had been hesitant to accept because as a society we are taught not to accept gifts from strangers. But now I loved getting help from people I didn’t know. It was one of my favorite parts of the trail.

At this point, however, I didn’t need any food or a ride into town. I looked down at my red, irritated leg. It was covered in lacerations from a thorny section of overgrown trail, and they were starting to ooze puss. If I didn’t clean them out soon, there was a good chance they would get infected.

Finally, I responded. “Well, I could really use a shower.”

“Great! We’re staying just a few miles down the road. You can shower at our place.”

Within the span of an hour, I went to their rental cabin, met the man’s equally gracious thru-hiker wife and their three-year-old daughter, showered, cleaned my leg, iced my knee and ankle, and administered anti-inflammatory pills and salve. I also ate a large portion of homemade vegetable lasagna and then returned to the trail.

Back at the trailhead, the mom and dad stood at their car, attaching baby carriers for a second afternoon hike. The kids were yelling and looking for the orange slugs I had told them about. As I continued hiking into the woods and away from Vermont Route 4, my body didn’t hurt as much, and neither did my heart.



Putting my life back together started at the base of Pico Peak that day. I no longer thought about quitting the hike. Instead, I pushed onward each day with the goal of reaching Canada as quickly as the trail would permit. Unfortunately, the path was not overly permissive.

Once the Long Trail split from the A.T., I traveled through several patches of overgrown stinging nettles. The invisible hairs that hung from the leaves of the plant quickly attached to my legs and caused a burning sensation that lasted anywhere from five to fifteen minutes. At times, the pain was so intense that I could only manage by screaming at the top of my lungs until it subsided.

The trail was all but deserted in central Vermont, and I doubt anyone ever heard me yell, but if they did, they probably dialed 911 out of concern.

The weather on the second half of the hike was as bad as it could be in the summertime. In every twenty-four-hour period, it rained for at least eighteen hours. More often than not, the downpour was accompanied by lightning and thunder.

The water turned the mountain slopes into a treacherous minefield of slick stones and boulders. During the lightning storms, I felt less threatened in the dense hardwood forest, but I was often delayed near the summits where there was no protection. Sometimes I hid underneath rock outcroppings and inside trail shelters, waiting for the storms to pass. Over and over again I would count the seconds between the lightning and thunder, hoping that the storm would weaken, but it seemed locked in place.

The heavy rain reminded me of the countless tears I had shed over the summer. So in the midst of hiking through the storm, I talked to God. It was not a prayer of reverence or thanksgiving. Instead, I complained and literally cried out to God, blaming him for my broken heart. I asked over and over why my last relationship didn’t work out and what I was supposed to do now. I wanted an immediate answer, but all I got was more thunder and lightning.

The trail threw one punch after another: bad weather, slick rocks, poorly marked junctions, and

just when I thought I had covered the most difficult stretch, I came to Doll Peak. The elevation of the mountain did not compare to the unending slope of Mount Mansfield, the highest summit on the Long Trail. And the climb was not as technical as the boulder scramble near Camel's Hump in central Vermont. But for my tired, sore, soaking-wet body, this felt like the toughest ascent of the trail.

When the trail becomes technical, you are frequently forced to place your hands on boulders or trees to gain balance. Sometimes you have to attach your hiking poles to your pack and use arm strength to pull yourself up a steep pitch. Technical trail can also demand sitting and sliding or crab walking down a mountain. If nothing else, the degree of difficulty increases since every step could result in a sprained ankle or twisted knee.

As I hiked up Doll Peak in the pouring rain, I used both hands to scramble and maintain my balance. I spent enormous energy willing my thighs in front of my body, then hoping my calves and feet would follow. With every step I tried to put my shoes on large, stable-looking rocks to prevent a fall. But it didn't work.

I fell five times in five minutes. My legs weren't going where my mind told them to, and on top of that, I couldn't see the next few yards through the clouds and fog, let alone the summit. I wanted to sit down and give up. But that wasn't an option, not in this weather and not on this terrain.

Just then, I remembered something Warren had said when we were waltzing at the gas station near I-81 in the early morning hours. "You can't fight the music, you have to flow with it."

There I was in the middle of a nor'easter, my knee was swollen, and scrapes and bruises covered my body, but I was still out there in the terrible, awesome onslaught of the wilderness. And I knew that I had to keep pressing forward. I realized that all summer I had been hiding from my own soundtrack. I hadn't wanted to hear the music; I'd just wanted to sleep and cry, to reject the truth that was blaring all around me.

Warren was right. I needed to embrace the rhythm, not worry so much about falling. And right now, the storm was my music and the rocks were my dance floor. So as I continued up the trail, my chin lifted and my footsteps grew stronger and more certain.

When I made it to the top of Doll Peak, I let out a victory cry. I wanted it to sound tough, but instead it sounded like a squeaky cheer at a pep rally. For me, those cries never seemed to reflect the guttural emotion that had formed them. Nevertheless, I was deeply proud to be on the top of that barren mountain in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, that physical and emotional barrier that I had overcome—and I only fell twice on my way back down.

After seven days, fifteen hours, and forty minutes, I reached the Canadian border. I had danced the dance, I had felt the pain, and now I could hear the music changing. The rain had stopped and so had my tears.

I felt lighter than I had in months. The Long Trail had allowed me to express my sadness and my frustration. It had allowed me to scream and cry; it had given me an arena to hurt. And I learned that sometimes the hurt has to get worse before it can get better.

By the end of the trail, I also felt that God had given me an answer through all my yelling and pleading. The first time I thru-hiked, it was to figure out who I was and what I was going to do with my life. But it wasn't until this trip that I finally realized the trail was more than a solitary adventure or something to check off my bucket list. The trail was my passion, and now I wanted it to be my profession.

I had big plans. I couldn't wait to call Warren and tell him about my hiking adventure and my new resolution. The next day, as soon as I had cell service, I dialed his number.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Warren, it's Jen."

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m done with the trail.”

“You’re already finished?” Warren asked in disbelief.

“Yep. I finished in less than eight days. That’s good enough for the record, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it certainly is.”

“Well, it was awesome,” I said excitedly. “I can’t wait to tell you all about it. And I think I figured a lot out while I was hiking. I will be driving home in a few days, so maybe I can stop by and fill you in on everything.”

“I would love that,” Warren replied. “What you accomplished is just incredible.”

“Thanks, Warren. Oh, hey, I was wondering . . . who had the unsupported record on the Long Trail before me?”

Warren chuckled. “Well, until this morning, I did.”

After our phone call I felt shocked and a little embarrassed. I should have been able to figure out on my own that Warren held the previous record. After all, he could never have given me such good advice if he hadn’t been there before.



On my drive home, I started making plans for my new hiking company. I wanted to help other people get outdoors. I was convinced that the trail was the best and the cheapest therapy I knew. By taking other people into the woods, I hoped that they could experience some of the joy, serenity, and truth that I felt in the wilderness. Plus, I knew that personally, I wanted—no, I needed—to keep hiking. Now that I had set a record on the Long Trail, my attention was focused on the Appalachian Trail.

Warren was right to suggest a shorter trail for my first record attempt, but now that I had gotten a taste, I wanted the full course dinner. A record attempt was more focused and more difficult than a traditional thru-hike. It required discipline and intensity, and it stripped away the interruptions and got you to your destination a lot sooner.

Now it all made sense why I had to go through the agony of a broken heart. I could never dedicate my life to training, hiking, and getting other people outdoors if I had to worry about a boyfriend.

I resolved to be single, and I focused on the trail.

BREW

AUGUST 2007—FEBRUARY 2008

Two weeks after swearing off relationships, I spent some time with my brother and his former college housemate. As much as I love my brother, I never thought that I would fall for one of his friends. But after spending one afternoon with Brew, I knew that he was the best man I would ever meet. It was love at first hike.

Even so, a part of me still wanted to hold on to the “single and focused” plan. In fact, after Brew and I went on our first date together, a three-mile walk, I said good-bye, got in my car, and immediately started to vent.

“Really God? What about *our* plan?” I was both confused and unbelievably happy.

My fists were tensed, and adrenaline coursed through me. In a fit of excitement and frustration, I drummed on my steering wheel with sweaty palms.

Then I looked over and realized Brew was still standing in the parking lot, watching me. He smiled and waved. I turned beet red, slunk down in my seat, and drove off as quickly as possible.

Despite my friends’ warning that Brew was a rebound boyfriend, and knowing that two weeks prior I had sworn off relationships, everything about being with Brew felt right. Typically, I was the queen of internalization, self-talk, and weighty dilemmas, but I had no doubts about my relationship with him.

Brew and I connected spiritually and emotionally, and we played together really well. In fact, we skipped the traditional dinner and movie ritual and instead spent our one-on-one time on “play dates.” We got to know one another sweating on the tennis court, trash-talking under a basketball net, battling over board games, and conversing on the trail. It was a fun, active, and competitive courtship. Everything seemed to be perfect. We both loved sports, we loved the outdoors, and we both loved hiking. Well, Brew *thought* he loved hiking.

Brew was a recreational hiker. He liked to take his time, smell the roses, and venture out in relatively good weather. After a week of dating, Brew and I spent Labor Day climbing Mount Mitchell, the tallest mountain east of the Mississippi River. Of course, I picked the longest, most difficult route to the top. We made it to the summit and back down to the trailhead just as dusk turned into darkness, and when we reached the parking lot, I had a huge toothy grin on my face. However, Brew was groaning, limping, and cradling his groin to prevent further chafing.

“We did it!” I exclaimed.

Brew replied, “I have been praying that I would meet a girl who was outdoorsy, but I didn’t mean *this* outdoorsy!”



Despite our different approaches to hiking, Brew always encouraged my trail pursuits. It never bothered him when I spent a day running and hiking on trails by myself or planned an overnight on my own. He was content to have a general idea of where I was going, when I would finish, and when he could see me again.

However, his enthusiasm wavered after John and Irene Bryant, an elderly couple from my hometown, were killed on a hike in the Pink Beds area of Pisgah National Forest west of Asheville. Brew became concerned for my safety and I couldn’t blame him, even though I knew that statistically,

I was safer hiking down the trail than driving down the interstate. So, for the first time since I started backpacking, I began looking over my shoulder.

I felt scared and violated. I hated knowing that two people had been murdered on a trail where I had enjoyed outings as a child. Someone had damaged my emotional connection with a place that I associated with good friends, open meadows, and a rare and very beautiful pink water lily. I would never again be able to hike the trail, play in the meadows, or look at those lilies without thinking of the murders that took place there.



Even though the deaths of John and Irene Bryant happened in my backyard, they didn't hit home like the murder of Meredith Emerson. Meredith went missing on New Year's Day in 2008. She had gone hiking with her dog on Blood Mountain, Georgia, and when she didn't come home, the newspaper headlines throughout the southeast read, "Twenty-Four-Year-Old Female Hiker Missing Near A.T." Because I was twenty-four years old and frequently hiked on and near the Appalachian Trail, friends began calling me to make sure I was not the woman who had gone missing.

I initially felt connected to Meredith because of our age and gender, but as the details of her life were released, I was startled to realize how much we had in common. Our studies, hobbies, and faith paralleled one another. For the next five days, every morning I would go in to work and read the online headlines about Meredith's disappearance. The authorities concluded early on that she had been forcibly abducted. And as new details emerged each day, I would read the updates with tears streaming down my face. I had never experienced a news story that seemed so personal. I felt like Meredith was a close friend, and I didn't understand how this could happen to her. There was a sick emptiness in my stomach that said it could easily have been me.

The day that the authorities found Gary Michael Hilton and announced that he had in fact murdered Meredith, a deep ache consumed my core. I needed to cry and clear my head, and I needed to hurt. I went for a long, difficult hike. But even in the forest, something didn't feel right. The birds and the squirrels were quiet and still. It was as if all of creation were grieving.

To me, it seemed like Meredith's life was taken at the worst possible time. I knew the potential of a twenty-four year old; the potential of a new career and the opportunity to explore the world and see new places. The potential to fall in love, get engaged, and have your father walk you down the aisle—the hope that one day you would have children of your own. It was as if Gary Michael Hilton had robbed the world of a flower that was just about to bloom.

In the following days, as the news continued to unfold, it became clear that authorities had not simply happened upon Gary Michael Hilton. Meredith had left a path for them to follow. She had physically and mentally fought her captor at every turn. She used self-defense to fight him on Blood Mountain, which resulted in evidence that police used against him. She provided the wrong ATM pin number at several different locations to create an electronic trail. She had done everything right. She demonstrated a rare bravery and intelligence under those extreme circumstances.

Once Hilton was apprehended, he was charged with the murders of John and Irene Bryant near Asheville, and that of Cheryl Haines in a Florida national forest. He also became a suspect in several other missing person cases throughout the southeast. Meredith may not have been able to save herself but she was responsible for saving the lives of many others and bringing some peace to the families of the victims.

I am grateful that the media decided to follow Meredith's story beyond her death, because it became clear that her legacy and influence had not ended. I know that it allowed me—and many others who felt like they knew Meredith—to heal.

I believed that because Meredith was a fighter and because she loved hiking and the wilderness, she would never have wanted her story to be something that kept other people from experiencing nature. Meredith reinforced my desire to get other people outside. She also reinforced my personal longing to explore the trails. So I decided that I would still try to set the women's speed record on the Appalachian Trail that summer, and I would do it in Meredith's honor.



To get ready for Appalachian Trail, I knew I needed to complete a substantial training hike, and I needed to practice hiking long days in hot weather. But in the months of January and February, that was all but impossible in North America. I had saved up money and vacation time, and I decided that at the end of January, I would travel to Australia and complete the six-hundred-mile Bibbulmun Track.

The problem with traveling halfway around the world to hike a trail without cell-phone service is that it made my boyfriend of five months extremely nervous. However, as an unmarried woman, I had to uphold certain standards in my relationship. And I refused to compromise or delay any adventures unless I was engaged.

In my previous relationship, Nightwalker had begged and pleaded for me not to go without him on a two-week hiking excursion to Peru. But he could not give me any date or idea of when he would be free to go, so I went on my own. Looking back, if I hadn't taken the initiative and traveled without him, I probably never would have gone to Cotahuasi Canyon or Machu Picchu, the sacred city of the Incas. And I would have regretted it.

So despite the fact that the past five months had seen several trail murders, and knowing that Brew would be worried sick about me while I was away, I disregarded the overwhelming feeling that I didn't want to be separated from my boyfriend for even a second, and I booked a four-week trip to Australia.

It turned out to be one of the smartest things I had ever done, because the week before I left, Brew gave me a ring.

He didn't want to be left out of my planning or my adventures ever again.



Hiking is, by definition, simply walking in a natural setting. But in reality, it is far more than that. It is a time of preparation and renewal. And in my opinion, the more fast-paced and over-stimulated the world becomes, the more important it will be to take a walk in the woods.

Traveling to Australia was heart wrenching because it put me 12,000 miles away from the person I loved most. But hiking the six-hundred-mile Bibbulmun Track was one of the best things I could have done for Brew, for myself, and for our impending marriage. Five months is a short time to date before getting engaged. But instead of spending the first month of our engagement worrying about a wedding, I simply thought about marriage. I mourned the loss of my singleness and I contemplated the full meaning and commitment of matrimony.

Contemplation came easily, as the Bibbulmun Track was the most solitary trail I had ever hiked. Most Australians refuse to hike the footpath between December and February because of the one-hundred-degree heat. But after hiking through the southern California desert on the Pacific Crest Trail without any shade and very few water sources, the high temperatures on the Bibbulmun Track, which were often diffused by a forest canopy or ocean breeze, did not prove to be a problem for me.

During one stretch along my journey, I went three full days without seeing another person. A few years before, and certainly before I started hiking, that level of solitude would have made me really uncomfortable—or it simply would have driven me crazy. But now, I embraced the isolation and I

embraced the crazy.

For three full days, I talked to animals instead of people.

The kangaroos were not very good conversationalists. They hopped off before I could even finish sentence. In my first few days on the trail, I was constantly startled by the sound of them bounding through the underbrush. They were stronger, taller, and much faster than I expected—not nearly as quaint and cute as they'd been in the books I read as a child. But because I saw between fifteen and thirty a day, I quickly grew accustomed to them.

There were plenty of other critters. The emus reminded me of the ostriches that I had seen after climbing Kilimanjaro in Africa, but they were far more skittish. I usually spotted them near berry bushes, and as soon as they felt my presence, they panicked and sprinted off. The spiders in Australia were very large, but I actually preferred these giant arachnids to the smaller U.S. varieties because I could spot them from yards away, which kept me from hiking into so many webs. And then there were the lizards. They were so huge, colorful, and primitive that I was convinced I might also spot a dinosaur hiding in the forest.



Most of the human interaction I had occurred when I would reach a town and could call Brew on payphone. He knew that I could call at any time, most likely during the middle of the night, so he didn't get very much sleep while I was on the Bibbulmun Track.

Hiking to hear Brew's voice encouraged me to hike longer days and higher miles. The reward for all my hard work was no longer reaching a warm shower or hot meal, but simply hearing my fiancé's voice. We both valued our time apart and recognized its significance in our relationship, but at the same time, we hated it.

One day toward the end of my hike when I reached the small town of Pemberton, I called Brew. It was late at night in the States, but I could tell his voice was weighed down with more than fatigue.

“I’m worried about this summer,” he said.

“About the A.T.?” I asked hesitantly, knowing the answer.

In our brief planning session before my departure, we scheduled our wedding for June 8, right after Brew finished teaching and twelve days before I wanted to start the Appalachian Trail. I had told him on our first date that I was planning on a record attempt that summer, and I didn’t want to give it up, especially now that I had dedicated it to Meredith. But looking down, I noticed the shiny new ring on my finger, and I realized I would have to try something that I wasn’t very accustomed to—compromise.

Brew continued, “I just want to be able to see you as much as possible on the trail, and I can’t imagine seeing you hurt or hungry or cold or wet, without being able to help you.”

I took a deep breath. One thing Brew wanted assurance of before we got engaged was that I loved him more than hiking, and that I would always put him above the trail. In my mind—and my heart—there was no comparison, but he still needed to hear that.

“I want to do what is best for us,” I said. “If that means that I don’t get to hike the A.T. this summer, then I’ll deal with it. But I’ve been dreaming about this trail record for months and working toward it. We are going to have our entire lives to be together and hike together, and I may not have the time or the ability to go after this record in the future. So I’d really like to do it now. Remember, you *are* robbing the cradle.”

Brew’s solemnness eased, and he let out a laugh.

I liked to tease him that I was his trophy wife. I also liked to remind him of our five-year age difference and of the fact that he’d had his entire twenties to travel and explore. Marriage would certainly be our greatest adventure, but I still wanted to have some smaller exploits along the way.

“Well, what if we did a supported hike?” Brew asked.

“You mean you’d help me the whole way?”

I had never done a supported hike before. I had always traveled on my own with everything I needed on my back. In a supported hike, Brew would take our car and meet me at points where the trail crossed a road. I could limit my pack weight and have daily access to food, dry socks, and my husband. I loved the solitude and self-sufficiency of traditional backpacking, but I loved Brew more. It made sense that this would no longer be my hike, but our hike.

“I’m going to be following you and worrying about you anyway, so I might as well help you. What do you say? Want to try a supported record?”

And from half a world away I said, “I do.”

THE HONEYMOON

JUNE 2008—AUGUST 2008

Brew and I were married on June 8, 2008, in a beautiful outdoor ceremony in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Charlottesville, Virginia. We spent almost two weeks honeymooning in Montpelier, Montreal, and Maine's Acadia National Park, and then on June 20, we began our supported thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail at Mount Katahdin, Maine. It was the greatest newlywed adventure that I can imagine, but it was also the most demanding.

The goal was to cover the Appalachian Trail's fourteen states and 2,180 miles in less than two months. My job was to wake up with the sun, hike all day, then go to bed when the sun went down. Brew's role was far more complicated.

I needed my new husband to locate obscure road crossings, hike in to find me, and always have the correct provisions in his pack or in the car. His role included setting up camp at night, preparing our food, running our errands, and encouraging me with positive feedback and humor whenever we were together.

At the end of the day Brew would sometimes hike in to meet me with our camping gear. Other times he would leave the last road crossing of the day with me and carry a pack with our supplies so that we could stop and set up camp. Ideally, if I could end the day at a road crossing, he would have our dinner ready, our tent set up, and our sleeping pads and bags unrolled by the time I arrived. It was up to him to make sure that I had everything I needed, all the time.

And I didn't realize how stressful the endeavor would be on Brew. He had never spent a night on the Appalachian Trail before the summer of 2008, and I had forgotten how difficult that transition could be. Brew had to grow accustomed to sleeping every night in a tent, waking up to black flies and mosquitoes buzzing in his face, and going several days without taking a shower. He also had to adjust to a diet of Clif bars and freeze-dried dinners. In other words, he had to learn to be very uncomfortable, very quickly.

But Brew's emotional burden was even greater than his physical discomfort. He had to learn simultaneously how to be a new husband *and* a one-man support team. On the trail, my success and safety depended entirely on Brew. If he couldn't find me, then I would not have any food or camping gear for the next section. My well-being was completely in his hands—and he knew it. And the fact that we started in the most logistically challenging and remote portion of trail didn't help his anxiety.

The northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail is in the middle of Maine, which is to say, the middle of nowhere. Katahdin, a large rocky monolith whose name means "Greatest Mountain," rises from the surrounding bogs and forests like an impenetrable fortress. It offers fulfillment to the thru-hikers who arrive at its base and hope to those who depart from its peak. The mountain is a great teacher, but its answers are always changing and are often bestowed in the form of new questions.

The day we began, I climbed the barren slopes of the Mighty Mountain with my new husband and then descended the arduous terrain on my own. After just a few hours, I exited the sanctuary of Baxter State Park. I paused at the park boundary and looked over my shoulder at the mountain behind me. I didn't know when I'd see it again, but I sensed that someday I would.

Ahead of me, Brew waited at the next road crossing. When I saw my husband standing at our car, I ran to meet him. He was my moving mountain, my migrating trail marker, a source of strength. Every time we parted, I would immediately look ahead and press forward to meet him again. Even on day

one, it seemed that the motivation to set a record was less compelling than the incentive of hiking to Brew. At this point I was still thinking more about our wedding and our honeymoon than about the difficult task that lay ahead. I was too full of love to worry about the hardships of the next 2,000 miles.

I gathered more food and supplies at our car and kissed my husband good-bye before entering the Hundred-Mile Wilderness. The common misperception about the Hundred-Mile Wilderness is that there are not any roads for evacuation, entry, or support. But it only feels that way. The thick woods, low-lying marshes, large undisturbed lakes, and abundant moose make the wilderness seem remote and impassable. But there are roads. Granted, they are mostly unmarked private logging roads that you have to pay to access and pray to navigate, but there *are* roads.

Brew did a great job maneuvering through the maze of obstacles in the Hundred-Mile Wilderness and I was able to see him at least twice a day. After I hiked out of it and crossed the wide channel of the Kennebec River, access to the trail increased, and I could see Brew even more often.

When the burly climbs, copious river crossings, and swarming black flies of central Maine began to wear on my body and spirit, I could always count on Brew to sing me a song, tell me a joke, or give me a kiss that would get me through the next section.

There were multiple times when I was between road crossings, all alone, and my body felt like it couldn't take another step. In those moments, I would start to sing—poorly and out loud—the Diana Ross chorus, “Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough to keep me from getting to you.” And my determination to overcome everything to get to my husband was renewed.

Brew felt the same way about finding me. Together we were a well-oiled machine, leap-frogging one another with perfect precision . . . until day six. That morning, I left early from our campsite near the still waters at Horns Pond Lean-to. Brew was still asleep in the tent, but I knew that in another hour, his alarm would sound and he would quickly pack up and hike down the mountain as well. I hiked four miles down a steep incline to where our car was parked at Maine Route 27. I changed clothes and loaded up on snacks for nine more miles of rugged terrain before I could see Brew and have access to our SUV again.

I made it to Caribou Valley Road in three hours, but when I arrived, Brew wasn't there. We had agreed to leave notes for each other on pieces of bright orange surveyor's tape in case one of us arrived early and had to press on. I looked around for one of those, but I could not find any on the nearby trees. The road was a rocky mess and had suffered multiple washouts from a nearby stream. It seemed like it would be difficult for an ATV to navigate, let alone a full-sized vehicle. I waited for Brew for over forty minutes. There were several times when I thought I heard our faithful Toyota Highlander traveling down the uneven road, and I was convinced that I could see a cloud of dust materializing through the trees, but the noise never grew louder and the car never appeared.

I had to make a decision. I either needed to start a twenty-four-mile stretch of very difficult terrain with a single granola bar in my pack, or I would have to waste more time waiting for Brew at a forest road that I was not convinced he could find or maneuver.

I heard a noise coming from inside the forest and looked up to see a thru-hiker exiting the trees. In spite of the difficulty of my own hike, I loved seeing the northbound thru-hikers in Maine. They were dirty, smelly, and hairy, and yet, at the same time, they were positively glowing. Most of them had been hiking now for three or four months and were within two weeks of their ultimate goal—Katahdin.

I smiled at the young man who had a bandana on his head and mud smeared across the inside of his ankles.

“Hey, there,” he said. “I didn’t expect to see a day hiker out here.”

“Well, I am waiting for my husband. He was supposed to meet me here, but I’m worried he might be lost or might not be able to get our car down the road.”

The thru-hiker looked around, his gaze lingering on the narrow, rocky, washed-out roadbed. He gave me a hopeless look.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“Well, I would keep going and try to reach Route 4, but I don’t have enough food.”

The thru-hiker grinned. He immediately took off his pack and began to dig inside, and after a few seconds, he pulled out an unopened pack of Chips Ahoy cookies. He said, “Here,” and offered them to me.

“No, no, no. There’s no way I could take food from a thru-hiker,” I said.

“I can resupply in nine miles. You would be doing me a favor by lightening my load. Really, just think of it as trail magic.”

Random acts of kindness that occur on the Appalachian Trail are part of what make the journey so special. And they often do more for your soul than your stomach. Generally thru-hikers with heavy backpacks fall on the receiving end of trail magic. But there I was, a supported hiker with a car full of gear and food somewhere in the vicinity, and I was receiving much-needed food from the least likely candidate. I could not believe this hiker’s generosity or my good fortune. I accepted the cookies and thanked him.

I wrote a quick note to Brew on orange surveyor’s tape, telling him I was okay and that he should hike in to meet me from the next road crossing. Then I stood up to leave the patch of sweet-smelling conifer trees where I had been sitting and started pacing down the trail, shoving cookies in my mouth and thanking God for the kind young man with the extra food.

For the rest of the day, I no longer worried about my well-being or safety; I only worried about Brew. Even though I didn’t have a headlight, I knew if I kept my pace up, I could make it to the next road before dark. Brew, on the other hand, was potentially lost, having car trouble, and he was worried about the person he loved most being on an unforgiving stretch of trail with one granola bar and no flashlight.

In my head, I could see Brew cursing loudly as he drove down the back roads of western Maine, mad at himself for not being able to find me and worried sick that I was in trouble. Once I made it over the top of Saddleback Mountain, I began to run down the steep, rocky backside of the slope, hoping to reach my husband as quickly as possible.

A mile and a half before coming to the road, I saw Brew walking uphill toward me with a full pack on his back and two LED headlamps hanging around his neck. I could tell he had prepared to hike all night. When he spotted me running down the trail, he ran toward me too, jostling all of his gear. As we embraced, I could feel a warm, wet tear roll down our pressed cheeks, but I was uncertain whether the tear was his or mine.

We held each other for several minutes, then walked hand in hand to the road. Physically, it had been a long, hard day, but my body felt okay—aside from the fact that I could not imagine eating another chocolate chip cookie. It was my emotions that were wrecked. And Brew, who had been lost and worried for most of the day, was equally worn down.

That night we drove to a hotel in nearby Rangeley, where we got to shower, recover, and hold each other close in a clean, soft bed instead of sticking to each other inside our dirty sleeping bags.

I knew that there would be other places on the trail where we would cross wires or miss one another again, but now I also trusted that we would eventually be able to find one another, and I was confident that Brew would do whatever it took to reach me.



After overcoming the trauma of not being able to find me in the bowels of backcountry Maine, Brew joked that his error was actually a ploy that forced me to hike faster and farther. It was funny but completely untrue. Throughout the entire record attempt, Brew never pushed me. Every decision to rest, slow down, speed up, or increase my miles was my own.

Self-monitoring was tough. I had no clue what type of effort or exertion was required on a record attempt of over two thousand miles. I wanted to give my all, but I didn't know what my all was. I wanted to try and avoid overuse injuries, even though I was making the same motion and using the same muscles for ten to twelve hours a day. Like most hikers, trail conditions and the weather forecast factored into my daily mileage goals. The women's A.T. record stood at eighty-eight days. An unsupported hiker who carried all her gear set it in 1993. It was a far cry from the men's supported mark of forty-seven days. Women had not actively pursued a supported record—until now.

I was constantly taking stock of my health and wellness. On the trail, without the assistance of medical studies, on-call physicians, or WebMD, I resorted to listening to my body. I did not know what was “normal.” I just knew that my goal was to hike over thirty-five miles every day.

When I left Maine, my body was not happy. I was covered in scrapes and bruises and my left ankle was red, swollen, and stiff. It had been irritated and in pain since the Hundred-Mile Wilderness. Over a week later, it still resembled a small ruby-red grapefruit. I didn't remember spraining it, but after turning and twisting the joint over uneven terrain for more than thirty miles every day, the cumulative effect felt worse than the sharp pain of any single misstep.

I decided that I would leave the trail and seek medical attention if the injury got worse. But because of my experience on the Long Trail and other long-distance paths, I also knew that I could hike through a lot of pain and even heal in the process. For a full week, my ankle didn't improve or become worse. Then, finally, when I made it to Pinkham Notch in New Hampshire, it started to feel better.

My body could not have picked a better point to mend itself. Pinkham Notch is a deep valley located between the high summits of Carter Dome and Mount Washington. And if there is any mountain of the Appalachian that makes you pray for good health and good weather, it is Mount Washington.

Mount Washington is a 6,288-foot peak located on top of a steep slope that resembles a rockslide. It is not the highest mountain on the trail in elevation, but for many hikers it presents the toughest climb. The path leading to the top leaves the protection of the forest—a boundary known as tree line—seven miles before the summit. From that point forward, the hike is a treacherous, hair-raising traverse over narrow ridges and loose rocks. It can be difficult to locate the trail on Mount Washington in good weather and impossible to find your way in inclement conditions.

In 2005, my hike up and down Mount Washington had been magical. I was traveling with my hiking companions Mooch and Nightwalker. The wind was strong, but the skies were clear and blue. The technical hiking on the mountain caused us to take our time, take pictures, and take solace in the fact that we were hiking the longest stretch of exposed terrain along the Appalachian Trail with good friends and without a storm in sight.

But this time, I found myself hiking up the same mountain alone, amid strong gusts of wind and dense fog. For five solid hours, I was terrified that I would get lost in the white blanket that covered every nook and cranny of the mountain. And if I did become lost, the steep precipices and late season snowfields on the mountain would leave me feeling like I might never be found. For ten miles I fought fear and uncertainty. My steps were short, my breathing was shallow, and I prayed constantly.

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