



THE TRAIL

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Toby and his friend Lucas made a list of things to do the summer before they
entered middle school, but now Lucas is gone, and Toby sets out to fulfill the
promise he made to his friend, to finish the list by hiking the Appalachian Trail
from Velvet Rocks to Mt. Katahdin, an undertaking that he is poorly prepared
for—and which will become not only a struggle for survival, but a rescue mission
for the starving and abused dog who he finds along the way.

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CHAPTER I

OUT IN THE woods, all by myself, I've become aware of the little things. There are the good littles: cooling my face with a handful of water from a mountain stream. The way sunlight plays through wind-rippled leaves. The startled leap of a deer that only I see.

Then there are the bad littles: mosquitoes, mostly. Achy feet. Lying down on a sharp rock under the tent after a long day of hiking, being too tired to move, and waking up to a bruise the size of a baseball on my shoulder.

But really. These are little things.

Then there are the little things that can turn into big things. I call them my keeps list. When I'm out on the trail, every hour or two I tick them off: (1) Keep warm. (2) Keep hydrated. (3) Keep eating. (4) Keep an eye on the sun.

Ignoring a little keep could turn into a big problem later. So I'll pull on a jacket if I'm cold, or slug back some water if I'm thirsty, or scarf down a Snickers if my belly rumbles. And I always try to make camp before dark.

It's a simple system, but I've learned the hard way that if you neglect one of the keeps long enough, before you know it, your teeth are chattering as you tilt back an aspirin for your dehydration headache, trying to make dinner in the pitch-dark with a groan in your stomach loud enough to wake the zombies.

In the woods, after dark, it's easy to believe in zombies.

But I know better than to be afraid of that.

Sort of.

Right now, I've been doing pretty good with my keeps list. It's evening, and I've pitched the tent by a small stream. Even though it's late June, I've layered up with a wool hat and two jackets—a light fleece and a waterproof shell. I've taken a long drink of water and have unpacked my mess kit to make dinner. Bowl, cup, fork. A quart pot with a lid that doubles as a frying pan.

Next, I break out my stove. It's an MSR PocketRocket, a pretty cool piece of camping equipment that folds to the size of my fist. I screw it onto my fuel canister and open the three pot supports. A quick twist of my wrist turns on the gas; I flick a match and, a second later, a bright blue flame darts up. I pour the rest of my water bottle into the pot and settle it onto the stove.

By the time the water has boiled, I've dug through my pack and found my meal for the night—a package of spaghetti and some ready-to-eat tomato sauce in a plastic pouch. It doesn't compare to what I'd be eating back at Gran's house, but I'm so hungry I don't care. I dump the spaghetti into the

bubbling water. As the long, thick strands twist in the water, a burst of saliva floods my mouth.

I've been on the trail for just a few days but have enough food for only one more, two if I count my candy bars as full-on meals. I've been eating more than I expected. I'm going to need to find a gas station or grocery store on a real road soon to restock.

That's what I call them now: real roads. Gravel and tar with straight yellow lines that run true and smooth to their destinations. Sometimes when the bad littles are getting to me—I'm lying in the tent and a stray mosquito won't stop buzzing, or my pack strap presses right on my black-and-blue shoulder—I think about taking a real road. A real road would bring me home so fast. All I would need to do is follow one to a town and turn myself in to the police station. A few hours later, I would be home.

But taking a real road would mean giving up. And I can't do that. Not yet, not while there's something warped and unfinished inside me that can be drained away only by hiking, step-by-step, down this two-foot-wide path, into the wilderness for four hundred more miles, until I'm standing at the top of Mount Katahdin at the end of the Appalachian Trail.



Just when I am crouching over the boiling pot, calculating the last nuggets of food in my pack, I hear it. A growl in the shadows.

My heart slams into my throat.

Bear.

I've been so busy thinking about the little things that I lost sight of the big ones. A bear is a big thing. And not a good one.

I am alone, with only a Swiss Army knife for protection. And I'm pretty sure a two-inch blade covered in last night's cheese crumbs won't stop much of anything. But I slide the knife out of my back pocket anyway and point it out ahead of me, jabbing at the night.

The growl gets louder. It's coming from a choked tangle of bushes fifty feet from my campsite. In the thickening darkness I can't see when it might attack.

I think I read somewhere that if you see a black bear, you shouldn't run away or they'll think you're prey. You're supposed to look big and make loud noises. So I stand up slowly. I open my mouth to shout at it.

Nothing comes out.

I also read somewhere that animals can see and smell fear, which is really too bad because I'm trembling all over and I can feel myself breaking into a cold sweat. *Look big*, I tell myself again. *Be brave*. But then my mind empties and I'm just praying, *Please don't eat me, please don't eat me*.

Bristling fur. Sharp teeth. Snarling lips. I cry out as it comes hurtling from the bushes like a burst of crackling gunfire and—it's a dog. Shaggy-faced and flop-eared, eyes brave with desperation. Pitch-black except for a

hollowed-out chest that's so mud-spattered, I can't tell if it's brown or white. A tail bent at the tip, as though someone had tried to snap it in half. He's definitely a mutt. Mangy and starving and as ugly as sin. I can count his ribs.

The dog rushes at me, but I feel my heart start beating again. I leap back as he stalks over to my cook site. A swift kick with his hind leg upsets my dinner pot.

"Hey!" I shout, but it's too late. Spaghetti and foaming starchy water spill to the ground. The movement was practiced, smooth. This dog has done this before. He must have seen me—a skinny kid with unwashed dark hair and terrified brown eyes who weighed less than a hundred pounds even with pockets full of change—and figured I was an easy target. He grabs a mouthful of scorching noodles and beats it back to the bushes.

I have never seen a dog hold boiling food in its mouth. The rest of my fear melts away. He must be near-crazy with hunger. I wonder how long he has been out here, scavenging for scraps from frightened hikers.

I stare at the remaining spaghetti lying in the dirt. My dinner. My stomach growls angrily. I can try to salvage the remains, give the noodles a long rinse and hope the tomato sauce covers up any leftover grit.

I sigh. Instead, I dig a fork out of my mess kit and scoop the muddy spaghetti into my pot. I tiptoe over to the edge of the campsite and dump the contents on the ground. I can see the dog now. He's twenty feet away, behind the thickest part of the bushes. He watches me with uncertain eyes.

I back up slowly. The dog does not budge until I have retreated all the way to the tent. Then he shuffles forward and begins gulping down the rest of his dinner.

“Enjoy it,” I tell him. I’m still annoyed, but at least he seems to appreciate my cooking.

Digging into my pack, I pull out a flattened peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. It was going to be my lunch for tomorrow, but it will have to do for tonight. As the dog busies himself with my pasta, I put away the rest of my food and then crawl into the tent, where I spend the last minutes before true dark with the taste of cold sandwich in my mouth and the certainty that, tomorrow, I’m going to have to find more food.