

## PATHS

"I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference." Robert Frost

We landed in Burlington, Vermont, after changing planes in Chicago. It was mid-October, and prime leaf-peeping season. My partner, a Denver native, had never seen an autumn in the Northeast and had watched the blazing foliage come into view as we circled the airport. The reds were so deep that they had a purple tinge, looking almost black in the bright sunlight. Picking up our rental car, we headed towards Stowe, and the bed and breakfast that would be our temporary home.

As Coloradans, we had an inflated sense of our physical abilities and were looking forward to hiking the trails around Stowe; particularly parts of the Long Trail, which runs 273 miles through the length of the state. The Long Trail is the oldest long-distance route in the United States, constructed between 1910 and 1930 by the Green Mountain Club. A 10 mile section of the trail has gained notoriety because six people vanished in that area between 1945 and 1950. Only one body was discovered and the fates of the other missing persons remains a mystery.

From the front yard of our bed and breakfast we could see Mt. Mansfield, the highest point of the Long Trail. Packing food and water, we decided to hike to the "chin" of Mt. Mansfield, a day hike that looked reasonable. Our host was very surprised that we were hiking up the trail but, as we didn't have the Colorado elevation to deal with, we were confident that we would make it to the summit by lunch. What we hadn't calculated was the fact that steep, wet, granite trails would be a challenge.

An hour into our hike we hadn't seen another soul and wondered why we were the only people on the trail. As it got steeper and more precarious my confidence in my physical prowess began to diminish. But the sun was warm and the sky was a soft blue, so I took deep breaths and continued on. At one point the trail was so rocky that I used my arms more than my legs and pulled myself forward. Hot, angry and tired we reached the "chin" and gasped at the incredible view spread out below. The orange, red, and gold leaves filled my eyes with their bright beauty. It felt like a show put on for me alone,.

Then I turned around and saw crowds of people, some in flip-flops, some carrying large picnic baskets. Turning to a ranger who stood nearby I asked how they had managed to climb the trail with such inadequate footwear and so much food. Actually, she said, there is a road just on the other side of the trail and most people drive up here.

Hours later, as the trail down was harder than the trail up and the rocks seemed more lethal as I struggled to keep my balance, we arrived back at our room. Muscles aching, we both had to laugh at our arrogance. But to this day I am grateful that we did not drive up the mountain, tempting as it seems in retrospect, but took the harder path. The memory of that day, and the satisfaction of the climb, has often kept me from looking for an easy way out. "And that has made all the difference..."

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