

A thru-hike on the 2179-mile Appalachian Trail is like an experiential comedic play that lasts for months. Thru-hiking cast members are hairy, emaciated, hilarious. And it's not just their serial-killer look that makes them so funny. It's also their repartee, delusions of awesomeness, voluntary celibacy, dietary excesses, and so much more. This book celebrates hiker humor in all of its guises - surreal, frivolous, morbid, and even scatological.

The LAUGHalachian TRAIL: A Green Zealot's Uncensored Celebration of Thru-hiker Humor

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The Laughalachian Trail



A Green Zealot's
Uncensored Celebration of
Thru-hiker Humor

Tom Waite

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CHAPTER 2

Gonad the Barbarian ☺☺☺[U]

six bowls in the morn
THC all thru the day
who *was* that woman?

Several hikers were so over-the-top hilarious that they deserve their own chapter. But one particular southbounder trumped all others combined in pure entertainment value. Using an anagram of his initial and subsequent trailnames, I'll call him "Gonad," short for "Gonad the Barbarian." As you'll soon see, he would be proud of this new pseudonym. He's not bashful or self-conscious or humorless. He's young, wicked good-looking (his opinion), smiley, graceful, athletic, magnetic, impulsive, flamboyant, manic, irreverent, nonconformist, charismatic, and highly desirable (his opinion). And he lets his gonads do most of his thinking (everyone's opinion).

Gonad spewed a steady stream of witty repartee along the trail. He also issued forth a colorful, unfiltered stream-of-consciousness commentary meant to scandalize, titillate, and amuse. It worked. Over and over, I got so annoyed with his politically incorrect antics that I vowed to shun him for the rest of my hike. But then he would blurt out something so inane and outrageous that I would get sucked back into his vortex.

Without further ado, here's a little sampler of Gonadisms, in chronological order. This first little ditty I overheard during an impromptu reunion of nine SOBOs gathered smack dab on the trail in Maine. Gonad was bragging to the whole group about his sexual prowess, claiming he was a truly phenomenal lover despite

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one very serious shortcoming: ***"You homies have no idea how freakin' tiny my penis is!"***

That was just Gonad's opening, attention-grabbing salvo. He then launched into an impassioned speech on the topic, arguing vehemently that we couldn't begin to imagine the truly infinitesimal nature of his thingamabob or the magical feats he could perform with it.

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A few days later, I descend Old Blue Mountain (mile 244 from Katahdin). The trail's steep and primitive, with no steps or hand holds and nary a switchback. (It's perfect.) I crash and burn several times. But I make it down, no big deal. I'm almost to South Arm Road and Black Brook when I spot a hand-written note duct-taped to a tree. In large pen-gripped-in-fist printing, it says,

**HELP!!! I LOST MY WALLET!!! IF U FOUND IT,
I'LL BE WAITING AT THE POST OFFICE IN
ANDOVER FOR 3 DAYS. THEN I'LL BE OFF THE
TRAIL!!!**

**THANKS,
GONAD, SOBO '09**

Poor guy, I think. What a lousy way for an attempted thru-hike to end. A broken long bone? That would be a valid reason. A death in the family? Sure. But a lost wallet? That doesn't seem legit. But maybe someone will find it, I think. If he left it at a lean-to or dropped it right on the trail, there's a pretty good chance he'll get it back.

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Minutes later, I cross South Arm Road and then rock-hop across Black Brook. There, scattered through the balsam fir thicket, is a gaggle of 11 SOBOs busily staking their claim to tent sites. They greet me with hugs and high fives and fist bumps. Someone asks, "Ledge, did you see Gonad's note?" And then someone tells me Prep School has his wallet. I seek out Prep School and tell him I'd be glad to hitch into Andover to return Gonad's wallet. He hands it over.

I rock-hop back across Black Brook to South Arm Road. I'm still trying to figure out which way to hitch, when the first car stops – more great luck hitching in Maine! A few minutes later, while chatting up my volunteer chauffeur, I happen to notice a lone tent pitched in the middle of a long-neglected, weed-infested baseball field complete with decrepit backstop on the outskirts of the village.

"That's gotta be my friend's tent," I say to my driver, "but he's supposedly waiting at the post office, so I don't wanna get out here."

"No problem," she says, "the post office is just up the road."

There's no sign of Gonad at the post office, but I hop out anyway. I find another note, this one duct-taped to the front door of the post office. I take down the note and start walking back toward the ball field, hoping to find Gonad along the way at the only logical place, *the* general store. He's not there. I spend a few minutes refilling my food bag with power bars, trail mix, honey roasted cashews, and such. Then I walk back to the ball field. As I approach the tent, I yell "Gonad, you there?" No answer. I get closer and yell again. No reply. No movement. No backpack. He's not here. Damn. But as I get right up to the tent and yell one last time, Gonad suddenly comes to life.

"Yo, who's there?" he yells from inside the tent.

"It's Ledge," I say.

"Hey, Ledge, did you hear? I lost my fuckin' wallet, man. I'm off the trail, unless somebody finds it. I'm screwed. My hike's over."

"That's terrible," I say. "I don't know anything about your wallet. I just happened to see your tent, so I stopped to say 'hi' on my way back to the trail. Sorry 'bout your wallet. Wish I had it. I can't make your wallet magically reappear, but how 'bout if I give you a twenty dollar bill so you can get something to eat?"

"Word, yeah. That's cool, Ledge. A twenty would be awesome. I have like 47 cents."

I reach through an opening in the mosquito netting of his tent. But when he reaches to take the bill, he realizes he's been punked. I've placed in his hand not a twenty dollar bill but instead his wallet, complete with weed stash.

He screams and bolts upright, nearly destroying his tent. He tackles me right off my feet, pins me like a Newfoundland lab about to lick my face, and thanks me profusely, "Dude, Ledge, you're the man! You're the man! You're so the man! Too bad you don't smoke weed, Ledge, or I would get you so fuckin' high. I would totally smoke out with you, dude."

"Yeah, too bad it triggers my asthma," I say. "Self-medicating with THC the way you do before breakfast would put me off the trail with bronchitis by noon and I'd have pneumonia by sundown."

"That blows donkey, dude. I don't know how you do it, living your life like a monk all weed-free and car-free and meat-free. You're badass, Ledge. Anyway, man, you totally saved my hike! I was so done. My mom was gonna come get me tomorrow. I'm serious, you totally fuckin' saved my hike. You rock, Ledge! I will totally pay you back, homes."

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∞

Early on, I started noticing elements of Gonad's modus operandi. For instance, upon arriving in each trail town in Maine, Gonad would approach the first likely candidate and ask, "Hey, homes, you a local? Know where I can get weed?" This tactic always worked.

Later, in Vermont, I observed a key aspect of Gonad's daily routine. Each morning he would roust his hiking partner, High Strung, using a little sing-songy ditty like: "Yo, High Strung, wakey wakey, let's get bakey. Get up get up get up. It's four o'clock."

Still hours till first light, they'd smoke a couple of bowls and then start walking. The super-early start counterbalanced by just the right dosage of THC led to consistent 20-mile days – and chronic smiling.

∞

I hadn't seen Gonad in weeks, but suddenly there he was in the barn at the free hiker hostel in Bennington, VT. It was a zero day for him and he was spending it competing against other SOBO lads in a decathlon-like, feats-of-strength competition. He was writhing in mid-air struggling to win the pull-up event as I arrived. My arrival prompted a time-out.

After bear-hugging me, he says, "Ledge, dude, it's so great to see you! You're the man! You totally fuckin' saved my hike. You rock, dude. I still can't believe you brought me my wallet. And you like muled my weed, without even fuckin' knowing it was in my wallet. Dude, you could've gotten busted for possession. That would've been like fuckin' hilarious. Anyway, I'm really glad you're here because I have something to tell you. I should've thought of this when I first got to know you in Maine. I don't know why it took me so long. It's like so fuckin' obvious now. I've been

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talking to other SOBOS and they agree. **Dude, Ledge, you totally gotta do my mom!"**

Overwhelmed by a 70:30 mixture of prudishness and flattery, I'm stunned and momentarily speechless.

"And if you and my mom hook up, you and I will be, like, stepbrothers or something," Gonad says.

"Wrong," I say, "I'd be your *stepfather*, your *evil* stepfather. And I'd let you rot in jail when you screw up."

"Oh, dad, why you gotta do me like that?"

∞

The next morning four of us SOBOS – Gonad, High Strung, Lost Cause, and yours truly – start wandering through Bennington, searching for one of those genuine aerodynamic diners with the glimmering stainless steel exterior. This one's supposed to be spectacular, with dozens of breakfast options, huge portions, and a perpetual line of patrons extending out the front door. We're all craving a feast, after fasting overnight while sleeping together in the rumpus room, on the barn floor.

We're strolling along two-by-two. Lost Cause and I are walking in front of the lads. He's telling me how he got his trailname. In the other world, he's a professional canoe guide in a national wildlife refuge, where he once got lost for several days. Following the helicopter rescue, his brush-with-death story was featured in several local media outlets – and his business boomed. It seems people would rather be guided by someone infamous rather than someone competent. It also seems his moniker is well-deserved. He's known for getting lost almost daily on the trail, where to get lost you'd really have to try to get lost. Or you could do as Lost Cause does and just wander off in an arbitrary

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direction looking for water. The obvious alternative approach, of course, is to listen for the nearby stream and simply walk in that direction. Oh well.

Lost Cause is a beloved trail character. He's a poet and likes to speak in metaphors and non-sequiturs. If he's had a good day on the trail, he'll say, "it was a steak-dinner-and-a-whore kinda day." So, Lost Cause is keeping me entertained as we stroll to brunch. He's entertaining, yes, but he can't hold a candle to Gonad, not even one of those tiny birthday-cake candles.

It's a lovely start to our zero in Bennington. But suddenly something seems off. There's a void in the conversation. It's Gonad. His incessant yammering has stopped. I turn back to see what's up. High Strung's still right on our heels, but he's alone. I give him a quizzical look. He clarifies by pointing down the street ahead of us.

I spot Gonad. In keeping with his in-the-moment style, in *this* moment he's affixed himself to the back of a tractor-trailer rig. In his mind, he's just hopped another freight train. He's smiling that beautiful smile at the three of us. We smile back.

∞

Mile 482.7 from Katahdin (1696.4 from Springer). Walking solo, I arrive at Lower Cold River Road and can't quite resist the temptation to hitch to the W.E. Pierce Store, only a mile away, in the miniature village of Cuttingsville, Vermont. No luck hitching, so I walk the 5280 feet. I'm glad I did. This is no ordinary general store. This is a *Vermont* general store. It's a community cooperative, run by the Preservation Trust of Vermont. It has all the quintessential general store stuff, the decades' old inventory and those nasty pickled eggs in the massive jar on the counter.

But it also has a full deli and, incongruously, a wine nook and many copies of today's *New York Times*. So, I get myself ensconced in the wine nook with a colossal sandwich and a mammoth cappuccino and a pristine copy of the *Times*. (Springer isn't getting any closer, but it isn't getting any farther away either, I rationalize.) I'm all settled and ready to fritter away a good chunk of the afternoon, when suddenly a woman in head-to-toe equestrian garb approaches and says, "Hey, you want a ride back up to the trailhead?"

"Of course, yes, thanks," I say as I scramble to gather my stuff and follow her to her truck.

She thinks it's hilarious that I'm heading back to the trail with a cappuccino and the *Times*. She tells me she routinely gives thru-hikers rides to and from the trailhead. And then she mentions that she met a particularly fascinating SOBO just the other day. She starts telling me about him, like how he's gone so ultra-light in recent weeks that he no longer carries a sleeping bag. He just wraps himself up at night in a sheet of Tyvek®, like a pupa in its cocoon.

"I know Gonad," I interject. "He keeps all the light sleepers awake at night."

"Because he snores?" she asks.

"No, because his plastic cocoon makes a racket when he shivers," I say.

She's astonished that I know Gonad, that he and I are trailfriends. She's surprised to learn how socially interconnected we are on the trail.

And then I ask the 64,000 dollar question, "Did he ask you for anything?"

"Yeah," she says, "he asked for two things: sex and weed."

"In that order?" I ask.

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"No, he asked for weed first. I was slightly offended."

"Don't be," I say, "even though he treats *every* woman like an object, he *always* asks for weed first."

∞

A few days later, I catch up with Gonad. Sure enough, he's strutting around with a new micro-volume super-ultra-light pack. And he's apparently lost his trekking poles. When I mention his polelessness, he explains that he hasn't lost them. He's intentionally gotten rid of them. I probe for his rationale and he explains, "You can't smoke weed and handle trekking poles at the same time." Apparently, it was simply too inefficient to stop hiking every time he wanted to smoke. The poles, it seems, were messing up his hike, by hurting his mileage *and* his THC levels.

∞

Gonad's perpetual efforts to engage in mock reproductive acts with perfect strangers failed — through Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and most of Connecticut. Lines like, "Hey, wanna be my baby mamma?" and "I fuck like a mountain man" had nothing but the expected anti-aphrodisiacal effect. They were an instantaneous turn-off. They induced lots of nasty retorts and presumably never induced ovulation. But then, suddenly, while milling about on a sidewalk in snooty Kent, Connecticut, all that Gonadal persistence finally paid off.

A car pulled over as if to offer him a ride back to the trailhead, but the driver made an offer of a different kind. She yelled out the window to Gonad, who was hanging with several thru-hikers, "Yo, cowboy, you a thru-hiker?"

"Yeah, girrrrrrrrl, you know it," said Gonad.

"Whaddup?" she asked.

"Just chillin' with my homies."

"You wanna do it?" she asked.

"Giddy up, thought you'd never ask," said Gonad, while his incredulous trailfriends looked on, mouths wide open.

"You got any condoms?" she asked.

"Naw."

"Go get some at that convenience store," she instructed.

Gonad obeyed. His trailfriends stared in disbelief as he bounded across the street, ran into the store, and then hustled back. He got into the car, miniature intromittent organ and all, and then climbed back out – prematurely, in less time than it would take to utter the Serenity Prayer and eat one of those teensy fun-size Snickers® bars.

His trailfriends honored him with a smattering of halfhearted applause, followed by a flurry of deep bows.

The woman drove away, but just a block down the street she ran into a utility pole. In more ways than one, it seems, she was operating under the influence.

Gonad walked down to the scene of the crash, presumably concerned about the well-being of his first copulatory partner in months. But just as a police cruiser arrived with lights flashing and siren blaring, Gonad reached into the back seat of his partner's car and retrieved something. The used condom? Nope. In his post-coital daze, he'd forgotten something: not his wallet-and-weed this time but his cell phone.

CHAPTER 9

Trail Towns as Hiker Havens ☺☺☺[R]

best trail town of all
free pizza new boots dancing
too bad Goose got jailed

I could easily have written a book's worth of stories about trail towns. Some of these stories I've told elsewhere. But I'll add a few stories here to help convey just how fun and funny it can be to arrive at a trail town – and then to stay for one or two days or weeks or years or decades.

Thru-hikers love trail towns. Some would-be thru-hikers become the guest who never leaves. They drop out right on the spot. They get a J-O-B. They find a place to crash for the winter. Or they complete their thru-hike and then return to their favorite trail town. They love that town so much that they end up settling there. Trail towns are littered with former thru-hikers. There was the lovely couple who run the hostel in Millinocket, the gent who runs the canoe-ferry service in Caratunk, the fellow who owns the laundromat and the other guy who ran a free hiker hostel in his apartment in Rangeley, the woman who works as a server at the restaurant in Damascus, the gaggle of fine folks who've settled at Mountain Crossing, the other lovely couple who run the hostel in Dahlenega. The list goes on and on.

Be forewarned, if you're nice to us, we just might reciprocate by moving to your town. I had such a wonderful time in Millinocket before getting on the trail that I entertained the thought of settling there. Then my experience in Monson was the

same, only more so. I thought I'd finish my thru-hike in Georgia and pedal right back to Monson to overwinter. (I did pedal back, but I didn't overwinter.) And so I expected to get swept away by the next trail town too.

It's early evening when I finally skirt along the "outskirts" of Caratunk, Maine. This is one of those frozen-in-time places. The settlement proper is just a small gathering of white clapboard houses, with a post office. The local human population stands at a robust 108, up marginally from four decades ago when there were just 90 residents. Caratunk is *not* showing off.

I reach the Arnold Trail (US 201), the two-lane paved road that runs along the Kennebec River, which I'll be crossing by canoe ferry in the morning. For the next couple of days, I'll be retracing the route taken by Benedict Arnold and his ragtag troops who passed through on their way to invade Canada during the Revolutionary War in 1775. They started in Massachusetts on a now-ominous date, 9-11. They struggled mightily to get themselves and their ultra-heavy bateaux – rather than ultra-light canoes – up to this point on the Kennebec. Then they took a left at present-day Caratunk. They went overland to the Dead River. They had to carry their absurdly heavy bateaux and all their gear. Their supplies ran low. They suffered from diarrhea. They were as scrawny, hairy, and smelly as thru-hikers. Many men died. Many others defected. By the time they arrived at Quebec City, their numbers had depleted from 1100 to 500. They spent the winter encamped outside the fortress walls, holding the city under siege while burying their dead. It had been one helluva macho march through the wilderness of present-day Maine. It turned out to be a feeble attack on British-held Quebec. The invasion failed. So, what might have become the major portion of

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the USA – Canada – remains little more than the source of our wintry weather and hockey goons.

I'll be following Ben's route over to Stratton, but not till morning. Tonight, I'll luxuriate indoors. I decide not to head north along 201, where a clique of SOBOS plans to soak in the hot tub at Northern Outdoors Resort. I'm not jumping on that bandwagon. Not one to follow the herd, I head south along Arnold Trail, just a mile to the Sterling Inn. It's a massive white clapboard house, built in 1816 as a stagecoach stop. According to the caretakers, it housed a dancehall and post office in its heyday. It was a vacation lodge for aristocrats from Boston and New York. Families would travel by train and then stagecoach, arriving for weeks of trout fishing, boating, swimming, berry-picking, and other such wholesome activities. I'll be here for just the night and I won't be doing anything active or wholesome. Next week the place will be filled to capacity when bicyclists in the Trek Across Maine pass through, but tonight I'm the one and only guest. I have the cavernous great room to myself, where I can sprawl out, watch an NBA playoff game, and shed a toenail in private.

And the evening's solitude gives me time to ponder Caratunk's "rich history." Not only did Benedict Arnold and his motley crew pass through on their way to invade Canada, but Canada supposedly returned the favor 225 years later by providing a safe haven for the 9-11 terrorists. You may recall the barrage of news reports that the hijackers staged in Quebec. On September 10th, Muhammad Attah and his co-conspirators entered Maine, passing through the US Customs and Immigration checkpoint near the metropolis of Jackman (population: 718). Waved right on through the border crossing, they then sped along 201, downstream along the Kennebec, on their way to martyrdom.

There was an outcry, a backlash against our too-gentle ginormous neighbor to the north. Sure, security might have been lax at the US border crossing, but it was Canada that had provided the safe haven. This wouldn't do. Canada may get away with stunts like sending a *single* battleship to the Persian Gulf, during Dubya's daddy's war. It may get away with chronically committing troops in a "peace-keeping" capacity. It may get away with being kind and gentle and oh so polite, in stark contrast with its loudmouthed warmongering neighbor to the south. But harboring the 9-11 terrorists, that was too much! Fingers pointed northward. Canada was blamed, vilified, and scolded by the media and by high-ranking American politicians. It was time for Canada to grow up.

The only problem with making Canada the scapegoat: it didn't happen. None of the 9-11 terrorists had even set foot in Canada. But myths like this are hard to debunk, almost impossible to eradicate. We all love to believe false allegations, especially when they're levied against a patsy like Canada, eh?

The initial news reports seemed plausible to me. You see, I'd passed through that very border crossing a few weeks before 9-11. I saw with my own eyes just how porous the border was. I arrived on my bicycle in the evening. There was no line-up of cars. I pedaled right up to the front door. The lights were on, but nobody was home. Nobody was there to greet me, to interrogate me. I waited a few minutes. I thought about leaving a note. Finally, a man appeared in the doorway.

I thought, man, he looks like my dad. He was squat and rotund. He was about 5 feet 5 inches, 340 pounds. His shirt was untucked, with one of the belly-buttons missing. He hadn't shaved in a few days. He was unsteady on his feet. He was chewing tobacco.

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"State yuh puhpose!" he orders.

"I've come to Maine to visit my dad."

"Has he lived here all his life?" he asks.

"Not yet," I say, doing my part to deliver the punchline of a familiar Maine joke.

He laughs, waves me through, and quips, "If you had the sense god gave a donut, you'd get rid of that pedal-bike and get yuhself one with a motah."

∞

In Caratunk, the town itself was tiny and strictly residential and I was back on the trail first thing in the morning, so I didn't have a typical trail-town experience. It was atypical because I didn't get to interact with locals, to pester them with all sorts of annoying questions. And they didn't get a chance to love me up, to heap trail magic on me, to hikernap me.

Sometimes I went into a town just to resupply and ended up spending a night at a sleaze motel. In the south, in places like Pearisburg, Virginia, these motels often house people awaiting sentencing, others on disability benefits, and others who work itinerant construction jobs. These places tend to be lively and interesting. But the rooms can be unsavory. So, whenever I got a chance, I would ask fellow hikers in advance: "How was the room? Did you sleep in your sleeping bag?"

Usually I would go into a trail town and hilarious encounters with naked apes would ensue. The trail townsfolk were unfailingly amusing and usually überkind to boot. Every town has a story. Every town yielded at least one comedic vignette.

Bethel, Maine was no exception. From Grafton Notch, I hitched into town and went straight to the pub for dinner. There would be live music that evening. Bonus! Sure enough, a fellow

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arrives, takes a seat on a stool, tunes his acoustic guitar, and starts dazzling the audience. He plays effortlessly, with virtuosity, in a distinctly jazzy style. He has a vast repertoire that includes hundreds of Bob Dylan and Grateful Dead songs, the “Snoopy theme song,” and many originals. You name it, he can play it.

When he finally takes a break, I sidle up to him and ask, “What are *you* doing *here*?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he says.

Despite this awkward start, we hit it off. It turns out he’s Denny Breau, brother of the late great Lenny Breau, who was murdered in Los Angeles thirty years ago. Denny lives here and makes a living by playing hundreds of gigs per year at local pubs. And he doesn’t want to tour anymore. He’s happy.

I’m happy too. I have a great evening listening to Denny and getting to know some of the Bethelites. At closing time, one of the locals says, “Hey, Ledge, we’re going to my house to eat eggs and smoke weed. You’re invited and we won’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Well, I accept, but I’d rather smoke eggs and eat weed.”

“That can be arranged,” she says. And then she announces to her entourage, “Ledge accepts. He’s coming to our slumber party.”

∞

A few days later, in Gorham, New Hampshire, I rendezvoused with Sad Hands and Chin Music, two of my favorite SOBOs. And I finally got to hear the song Sad Hands had written for me while hiking in Maine. We were walking together back to the hostel, “The Barn,” in the wee hours of the morning. Walking arm-in-arm, with her boyfriend, Chin Music, on one side and me on the other, Sad Hands suddenly threw back her head and belted out in a

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bluesy style, *Oh Ledge / You're living on the edge / You've teetered on a ledge / You've hidden in a hedge / You can identify a sedge / Between us there's no wedge / That's what I pledge / Oh Ledge.*

I cried. She sang it again. I laughed.

"What's funny? Are you laughing at me or my song?" asked Sad Hands.

"I'm not laughing *at* you, I'm laughing *with* you. I'm laughing at the rhyme scheme."

"Good, you get the joke. I knew you would. For the record, the rhyme scheme is: A-A-A-A-A-A-A."

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In North Woodstock, New Hampshire, I finally arrive – on foot. It's a different world here. It's touristy. Unlike Maine, where hitching was easy as blueberry pie, here it's harder than granite. Folks around here don't seem to realize that while thumbs-up ordinarily means "OK," in the current context it means "please pull over and give me a ride into town." The torons speed by with tunnel vision, heading to the waterpark, menagerie, gift shop, or fudge factory. I try hitching but have no luck. I end up walking all the way to town. That's 7+ miles of unplanned road-walking tacked onto 20+ miles of trail-walking.

But I finally arrive, well after hiker midnight. I enter the lobby of one of the little mom-and-pop motels. I'm their only guest for the night. How do they stay in business, I wonder? The desk clerk is in his PJs. He seems annoyed by my interruption of his marathon TV-watching session. He doesn't say a word. I hand over my credit card and fill out a registration card. It's all so perfunctory. He doesn't ask anything about my hike. He doesn't

say anything at all. He slides the room key to me and finally speaks. He orders, "Don't empty your pack in the room."

"Huh?"

"Don't empty your pack in the room."

"What?"

"I said, 'Don't empty your pack in the room.' Hikers always do that and get forest debris all over everything."

"Forest debris?"

"Yes, forest debris."

"But I'm a hiker and surely you must realize that everything I own is inside my pack. Is it OK with you if I empty the contents of my pack *outside* the room? I'd be glad to do that. It's just an unusual expectation. Should I go buy a new toothbrush? Maybe I should leave my pack here with you? It would stink up the whole lobby and your living quarters, but at least I wouldn't get so much as a spruce needle on the carpet in Room 4."

He says nothing. Not one word.

I slink over to room 4, where I remove my forest debris-filled boots outside the door. It's a most impressive deposit. Bracken fern fragments, spruce needles, and pulverized duff galore. Then, for the first time ever, I dump the entire contents of my pack in the room, right on the pristine carpet. I shake the emptied pack vigorously. Nothing comes out. There simply is no appreciable forest debris inside my pack, which of course is why his demand was so puzzling in the first place.

Then I settle in for the night. But instead of writing in my journal, I write the desk clerk a letter hinting ever-so-tactfully at my dissatisfaction. I acknowledge it was unfair of me to expect much from him. He's inert, inanimate. He's devoid of personality. He's not going to hug hikers and rave about how he loves the smell of thru-hikers, and he's not going to call you by your

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trailname or tell you to help yourself to the nonexistent hiker box. He's homozygous for apathetic and boring. I get that. But I thought he should know the definition of "hiker friendly," since the trail guide identifies his motel accordingly, even though his behavior personifies the antonym, hiker *unfriendly*. I also thought he should know that hikers don't go into his rooms and dump all of the contents of their pack on the floor and then turn their pack inside out and shake it. And if they did, virtually nothing would happen. Why? Because the "forest debris" he loathes with every fiber of his being resides in our boots, not our packs. So, what he should do in the future is ask hikers, nicely if he can muster that, to leave their boots outside. This is a routine request and one that hikers are only too glad to comply with.

I sign off my letter by wishing him all the best in future opportunities to treat his paying guests like crap, to drive away business, to sully his reputation within the trail community, to minimize his cash flow, to shorten the latency to bankruptcy.

And then I add a post script telling him I truly wish him well and that I hope his behavior wasn't the side-effect of some personal tragedy like a terminal illness or a recent death in his family.

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Weeks later I arrive in another trail town, Duncannon, Pennsylvania, at the end of another long day. I've pushed hard to get here, doing 30+ miles, the last couple on "painment." But when I arrive at the perfectly seedy Doyle Hotel, a bastion for over-the-top hiker friendliness, I couldn't be happier. My trailfriends, Zamboni and Strawberry Shortcake, are the only hikers there when I arrive. It's 9 PM and the deep fryer is still on,

so I'm just in time to order mounds of fried food. Zamboni and Strawberry join me by ordering their second dinner.

The bartender charges me \$3 – that's right, three US dollar bills – to sleep on the floor in Zamboni and Strawberry's room. Off we go, up the creaky stairs, down the creaky hallway, to our creaky room. As we enter the room, I laugh out loud at the sight of Zamboni's bed. It's buried by the contents of his grocery bags. The scene reminds me of those massive hauls we admired as kids upon returning from trick-or-treating forays. He's intuitive. He knows why I'm amused: he's fueling his thru-hike on a monotonous and mountainous diet of candy. A little probing reveals that his girlfriend, a nutritionist, has already scolded him. She's analyzed his diet and discovered potentially toxic levels of magnesium thanks to his gastronomical chocolate intake. Further probing reveals that Zamboni's hike has also been compromised by "anal leakage," the byproduct of overindulging on a certain brand of low-fat potato chips.

In the morning, I announce my spur-of the-moment plan to zero. Zamboni's disappointed that I won't be hiking with him. He tries to shame me into changing my mind. He calls me weak and lame and otherwise casts nasturtiums on my character. I tell him I love him too and I hug him, which he pretends to hate.

Then I seek out Vickey and Pat, the legendary couple who own and run The Doyle. Vickey exudes love, caring, openness, and tolerance. She *loves* hikers and hikers love her. She makes you feel like you're home. She can do this with just her smile. And then she hugs you and tells stories about hikers you know and just plain loves you up. It's a thrill to meet her.

When I congratulate her husband, Pat, for his excellent spousal choice, he doesn't respond in that woe-is-me way you

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might expect. Instead, he says, "We got married sixteen days after we first met, 37 years ago."

"Sixteen days?! What took you so long? I guess you were commitment phobic?"

"Not me. Vickey didn't even want to go out with me at first, but she caved after a week. Then the wedding got delayed."

"Delayed? I thought you said you got married sixteen days after meeting."

"I did. But we wanted to get married even sooner. We didn't want to wait, but I couldn't get a marriage license right away. In those days, I was such a nomadic countercultural drop-out that I didn't have an official ID, so we couldn't get a marriage license until I could prove my identity."

"So you squandered a whole week of conjugal bliss?"

"Yeah, but we've been making up for it ever since," says Pat.

A thru-hike on the 2179-mile Appalachian Trail is like an experiential comedic play that lasts for months. Thru-hiking cast members are hairy, emaciated, hilarious. And it's not just their serial-killer look that makes them so funny. It's also their repartee, delusions of awesomeness, voluntary celibacy, dietary excesses, and so much more. This book celebrates hiker humor in all of its guises - surreal, frivolous, morbid, and even scatological.

The LAUGHalachian TRAIL: A Green Zealot's Uncensored Celebration of Thru-hiker Humor

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