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The Light at the End of the Tunnel

I challenge you to name one thing more amazing than standing at the top of a mountain and looking down on the roofs of buildings and the tops of trees. I didn’t appreciate the views for the longest time; it was one of those things that I took for granted. After a few years, the hiking trips have blended together and it would take some time to differentiate between some of the hikes at this point; however, each hike stands out in its own way. The feeling it left me with, the people I met along the way, just the realization that I am miles above sea level…

*Some mountains are a thousand feet tall,* I was thinking as I tied the laces of my hiking boots.

Now, this mountain was not a thousand feet tall. That’s crazy. No fifteen year old girl I know embarks on *that* kind of a hiking trip. And even though I have aspirations of hiking a portion of the Appalachian Trail now, that was not what I was thinking about in Georgia on this particular spring break vacation.

It was a big hike…

It would take a few hours, at least…

Is it even *healthy* to hike that many miles?

“It’s because your sister always complained,” my mom said, “it rubbed off on you.”

I stepped out of the car and took a deep breath. The air was wonderfully crisp because the Georgia sun hadn’t begun pulsating yet; it was only eight in the morning. It crossed my mind that eight was awfully early for exercise and I couldn’t help but think of my friends across the state line in Florida – lying on the beach and relaxing. And here I was – about to spend my entire morning sweating more than I ever thought possible.

Before beginning the treacherous hike, we paused to look at the trail map. As I looked at the twists and turns in the trail, my mind wandered. My imagination painted visions of us getting lost in the mountain and before long, all I could think of was the movie *The Hills Have Eyes*.

I came back to the present, pushing my thoughts of crazy homicidal mountain people out of my mind, and watched as my dad traced the map with his index finger – pointing out our path.

The trail head was marked with orange tape – medium difficulty; my parents had made sure not to strain their poor whiney daughter.

“This is going to be great,” my dad chirped, tugging his baseball cap down on his forehead to block the sunlight. My mom chimed in with remarkably cheerful conversation. Have I mentioned it was *eight* in the morning?

After twenty or so minutes on the trail, I was shocked by how beautiful the scenery was. There was wildlife galore and the sun was peeking through the treetops – just enough for me to catch the warmth of a few rays on my skin. And for a moment, I almost felt as happy as I would have been with my friends in Florida.

But that feeling didn’t last long.

After an hour and a half, I was *dripping* sweat and in desperate need of a break. The breaks we did take left something to be desired – like air conditioning. I hate to come off sounding so bratty, but I was no longer enjoying myself on this hike. I mean, trees and leaves are only pretty for so long and it was amazing how quickly Georgia could heat up.

“It’s worth it at the end!” my mom kept saying.

She insisted the surprise would be well worth the torture, but I only hoped the light at the end of the tunnel was a heaping bowl of ice cream.

Twigs crunched beneath my boots and a squirrel shot by. The birds were still singing above us, but their voices were now accompanied by the sound of trickling water. As we continued on, the sound of the stream grew louder and before long it had escalated to a deafening roar.

Descending that final hill caused my calves to cramp intensely, but I wasn’t thinking about myself at that moment; there was too much else to take in. We had reached a gorge lined with miles of trees in both directions. The sun was directly above us and it illuminated the water, causing it to sparkle below us.

And there it was – the most beautiful waterfall I had ever seen. With that view, I no longer felt the contracting of my lungs and the way the altitude had caused me to breathe in short, gasping gulps of air. The sweat on my face no longer fazed me. My calves ceased to ache. All I saw was the white water tumbling down the rock of the mountain and foaming at the bottom before gliding through the gorge. I couldn’t do a thing but just watch in awe of what nature had created.

There was a couple enjoying a picnic at the base of the waterfall and they looked like ants from our perch at the top of the valley.

There was a middle-aged man sitting on the edge of a rock with his elbows to his knees, head in hands just admiring the waterfall.

I couldn’t believe that something this magnificent could just exist in nature and that there were only six of us there to enjoy it. For the rest of vacation and for every vacation to come, Florida was never on my mind.

*We’re missing out in Michigan,* I thought to myself that day and I think to myself every time I go hiking in another state. There truly is nothing more amazing and inspiring than hiking through a mountain for hours and finishing at the base of a waterfall, or standing at the very top of a mountain and looking down on the rugged town below. The hikes can be excruciating, but the reward at the end is a thousand times better than a bowl of ice cream.

“You were right.” I had to hand it to my parents. Somehow they knew their whiny fifteen year old daughter would grow to love hiking as much as they did.