

Hiking in the shadow of a disastrous family trip up New York's highest peak

BY PAUL GREENBERG

WHEN YOU GROW UP under the care of a parent who is so completely a mess, your chief struggle is to be not a mess when you yourself become a parent. Often that struggle is humdrum and nearly invisible in the way it is embedded in daily life. The lunch box that isn't gross, the school pickup that's never late. But on the exposed rock dome atop the Adirondacks' highest peak with an early winter wind raging and my nine-year-old son wet and cold and half a day's difficult hike remaining, all my pretensions of being the not-a-mess dad fell away. It would be possible to die up here, I thought when I considered the hike still remaining to Lake Tear of the Clouds and then an extended ass-slide all the way back down to Johns Brook Lodge. Either that or we'll be rescued by some other, much more responsible fathers.

That Luke and I were actually standing on Mount Marcy's summit was already something of a miracle to me. Up until this harsh, gray afternoon my son wasn't much of a hiker and he'd entered that phase of boyhood where staying close to home, nearby snacks and soccer fields, was his first resort. Indeed, his was turning out to be a boyhood unsettlingly different from my own. I had been a classic 1970s latchkey kid who eschewed both latch and key. I'd grown up in rental cottages on vast backwoods estates in Greenwich, Connecticut. I spent my after-school afternoons trespassing and poaching largemouth bass and would come home evenings just as my divorced temporary secretary of a mom would be pouring herself a second Scotch.

My son, meanwhile, wholeheartedly embraced the helicoptered life. We live in a Manhattan apartment a short walk from school and he is seldom alone, let alone in a forest alone. And so when I picked Luke up from PS 150 one October afternoon and he announced that his class was studying the Hudson River and that he had just learned that the Hudson's source was a body of water

TWO SIDES OF MOUNT MARCY

ILLUSTRATION BY AARON MCCONNOMY, COLAGENE.COM



Fateful crew: Ruth, Paul and Matthew Greenberg around the time they assaulted—and were assaulted by—Mount Marcy. The author and his son, Luke, atop Marcy. Facing page: Ruth, a life-long nature-lover and bird-watcher, on a more pleasant outing.

called Lake Tear of the Clouds, it was almost as a joke that I said to him, “You know, we could go to that lake. It’s on Mount Marcy. I’ve climbed that mountain before.”

“When could we go?”

“Um. I dunno. End of the month?”

“OK.”

“OK?”

“Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Because fathers derive their magical powers from a kind of confidence game, I tried not to reflect much on the previous, disastrous time I’d climbed Mount Marcy with my mother as I prepared for the trip with my son. When he and I had looked at the trail map in the warm confines of our Manhattan apartment, Lake Tear of the Clouds seemed to be just a small detour. The plan was we’d summit Marcy, then make a little loop around the summit and in the bright clear light of a classic Adirondack autumn day, we’d step down to the shore of Tear of the Clouds and then I’d dip a specially brought glass jar into its crystalline waters and we’d capture the rare prize that no other fifth-grader at PS 150 would possess: A jarful of the Hudson River’s very source, secured forever on our mantel, documenting the epic climb.

Now as I considered the trail map and watched ice crystals fall upon it and melt down its face I realized the little “loop” I’d planned would require our summiting Skylight, Haystack and Little Haystack Mountains before rejoining the trail home. The only alternative was a “shortcut” down something called “Panther Gorge” and then a scramble back up Marcy’s summit a second time and then finally back down to Johns Brook Lodge.

“Can we go get our Lake Tear of the Clouds water now?” Luke asked brightly. He was still buoyed up by the thrill of reaching Marcy’s summit and the unnecessarily large amount of GORP I’d packed. Riding a sugar high, he did not know how he would

crash in the hours ahead.

But I did.

It’s something my mother taught me.

THE WORST THING about my mother was that she was a terrible liar. I don’t mean that she was bad at lying. I mean that she lied terribly often and that when she was found out it would be revealed that her lies concealed something truly terrible. A fib that my pet hamster had been “hurt” in a run-in with our cat when in fact he had been devoured and

then replaced with a much darker and uglier rodent. A fabrication that she did in fact have enough money to cover university tuition, debunked at the bursar’s office by a cold stare that caused us to literally pull coins from our pockets in a last-ditch attempt to make bank.

But perhaps my mother’s worst lie was the lie she told my brother back in the early 1980s that she felt fully capable at the age of 48 of climbing Mount Marcy.

“I spoke with her at length the night before the climb,” my brother Matt recalled recently. “I tried to impress upon her how hard the climb was; how in order to make it up and back before dark we wouldn’t be able to stop for breaks; how her smoker’s lungs were going to be an issue. The more I tried to argue, the more intransigent she became.”

The first third of the trip went smoothly. My brother, his friend Peter and I were all in good spirits. Even my mom seemed optimistic. The real problems began in the second third of the climb when Marcy becomes an agonizing and seemingly endless staircase. She demanded a break every five minutes. Each time, she would pull out a cigarette. My brother told her that we had to pick up the pace, that we couldn’t have these constant stops, that we’d get stuck on the mountain after dark. And above all he told her not to smoke.

“Why can’t you be more supportive?” she yelled. “Do you know how hard this is for me?” She began to regress. As my brother recalls, “She had started the climb as a woman in her late 40s; by the midpoint she had become a 12-year-old.”

It only got worse. Every time my brother tried to encourage her up the mountain she would screech back, “Macho! Macho! Macho!” But that wasn’t what got him.

“She crossed the line into full-blown Oedipal meltdown,” remembers Matt. “Harvey! Harvey! Harvey!” she yelled, calling my brother by her ex-husband’s name. “I had become Dad and she had become a six-year-old.”

Finally, we got to the last part of the climb—the part where Marcy announces itself as a sheer, lichen-speckled dome of cold, barren rock. The same dome I stood upon much later with my son, Luke.

“This is impossible!” my mother cried. “All of you have to stop. This is too dangerous!”

It was then that she revealed to my brother that this whole thing was a kind of self-dare, that she’d had a near-fatal climbing fall while banding peregrine falcons with an ornithologist boyfriend back in the 1950s. That this was the highest she’d been on a mountain since that fateful climb. And now she was petrified.

We told her that we were going to finish this climb regardless. She would have to wait there alone. And this, my brother recalls,

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was the worst moment for her—the idea that her kids would leave her behind. She resolved to try. My brother told her to go ahead. That he would catch her if she fell.

“Macho! Macho! Macho!” she yelled.

By the time we reached the summit the sun was already angling down in the sky.

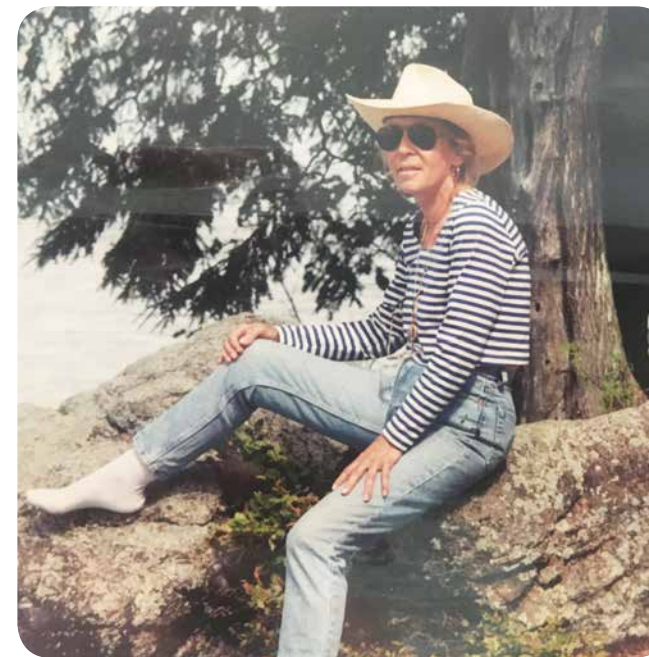
And that’s when we realized my mother’s other bit of misinformation. She had not packed as much food and water as we thought she had. She did not think to have us save half of our sandwiches during our summit celebration. As we headed back down the mountain we had nary a raisin nor a Coke. That oversight was the defining aspect of the descent. An agonizing, knee-splitting shout-fest that petered off into silence as all of our stomachs gurgled and our slack limbs slunk down the desultory root-and-rock staircases of Marcy. Downward we stumbled into the darkening birch forests, the white trunks looming like ghostly sentinels. The only break came when our heroic friend Peter sprinted miles ahead, bought a brace of Charleston Chews at the Adirondak Loj, and then sprinted them back to us.

Up until my climb with my own child, when I thought of Mount Marcy I thought of two things: Charleston Chews and lies.

WE TEACH OUR children all kinds of things we never mean to teach them. What I came to learn from my mother was how to tell the difference between fact-based planning and magical thinking. It was her oversights that had prompted me to weigh down my son’s and my packs 35 years later with two pounds of GORP, a pound each of salami, cheese, ham and turkey, a dozen apples, four muffins and six chocolate bars. It was her shortcomings as a reality-based thinker that had me book us at Johns Brook Lodge instead of the Adirondak Loj for our summit attempt—a piece of planning that cut the return time to a warm bed by several hours. But it was another skill I inadvertently learned from my mother that may have possibly saved our lives atop New York’s highest peak. A skill that came from the depths of my soul as we considered our next steps.

“When,” my son repeated, “are we going to go get our Lake Tear of the Clouds water?”

It was 1 p.m. Sunset would be at 6 p.m. If we headed straight down to the lodge, we would make it to well-marked trails with perhaps a little bit of gloaming still remaining in the sky and a little bit of spring left in our steps. If, however, we were to head down the south slope of Marcy down Panther Gorge to Lake Tear of the Clouds to get our precious drops, all bets were off. If I thought about myself in my best lights and my son in his, I could make the magical argument that, sure, we could make that “little loop” in an hour. Or so. But when I real- (Continued on page 79)



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ly thought about it, about how I could already feel my 49-year-old knees giving out, how I could see how my son's enthusiasm would fade to a cool ember of itself in the persistent rain, I realized that I had no other choice.

I had to lie.

"You know," I said to Luke, drawing his attention to the puddles of water that had formed in the divots of Marcy's summit. "This water here, sooner or later, it's going to run downhill. And you know where it will end up?"

"Lake Tear of the Clouds?"

"Yeah. And we can just take this water and it will be, um, the same."

The air was full of pause and fear. And then, like a sun clearing the clouds, Luke smiled.

"OK!"

"OK?"

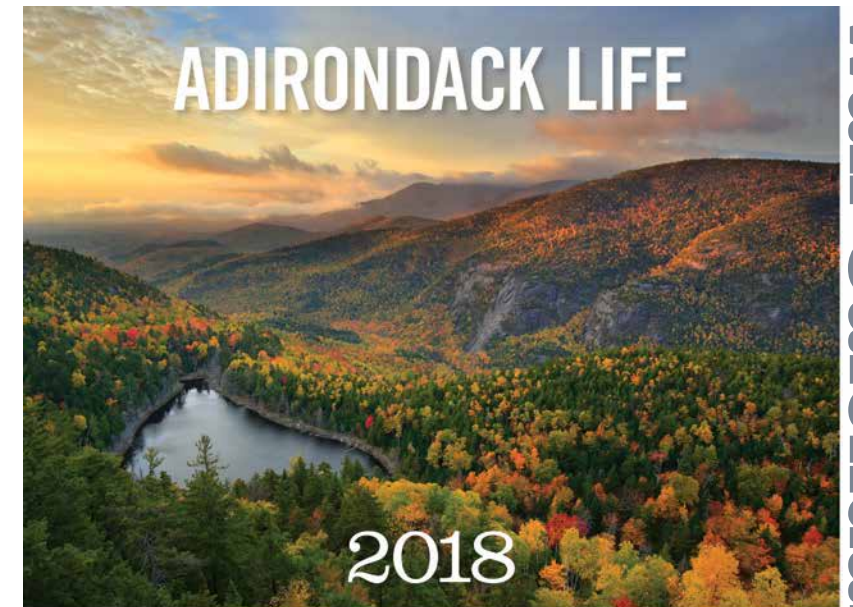
"Yeah, sure!"

The climb down was as much of a blur as that earlier one back in 1982. What I remember is that this time there was food. Lots of it. In the end I did not feel like a type-A lunatic at all when Luke and I wolfed down our eighth sandwich each. And as the sun completely vanished a mile from the lodge I remembered to let Luke take a break here and there. But not too many breaks. I had to keep us going. I sang Beatles songs that he knew. We did all of Sgt. Pepper's and when there was still more endless trail ahead, we started into *Abbey Road*. And when finally we saw the lodge winking out at us from the darkness and made the last push to the end of the trail, it was with a feeling of relief, not defeat, that we high-fived and hugged each other.

A cheer went up from all the other hikers as we stepped inside.

"Good thing you made it," the Johns Brook Lodge caretaker said. "Another hour and we'd have had to send out a search party." ▲

Paul Greenberg is the best-selling author of *Four Fish*, *American Catch* and the forthcoming *Omega Principle*. A *Pew Fellow in Marine Conservation* and the writer-in-residence at the Safina Center, he lives with his partner and son in New York City and intends to be a 46er before he reaches 60.



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