You Gotta Have Friends. Which is Damned Unfortunate.

Tackling the Appalachian Trail on a whim would require a few essentials. I realized, foremost among them a boon companion. What I got was Katz.

By Bill Bryson

Not long after I moved with my family to a small town in New Hampshire — I had been living abroad, in England, for nearly 20 years — I happened upon a path that vanished into a wood on the edge of town. A sign announced that this was no ordinary footpath, but the celebrated Appalachian Trail. Running more than 2,100 miles along America's eastern seaboard from Georgia to Maine, it wanders across 14 states, through plump, comely hills whose very names — Blue Ridge, Smokies, Cumberlands, Catskills, Green Mountains, White Mountains — seem an invitation to amble. And here it was, quite unexpectedly, meandering in a dangerously beguiling fashion through the pleasant New England community in which I had just settled. It seemed such an extraordinary notion — that I could set off from home and walk 1,700 miles through woods to Georgia, or turn the other way and clamber over the rough and stony White Mountains to the fabled prow of Mount Katahdin, floating in forest 440 miles to the north in a wilderness few have seen. A little voice in my head said, "Sounds neat! Let's do it!"

I formed a number of rationalizations. It would get me fit after years of waddlesome sloth. It would be an interesting and reflective way to reacquaint myself with the scale and beauty of my native land. It would be useful (I wasn't quite sure in what way, but I was sure nonetheless) to learn to fend for myself in the wilderness. When guys in camouflage pants and hunting hats sat around in the 4 Aces Diner talking about fearsome things done out-of-doors, I would no longer have to feel like such a cupcake.

So I decided to do it. More rashly, I announced my intention — told friends and neighbors, confidently informed my publisher, made it common knowledge among those who knew me. My intention was to start in the south in early March. I put aside six weeks for the first 500-mile leg and plunged into learning the lore and arcana of the trail.

After I had read some books and talked to people who had done the trail in whole or in part, I came gradually to realize that this was way beyond — way beyond — anything I had attempted before.

The more I read, the more I realized that the Appalachian woods were probably no place for a guy like me. The peaks of the Appalachian Trail are not particularly formidable as mountains go — the highest, Clingmans Dome, in Tennessee, tops out at a little under 6,700 feet — but they are big enough and they go on and on. (Altogether, it takes about five months, and five million steps, to walk the trail from end to end.) Those woods were full of dangerous things: bears and bobcats, poisonous snakes, infectious ticks, and the odd hiker-murderer, not to mention — for all I knew — grinning hillbillies destabilized by quantities of impure corn liquor and generations of unbiblical sex.

I was particularly fascinated to learn that black bears, Ursus americanus, are common along the Appalachian Trail (indeed, they often use the trail for convenience). Black bears rarely attack. But here's the thing: Sometimes they do. All bears are agile, cunning, and immensely strong, and they are always hungry. If they want to kill you and eat you, they can, and pretty much whenever they want. That doesn't happen often, but — and here is the absolutely salient point — once would be enough.

I came to the profound realization that I didn't want to do this alone, a thought that occupied my mind a great deal in the months while I waited for spring to come.

At Christmas, I put notes in lots of cards inviting people to come with me on the trail, if only part of the way. Nobody responded, of course. Then one day in late February, with departure nigh, I got a call. It was from an old school friend named Stephen Katz. Katz and I had grown up together in Iowa, and we had traveled together through Europe as young men, but I had pretty well lost touch with him. In the 25 years since, I had run into him three or four times on visits home. We had remained friends in a kind of theoretical sense, but our paths had diverged wildly.

"I've been hesitating to call," he said slowly. He seemed to be searching for words. "But this Appalachian Trail deal — do you think maybe I could come with you?"

I couldn't believe it. "You want to come with me?"

"If it's a problem, I understand."

"No," I said. "No, no, no. You're very welcome. You are extremely welcome."

"Really?" He seemed to brighten.

"Of course." I couldn't believe it. I wasn't going to have to walk alone. I did a little jig. I wasn't going to have to walk alone. "I can't tell you how welcome you would be."

"Oh, great," he said in a flood of relief, then added in a confessional tone, "I thought maybe you might not want me along."

"Why ever not?"

"Because, you know, I still owe you $600 from Europe."

"Hey, jeez, certainly not — you owe me $600?"

"I still intend to pay you back."

"Listen, it's not a problem," I said. "Just come hiking with me. Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Absolutely."

"What kind of shape are you in?"

"Real good. I walk everywhere these days."

"Really?"

"Well, they repossessed my car, you see."

"Ah."

We settled that he would fly to New Hampshire the next Wednesday, we would spend two days making preparations, and then we'd hit the trail. For the first time in months I felt positively positive about this enterprise. Katz seemed remarkably upbeat, too, for someone who didn't have to do this at all.

My last words to him were, "So, how are you with bears?"

"Hey, they haven't got me yet!"

That's the spirit, I thought. Good old Katz. Good old anyone with a pulse and a willingness to go walking with me. After he hung up, it occurred to me I hadn't asked him why he wanted to come. Katz was the one person I knew on earth who might be on the run from guys with names like Julio and Mr. Big. Anyway, I didn't care. I wasn't going to have to walk alone.

I found my wife at the kitchen sink and told her the good news. She was more reserved in her enthusiasm than I had hoped.

"You're going into the woods for weeks and weeks with a person you have barely seen for 25 years. Have you really thought this through?" (As if I have ever thought anything through.) "I thought you two ended up getting on each other's nerves in Europe."

"No." This was not quite correct. "We started off on each other's nerves. We ended up despising each other. But that was a long time ago."

She gave me a look of some dubiety. "You have nothing in common."

"We have everything in common. We're 44 years old. We'll talk about hemorrhoids and lower back pain and how we can't remember where we put anything, and the next night I'll say, 'Hey, did I tell you about my back problems?' and he'll say, 'No, I don't think so,' and we'll do it all over again. It'll be great."

"It'll be hell."

"Yeah, I know," I said.

And so I found myself, six days later, standing at our local airport watching a tin commuter plane containing Katz touch down and taxi to a halt on the tarmac 20 yards from the terminal. The hum of the

propellers intensified for a moment and then gradually stuttered to a halt, and the plane's door-cum-stairway fell open. I tried to remember the last time I had seen him. After our summer in Europe, Katz had gone back to Des Moines and had become, in effect, Iowa's drug culture. He had partied for years, until there was no one left to party with, then he had partied with himself, alone in small apartments, in T-shirt and boxer shorts, with a bottle and a plastic bag of pot and a TV with rabbit ears. I remembered now that the last time I had seen him was about five years earlier in a Denny's restaurant where I was taking my mother for breakfast. He was sitting in a booth with a haggard fellow who looked like his name would be Virgil Starkweather, tucking into pancakes and taking occasional illicit nips from a bottle in a paper bag. It was eight in the morning and Katz looked very happy. He was always happy when he was drunk, and he was always drunk.

Two weeks after that, I later heard, police found him in an upended car in a field outside the little town of Mingo, hanging upside-down by his seat belt, still clutching the steering wheel and saying, "Well, what seems to be the problem, officers?" There was a small quantity of cocaine in the glove compartment, and he was dispatched to a minimum-security prison for 18 months. While there, he started attending A.A. meetings. To everyone's surprise, not least his own, he had not touched alcohol or an illegal substance since.

For the past three years he had devoted himself to rectitude and — I instantly saw now as he stooped out the door of the plane — growing a stomach. Katz was arrestingly larger than when I had last seen him. He was limping a little and breathing harder than one ought to after a walk of 20 yards.

"Man, I'm hungry," he said without preamble, and let me take his carry-on bag, which instantly jerked my arm to the floor.

"What have you got in here?" I gasped.

"Ah, just some tapes and shit for the trail. There a Dunkin' Donuts anywhere around here? I haven't had anything to eat since Boston."

"Boston? You've just come from Boston."

"Yeah, I gotta eat something every hour or so or I have, whaddayacallit, seizures."

"Seizures?" This wasn't quite the reunion scenario I had envisioned. I imagined him bouncing around on the Appalachian Trail like some windup toy that had fallen on its back.

"Ever since I took some contaminated phenothiazine about ten years ago. If I eat a couple of doughnuts or something I'm usually OK."

"Stephen, we're going to be in the wilderness in three days. There won't be doughnut stores."

He beamed proudly. "I thought of that." We had arrived at the baggage carousel, and he pointed out a green army-surplus duffel and let me pick it up. It weighed at least 75 pounds. He saw my look of wonder. "Snickers," he explained. "Lots and lots of Snickers."

We drove home by way of Dunkin' DOnuts. My wife and I sat with him at the kitchen table and watched him eat five Boston cream doughnuts, which he washed down with two glasses of milk. Then he said he wanted to go and lie down a while. It took him whole minutes to get up the stairs.

My wife turned to me with a look of serene and irksome blankness.

"Please just don't say anything," I said.

In the afternoon, after Katz had rested, he and I visited my local outdoor-equipment store and got him fitted with a backpack and a tent and sleeping bag and all the rest of it, and then went to Kmart for a ground sheet and thermal underwear and some other small things. After that he rested some more.

The following day, we went to the supermarket to buy provisions for our first week on the trail. I knew nothing about cooking, but Katz had been looking after himself for years and had a repertoire of dishes (principally involving peanut butter, tuna, and brown sugar stirred together in a pot) that he thought would transfer nicely to a camping milieu, but he also piled lots of other things into the shopping cart — four large pepperoni sausages, five pounds of rice, assorted bags of cookies, oatmeal, raisins, M&M's, Spam, more Snickers, sunflower seeds, graham crackers, instant mashed potatoes, several sticks of beef jerky, a couple of bricks of cheese, a canned ham, and the full range of gooey and evidently imperishable cakes and doughnuts produced under the label Little Debbie.

"You know, I don't think we'll be able to carry all this," I suggested uneasily as he placed a horse-collar-shaped bologna in the shopping cart.

Katz surveyed the cart grimly. "Yeah, you're right," he agreed. "Let's start again."

He abandoned the cart there and went off for another one. We went around again, this time trying to be more intelligently selective, but we still ended up with clearly too much.

We took everything home, divvied it up, and went off to pack — Katz to the bedroom where all his other stuff was, I to my basement HQ. I packed for two hours, but I couldn't begin to get everything in. I put aside books and notebooks and nearly all my spare clothes, and tried lots of different combinations, but every time I finished I would turn to find something large and important left over. Eventually I went upstairs to see how Katz was doing. He was lying on the bed, listening to his Walkman. Stuff was scattered everywhere. His backpack was limp and unattended. Little percussive hisses of music were leaking from his ears.

"Aren't you packing?" I said.

"Yeah."

I waited a minute, thinking he would bound up, but he didn't move.

"Forgive me, Stephen, but you give the impression that you are lying down."

"Yeah."

"Can you actually hear what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, in a minute."

I sighed and went back down to the basement.

We were leaving the next morning. Katz said little during dinner and afterward returned to his room. We heard nothing more from him throughout the evening, but about midnight, as we lay in bed, noises began to float to us through the walls — clompings and mutterings, sounds like furniture being dragged across the floor, and brief enraged outbursts, interspersed with long periods of silence. I held my wife's hand and couldn't think of anything to say. In the morning, I tapped on Katz's door and eventually put my head in. He was asleep, fully dressed, on top of a tumult of bedding. The mattress was partway off the bed, as if he had been engaged in the night in some scuffle with intruders. His pack was full but unsecured, and personal effects were still liberally distributed around the room. I told him we had to leave in an hour to catch our plane.

"Yeah," he said.

Twenty minutes later, he came downstairs, laboriously and with a great deal of soft cursing. Without even looking, you could tell he was coming down sideways and with care, as if the steps were glazed with ice. He was wearing his pack. Things were tied to it all over — a pair of grubby sneakers and what looked like a pair of dress boots, his pots and pans, a Laura Ashley carrier bag evidently appropriated from my wife's wardrobe and filled now with God knows what. "This is the best I could do," he said. "I had to leave a few things." I nodded. I'd left a few things, too — notably, the oatmeal, which I didn't like anyway, and the more disgusting looking of the Little Debbie cakes, which is to say all of them.

My wife drove us to the airport in Manchester, through blowing snow, in the kind of awkward silence that precedes a long separation. Katz sat in back and ate doughnuts. At the airport, she presented me with a knobbly walking stick the children had bought me. It had a red bow on it. I wanted to burst into tears — or, better still, climb into the car and speed off while Katz was still frowning over his new, unfamiliar straps. She squeezed my arm, gave a weak smile, and left.

I watched her go and then went into the terminal with Katz. The man at the check-in desk looked at our tickets to Atlanta and our packs and said — quite alertly, I thought, for a person wearing a short-sleeve shirt in winter — "You fellows hiking the Appalachian Trail?"

"Sure are," said Katz proudly.

"Lot of trouble with wolves down in Georgia, you know."

"Really?" Katz was all ears.

"Oh, yeah. Coupla people been attacked recently. Pretty savagely, too, from what I hear." He messed around with tickets and luggage tags for a minute. "Hope you brought some long underwear."

Katz screwed up his face. "For wolves?"

"No, for the weather. There's gonna be record cold down there over the next four or five days. Gonna be well below zero in Atlanta tonight."

"Oh, great," Katz said and gave a ruptured, disconsolate sigh. He

looked challengingly at the man. "Any other news for us? Hospital call to say we got cancer or anything?"

Perhaps the hardest part about hiking the Appalachian Trail is getting onto it, nowhere more than at its ends. Springer Mountain, the launching-off point in the south, is seven miles from the nearest highway, at a place called Amicalola Falls State Park, which in turn is a good way from anywhere. From Atlanta, the nearest outlet to the wider world, you have a choice of one train or two buses a day to Gainesville, and then you're still 40 miles short of being seven miles short of the start of the trail, as it were. (To and from Katahdin in Maine is even more problematic.)

Fortunately, there are people who will pick you up in Atlanta and take you to Amicalola for a fee. Thus it was that Katz and I delivered ourselves into the hands of Wes Wisson, a large, friendly guy in a baseball cap who had agreed to take us from the airport in Atlanta to Amicalola Falls Lodge, our setting-off point for Springer.

Every year, about 1,200 hikers set off from Springer, most of them intending to go all the way to Katahdin. No more than 10 percent actually make it. Half don't make it past central Virginia, less than a third of the way. A quarter get no farther than North Carolina, the next state after Georgia. As many as 20 percent drop out the first week. Wisson had seen it all.

"Last year, I dropped a guy from Florida off at the trailhead," he told us as we tooled north through darkening pine forests toward the rugged hills of north Georgia. "Three days later he calls me from the pay phone at Woody Gap — that's the first pay phone you come to. Says he wants to go home, that the trail wasn't what he expected it to be. So I drive him back to the airport. Two days after that he's back in Atlanta. Says his wife made him come back because he'd spent all this money on equipment and she wasn't going to let him quit so easy. So I drop him off at the trailhead. Three days later he phones from Woody Gap again. He wants to go to the airport. 'Well, what about your wife?' I says. And he says, 'This time I'm not going home.'"

"So why did he quit so soon?" I asked.

"He said it wasn't what he expected it to be. They all say that. Just last week I had three ladies from California — middle-aged gals, real nice, kind of giggly but, you know, nice — I dropped them off and they were in real high spirits. About four hours later they called and said they wanted to go home. They'd come all the way from California, you understand, spent God knows how much on airfares and equipment — I mean, they had the nicest stuff you ever saw, all brand new and top of the range — and they'd walked maybe a mile and a half before quitting. Said it wasn't what they expected."

"What do they expect?"

"Who knows? Escalators maybe. It's hills and rocks and woods and a trail. You don't got to do a whole lot of scientific research to work that out. But you'd be amazed how many people quit. Then again, I had a guy, oh, about six weeks ago, who shoulda quit and didn't. He was coming off the trail. He'd walked from Maine on his own. It took him eight months, longer than it takes most people, and I don't think he'd seen anybody for the last several weeks. When he came off he was just a trembling wreck. I had his wife with me. She'd come to meet him, and he just fell into her arms and started weeping."

"So can you tell when you drop people off whether they're gonna make it?"

"Pretty generally."

"And do you think we'll make it?" Katz asked.

He looked at us each in turn. "Oh, you'll make it all right," he replied, but his expression said otherwise.

Amicalola Falls Lodge was an aerie high on a mountainside, reached up a long, winding road. It was piercingly, shockingly cold when we stepped from the car. A treacherous, icy wind seemed to dart around from every angle and then zip up sleeves and trouser legs. "Jee-zuss!" Katz cried in astonishment, as if somebody had just thrown a bucket of ice water over him, and scooted inside. I paid up and followed.

The lodge was modern and very warm. We agreed to rendezvous at seven and parted for our anonymously comfortable rooms. I had a lavishly steamy shower involving many towels, inserted myself between crisp sheets (how long would it be until I enjoyed this kind of comfort again?), watched discouraging reports by happy, mindless people on the Weather Channel, and slept hardly at all.

On my way to breakfast, I stepped outside to check out the air. Dry little pellets of snow, like tiny spheres of polystyrene, chased around in swirls. A big wall thermometer by the entrance read 11 degrees Fahrenheit.

"Coldest ever for this date in Georgia," a hotel employee said with a big pleased smile as she hurried in from the parking lot, then stopped and said, "You hiking?"

"Yeah."

"Well, better you'n me. Good luck to ya. Brrrrrrr!" And she dodged inside.

To my surprise, I felt a certain springy keenness. I was ready to hike. I had waited months for this day, after all, even if it had been mostly with foreboding. I wanted to see what was out there. All over America today people would be dragging themselves to work, stuck in traffic jams, wreathed in exhaust smoke. I was going for a walk in the woods.

I found Katz in the dining room, and he was looking laudably perky, too. This was because he had made a friend — a waitress named Rayette, who was attending to his dining requirements in a distinctly coquettish way. She could not have signaled her availability to Katz more clearly if she had thrown her skirt over her head and lain across his deluxe breakfast platter. Katz in consequence was pumping testosterone.

"Oooh, I like a man who appreciates pancakes," Rayette cooed.

"Well, honey, I sure appreciate these pancakes," Katz responded, face agleam with syrup and early-morning happiness.

Eventually I managed to tear Katz away from breakfast and Rayette. Ten minutes later we met outside, togged up and ready to go. Katz was looking miserable. "Let's stay here another night," he said.

"What? Are you kidding?" I was completely taken aback by this. "Why?"

"Because it's warm in there and it's cold out here."

"We've gotta do it."

He looked toward the woods. "We'll freeze out there."

I looked toward the woods, too. "Yeah, probably. We've still gotta do

it."

I hoisted my pack and took a backward stagger under the weight (it would be days before I could do this with anything approaching aplomb), jerked tight the belt, and trudged off. At the edge of the woods, I glanced back to make sure Katz was following. Ahead of me spread a vast, stark world of winter-dead trees. I stepped portentously onto the path.

The date was March 9. We were on our way. The jumping-off point for the Appalachian Trail lay seven miles ahead, on Springer Mountain.

The route led down into a wooded valley with a chuckling stream edged with brittle ice, which the path followed for perhaps half a mile before taking us steeply up into denser woods. This was, it quickly became evident, the base of the first big hill, Frosty Mountain, and it was immediately taxing. The sun was shining and the sky was a hearty blue, but everything at ground level was brown — brown trees, brown earth, frozen brown leaves — and the cold was unyielding. I trudged perhaps a hundred feet up the hill and then stopped, bug-eyed, breathing hard, heart kabooming alarmingly. Katz was already falling behind and panting even harder. I pressed on.

It was hell. I was hopelessly out of shape — hopelessly. The pack weighed way too much. Way too much. I had never encountered anything so hard, for which I was so ill prepared. Every step was a struggle.

I don't know exactly when I lost track of Katz, but it was in the first couple of hours. At first I would wait for him to catch up, bitching every step of the way and pausing after each three or four shuffling paces to wipe his brow and look sourly at his immediate future. It was painful to behold in every way. Eventually I waited to see him pull into view, just to confirm that he was still coming, that he wasn't lying on the path palpitating or hadn't thrown down his pack in disgust and gone looking for Wes Wisson. I would wait and wait, and eventually his shape would appear among the trees, breathing heavily, moving with incredible slowness, and talking in a loud, bitter voice to himself. Halfway up the third big hill, the 3,600-foot-high Black Mountain, I stood and waited a long while, and thought about going back, but eventually turned and struggled on. I had enough small agonies of my own.

Seven miles seems so little, but it's not, believe me. I trudged along for hours, in a private little world of weariness and woe, up and over imposing hills, through an endless cocktail party of trees, all the time thinking, "I must have done seven miles by now, surely." But always the wandering trail ran on.

Finally, at 3:30, I climbed some granite steps and found myself on a spacious rock overlook: the summit of Springer Mountain. I shed my pack and slumped heavily against a tree, astounded by the scale of my tiredness. The view was lovely — the rolling swell of the Cohutta Mountains, brushed with a bluish haze the color of cigarette smoke, running away to a far-off horizon. The sun was already low in the sky.

I rested for perhaps ten minutes and then got up and had a look around. There was a bronze plaque screwed into a boulder announcing the start of the Appalachian Trail, and nearby on a post was a wooden box containing a Bic pen on a length of string and a standard spiral notebook, its pages curled from the damp air. The notebook was the trail register (I had somehow expected it to be leather-bound and funereal), and it was filled with eager entries.

There were perhaps 25 pages of entries since the first of January —

eight entries on this day alone. Most were hurried and cheery — "March 2nd. Well, here we are and man it's cold! See y'all on Katahdin! Jaimie and Spud" — but about a third were longer and more carefully reflective, with messages along the lines of "So here I am at Springer at last. I don't know what the coming weeks hold for me, but my faith in the Lord is strong and I know I have the love and support of my family. Mom and Pookie, this trip is for you," and so on.

I waited for Katz for three-quarters of an hour and then went looking for him. The light was fading and the air was taking on an evening chill. I walked and walked, down the hill and through the endless groves of trees, back over ground that I had gratefully put behind me forever, or so I had thought. Several times I called his name and listened, but there was nothing. I walked on and on, over fallen trees I had struggled over hours before, down slopes I could now only dimly recall. My grandmother could have got this far, I kept thinking. Finally, I rounded a bend and there he was, stumbling toward me, wild-haired and one-gloved and nearer hysteria than I have ever seen a grown person.

It was hard to get the full story out of him in a coherent flow, because he was so furious, but I gathered he had thrown many items from his pack over a cliff in a temper. None of the things that had been dangling from the outside were there any longer.

"What did you get rid of?" I asked, trying not to betray too much alarm.

"Heavy fucking shit, that's what. The pepperoni, the rice, the brown sugar, the Spam, I don't know what all. Lots. Fuck." Katz was almost cataleptic with displeasure. He acted as if he had been deeply betrayed by the trail. It wasn't, I guess, what he had expected.
I saw his glove lying in the path 30 yards back and went to retrieve it.

"OK," I said when I returned, "you haven't got too far to go."

"How far?"

"Maybe a mile."

"Shit," he said bitterly.

"I'll take your pack." I lifted it onto my back. It wasn't exactly empty now, but it was decidedly moderate in weight. God knows what he had thrown out.

We trudged up the hill to the summit in the enveloping dusk. A few hundred yards beyond the summit was a campsite with a wooden shelter in a big grassy clearing against a backdrop of dark trees. There were a lot of people there, far more than I'd expected this early in the season. The shelter — a basic, three-sided affair with a sloping roof — looked crowded, and a dozen or so tents were scattered around the open ground. Nearly everywhere there was the hiss of little camp stoves, threads of rising food smoke, and the movements of lanky young people.

I found us a site on the edge of the clearing, almost in the woods, off by ourselves.

"I don't know how to put up my tent," Katz said in a petulant tone.

"Well, I'll put it up for you then." You big soft flabby baby. Suddenly I was very tired.

He sat on a log and watched me put up his tent. When I finished, he pushed in his pad and sleeping bag and crawled in after. I busied

myself with my tent, fussily making it into a little home. When I completed my work and straightened up, I realized there was no sound or movement from within his.

"Have you gone to bed?" I said, aghast.
"Yump," he replied in a kind of affirmative growl.

"That's it? You've retired? With no dinner?"

"Yump."

I stood for a minute, speechless and flummoxed, too tired to be indignant. Too tired to be hungry either, come to that. I crawled into my tent and finally shimmied into the bag, more grateful than I have ever been to be horizontal. I was asleep in moments. I don't believe I have ever slept so well.

When I awoke, it was daylight. The inside of my tent was coated in a curious flaky rime, which I realized after a moment was my all my nighttime snores, condensed and frozen and pasted to the fabric, as if into a scrapbook of respiratory memories. My water bottle was frozen solid. This seemed gratifyingly macho, and I examined it with interest, as if it were a rare mineral. I was surprisingly snug in my bag and in no hurry at all to put myself through the foolishness of climbing hills, so I just lay there as if under grave orders not to move. After a while I became aware that Katz was moving around outside, grunting softly from aches and doing something that sounded improbably industrious.

After a minute or two, he came and crouched by my tent, his form a dark shadow on the fabric. He didn't ask if I was awake or anything, but just said in a quiet voice, "Was I, would you say, a complete asshole last night?"

"Yes, you were, Stephen."

He was quiet a moment. "I'm making coffee." I gathered this was his way of an apology.

"That's very nice."

"Fucking cold out here."

"And in here."

"My water bottle froze."

"Mine, too."

I unzipped myself from my nylon womb and emerged on creaking joints. It seemed very strange — very novel — to be standing outdoors in long johns. Katz was crouched over the camp stove, boiling a pan of water. We seemed to be the only campers awake. It was cold, but perhaps just a trifle warmer than the day before, and a low dawn sun burning through the trees looked cautiously promising.

"How do you feel?" he said.

I flexed my legs experimentally. "Not too bad, actually."

"Me either."

He poured water into the filter cone. "I'm going to be good today," he promised.

"Good." I watched over his shoulder. "Is there a reason," I asked, "why you are filtering the coffee with toilet paper?"

"I...oh...I threw out the filter papers."

I gave a sound that wasn't quite a laugh and said, "They couldn't have weighed two ounces."

"I know, but they were great for throwing. Fluttered all over." He dribbled on more water. "The toilet paper seems to be working OK, though."

We watched it drip through and were strangely proud. Our first refreshment in the wilderness. He handed me a cup of coffee. It was swimming in grounds and little flecks of pink tissue, but it was piping hot, which was the main thing.

He gave me an apologetic look. "I threw out the brown sugar too, so there won't be any sugar for the oatmeal."

Ah. "Actually, there won't be any oatmeal for the oatmeal. I left it in New Hampshire."

He looked at me. "Really?" Then he added, as if for the record, "I love oatmeal."

"What about some of that cheese?"

He shook his head. "Flung."

"Peanuts?"

"Flung."

"Spam?"

"Really flung."

This was beginning to sound a trifle grave. "What about the baloney?"

"Oh, I ate that at Amicalola," he said, as if it had been weeks ago, and then added in a tone of sudden magnanimous concession, "Hey, I'm happy with a cup of coffee and a couple of Little Debbies."

I gave a small grimace. "I left the Little Debbies, too."

His face expanded. "You left the Little Debbies?"

I nodded apologetically.

"All of them?"

I nodded.

We breakfasted on a Snickers bar and coffee, packed up our camp, hoisted our packs with a sideways stagger, and set off once again.

"I can't believe you left the Little Debbies," Katz said, and immediately began to fall behind.