

NADINE MCINNIS

ZERO DAY

MY DAD SAID TO ME, “We’re going to take a zero day, no matter what your mom says. We’re drenched as a drowned dog.”

Rogaine, the dog we picked up on the Appalachian Trail in Virginia, turned around, cocked his head expectantly, and started panting.

My dad, whose trail name is Hell Yeah, laughed just like he did on day one of the trail, when he picked up his nickname and the three of us were still shiny and new to this. “See that? Even he knows we pushed things too far last night.”

“He just knows the word *dog*. He’s okay,” I said as I picked up a pinecone and threw it as far as I could down the trail. Rogaine went tearing after it. I was secretly happy we were going to take a break. My running shoes were making a squishy sound, and the bottoms of my big toes had blisters on them because I’d grown and my socks were too small. My feet had poked holes in the wet wool, but I didn’t want him to know that.

There was a big birch down across the trail ahead, its leaves blowing around yellow and orange like a fire. I jumped up on the length of it and yelled, “I’m the queen of the world!” I saw that in a movie once, only it was “king of the world,” and they were on a boat instead of in the woods. That was when we were sleeping in a church basement in Pearisburg, Virginia after a fire wiped out the outskirts of the town and burned part of the trail to a crisp. We had to wait before we could get back on until all the little fires weren’t going to jump up again. We were on cots beside families whose trailers and mobile homes had burned away, and I thought of how lucky we were.

Rogaine wasn’t Rogaine then. He was just a yellow dog with bald spots who was hanging around the parking lot. They gave me too much food in the shelter: corn on the cob, hot dogs, big slurpy bowls of canned peaches, and so much Coke I felt like my nose was lit up like a sparkler. Rogaine came running every time I snuck out the door and ran around in tight circles with

my corncob in his mouth. Pure joy.

My mom, whose trail name was Twitchy, couldn't take the TV, the steamy smell of the food, and all the people in big families brushing their teeth around the same sink, so we headed back out on the trail even though our tent was ripped. She never worried much about weather, fire, or anything like that. She just needed to get a move on.

Twitchy relaxed when we were back out on the trail, even though I was coughing from the smell of the ash. Little wisps of bluish-grey smoke still lazily corkscrewed up here and there even though any fuel for fire was gone.

Hell Yeah gave me the bandana from around his neck and said, "You're short, Chiclet. Here, put this over your face." I loved the smell of it, which was like him tucked beside me in the tent at night—like salt, metal, and a bit of fresh camp food when we stopped in a town to pick up some onions that we carried with us for a day or two until we ran out and had to wait until we came down out of hills into the next town.

My mom liked the puzzle of the downed trees and scorched ground. She was always out ahead of Hell Yeah and me, and her hair stood out against the ash because she dyed it green in North Carolina on one of our zero days. That was a big change because normally her head blended in with all the summer leaves. If she was too far ahead, she looked like a headless woman, which was creepy but also a little funny.

"This is to remember Springer Mountain," she said when she came back with her new hair, "where this all began. Our first day of real freedom." That was before I had my trail name, Chiclet.

Hell Yeah whooped at the sight of her returning from the drugstore in Wesser where a trail friend, Hoop Girl, did her hair in a public bathroom. "Hell yeah!" he said. "I won't lose *you* in a crowd."

I remember wanting my hair done like that too, but then I wasn't so sure.

The bright green was mostly faded now that we were in Maine, just like the light and heat in the sky. But the air was wet after last night's storm on the top of Saddleback Mountain, and the colour was there a little bit again. Her hair was stringy and greenish, and now that the leaves were mostly gone I could see her head too clearly, as though her thoughts were written in a bubble above her. "Keep moving." "What's on top of that mountain?" "Bears are more scared of you than you should be of them." There were also thoughts I couldn't make out, as if they were written in Chinese, Russian,

or some other alphabet. She got this look of concentration on her face when we were going up a big mountain. Her feet hit the rocks with a pounding rhythm, like a grouse startled from the undergrowth. She never liked to stop when she was out of breath, even if Hell Yeah needed a break.

“Slow down and smell the roses,” he yelled after her. I dawdled with him, even though I didn’t need to catch my breath. He pulled something out of his pocket for me. Again, it was Chiclets, my favourite—especially these, the cherry kind.

“Have two or three! When the flavour is gone, spit it out. I don’t want you to choke with all this heavy breathing.” He knocked me on my chin with his thumb.

“I can fly up this mountain,” I said, my arms out wide as I ran as much in circles as I could. Rogaine jumped, barked, and then nipped my backside.

“Sugar has magical properties,” he said. “It turned you into a fly!”

“Buzz, buzz,” I said. Rogaine was wild with joy, his little yips answering my every buzz.

Then he stopped me and said, “Look, there’s Sugarloaf Mountain. When I was your age, I thought people skied down that mountain on dry sugar, and that’s why everyone in Montreal said it had the most perfect snow.”

“That’s dumb.”

“Hell yeah!” he yelled out to the sky—something he hadn’t done much since the weather turned colder.

Sugarloaf didn’t look very magical to me. It was scarred with treeless paths, where skiers would be whizzing down in just a month or so, and nothing looked alive except for the spruce trees. We scrambled over some boulders, headed down a steep hill, and heard rushing water. Twitchy was waiting at the side of a river bubbling with brown water, the white foam almost coffee-coloured. She was squatting, filtering water into her bottle.

“Stopped dead in your tracks finally?” he said, and she turned to look at us coming down the trail towards her. She didn’t smile.

“There’s always a way to cross. I just didn’t want to get separated from you.”

“Now that’s a thought,” he said.

“We’ve got lots of light left. Camel up, Chiclet,” she said, holding out her full water bottle. “We can wait a little for the runoff to clear and be into the Bigelow Preserve by nightfall. Maybe even get back up onto the ridgeline.”

"No. We stop in Stratton and dry out," my dad said, sounding like my old dad when we lived in Montreal. "Tomorrow is November. Time for a change."

Twitchy studied the river and didn't say anything, but her hands were doing that clenching movement—open, closed, open, closed. She never hiked with poles because she hated the sound they made on the stones.

"Look, there are some rocks above the water line. They're dry." And she was off, down the shoreline, and already out in the middle of the rushing water before we had anything to say about it. She was springing weightless across the water, as though she didn't have a pack on her back.

Hell Yeah took me by the hand, although I was too old for that, and told me to climb on top of his pack, although I was too old for that too. He moved beneath me like an old workhorse, leaning to one side then another as he placed his poles one by one in the current. I didn't breathe so as not to disturb his concentration. My hands were around his neck, and his beard tickled my fingers. His scalp smelled so good it made me hungry.

Once we were across, Rogaine started barking from the other side, running back and forth but not getting his feet wet.

"Help him, Dad." I never called him that, and he looked at me, surprised.

"Dogs can swim, Chiclet. He'll find his way across," Twitchy said.

"He'll drown!" I was wailing now.

"Enough with the drama. Do you think he doesn't have instincts?"

All the browns and greens were blurring until I blinked back tears that ran cold onto my cheeks. Something dropped beside me, and at first I thought it was Hell Yeah and that something terrible had happened, but it was only his pack falling onto rock from his full height above me. With his poles, he was back out in the middle of the turbulent river, then Rogaine was on his back with his paws wrapped around his neck, the same as me. How did he know how to do that? I took my own pack off and sat down. Then Rogaine was licking the tears off my face with his warm velvety tongue.

We reached Stratton when it was getting dark. Now and then a truck drove by on the highway, too loud after the quiet of the trail. The buildings were dark on one side of the road and lit up on the other. The dark side was my favourite because of how the jack-o'-lanterns flickered orange like the last embers of a stealth campfire. We went into a gas station that had a jack-o'-lantern in the window. Behind the cash stood a witch in black with a black

pointed hat.

“No gas,” the witch said. “The power’s been out all day, but we have coffee. Cash only.” She didn’t smile at me, even though she was all dressed up for Halloween. She wasn’t friendly like the people on the trail, although we hadn’t seen any trail people for the last week.

Some kids came in dressed up—one as a space man with a hat made out of a big funnel covered with tin foil and another with a tall ponytail, black eye shadow, and a short skirt with sparkles. The woman behind the counter lifted a bowl of little chocolate bars and held it out across the counter. My mouth watered, and I suddenly remembered the last time I went out for Halloween in Montreal and the strange weight of the antlers bound to my head with bungee cords under my hat. My nose was painted black, and I wore a fake fur snowsuit that Mom, who wasn’t Twitchy then, soaked in tea to make brown. Everyone opened the door of the tall houses of the rich people, and the black statue of Jacques Cartier in Saint Henri Square stood out against the icy trees swaying under the streetlights. There were jack-o’-lanterns on every porch around the square and sometimes on every stair leading up to tall carved front doors. The colder the air, the warmer the orange glow of all those little flames.

I missed our place with its curving rickety staircase. I wondered how big the crack in the ceiling was that I followed all last winter. Would it have reached the curlicues and fleur-de-lis of the medallion that surrounded the ceiling light in my room? I missed having poutine with my dad at the diner. I missed the ice fog from the river. I missed the old factory near the canal with all the broken windows and the way the sky reflected in the glass that remained all fiery bright like headlights or heaven. I missed the church bells, the black cat next door, and my stuffed panda.

A man in the gas station reached over my head and grabbed a chocolate bar. I tried to get out of his way, but he touched my arm so I would raise my hand, dropped the chocolate bar into it, and said, “Are you dressed up as a ragamuffin?” But he wasn’t mean about it. He was kind, and I missed my grandpa, although I had only seen him twice that I could remember.

Rogaine must have slipped in the door when he came in. He was wagging his tail and whimpering a little.

The man bent down and gave him a scratch under his chin.

“Looks like he could use a good meal,” he said.

“Oh, he’s alright. He’s a good hunter. He gets lots of squirrels on the

trail.”

“You’re still on the trail this late in the season? Where did you come from?”

“Springer Mountain.”

“All the way from Georgia! Imagine that. So this dog is a squirrel hound. What about you?”

“Squirrel is okay, but I like rabbit better.” I pulled my lucky rabbit foot out of my pocket. I wished it was blue, pink, or even white, but it was brown and had a couple of sharp nails that I liked to press hard against with my thumb. Hell Yeah had carried it for a while until it dried out, and he gave it to me on my birthday somewhere in the Smoky Mountains.

“We’re going into the hundred-mile wilderness soon.”

“That sounds like a place out of a dream or a nightmare,” he said. “Are there trolls?”

“Maybe moose and foxes. Lots of boulders. We won’t see any road for a hundred miles. It might snow.”

“Sounds like a big adventure. I hope your parents know what they’re doing.”

“No dogs allowed in the store,” the witch said, so I went outside. Twitchy came back from the bathroom, and Hell Yeah was already outside waiting.

“We’re going to stop just down the road,” Hell Yeah said. “We need to dry out our gear.”

“It stopped raining, and I got fresh batteries for our headlamps,” Twitchy said. “Let’s at least get out of town.”

“No,” he said. “Enough.”

We didn’t talk as we trudged down the highway. The square light of the Stratton Motel was ahead of us, but it seemed to take forever to get closer. I was suddenly tired—more tired than I ever was on the trail, where the trees are always changing and the boulders are jumbled in strange shapes. That morning we were up on the ridgeline of Saddle Mountain and could see all the way back to Canada after the storm cleared out and left the sky a bright blue, but not even Canada seemed as far as that square light that spelled out *Backpackers Welcome*.

The road was covered with sawdust, and trees had toppled along the road. All the trees that still had leaves were down.

At first it looked like the Stratton Motel was closed because there were no lights on in the rooms, even though there was power on this side of the

highway. A creek beside the motel was roaring, scraping along, and overflowing into the ditches. The glittering surfaces of it were swirling fast. Then we saw someone in a green hat in the office and went in.

She was taking candy out of one of those plastic Halloween pumpkins and wearing a St. Patrick's Day bowler with bright green shamrocks and green sparkles. As she drew her hand out, I saw that it was shaking, and her speech was slow. Her left shoulder kept jerking a little, as though she was having an argument with someone we couldn't see.

"Welcome backpackers," she said. Then she stuffed an orange-wrapped candy kiss in her mouth, paper and all. The paper emerged a minute later, after the man with dreads came out from the back room to give us a key. She spit it into an ashtray.

"Go on back to the living room, Greta, and I'll get these people set up. Go on. Don't mind her. She's my aunt, and she's helping me tonight. She loves a holiday but sometimes can't keep them straight."

Hell Yeah and the man were trading trail stories as Twitchy hung out our tent and sleeping bags on a low clothesline just outside our room. I once saw a hot air balloon after it had landed in a field down south, and that's just what our tent looked like: soaking wet, boneless, and nothing holding it up any more—not even a flutter of animation.

All the other rooms were dark. Hell Yeah came back and gestured to get Twitchy to come into the room. I went too, but Rogaine stayed outside in the dark. It was too hot inside, with dry dusty air blowing out of the vents next to the bed.

"He said half of Maine lost power in that storm last night. Trees are down all over, and people are supposed to stay off the roads."

"Well, we're not on the roads, so it doesn't matter."

"It does so matter. We could have died last night."

"Do you want to make her scared? And we wouldn't have. We weren't even near any trees."

"Chic, why don't you go watch some TV with Mort in the office. He said you can," Hell Yeah said, so I went out into the night. I could hear their voices, even though I didn't want to. I concentrated instead on the fast-moving stream, the steady rushing windy sound of it. Usually we were tucked into our tent by now, our faces tingling around a stealth fire. Hell Yeah would bring rocks from the fire into the tent to warm the bottom of our sleeping bags, and I would lie between them with Rogaine tucked down near my feet.

Could we have died last night? We got really wet up on the ridgeline, and I had to hide behind a rock cairn while they tried to put up the tent in the wind. Finally we all crawled in and ate our gorp. The tent couldn't hold its shape, and the pitching of the walls was so loud and crazy we put out our headlamps because it was making me dizzy. The rain pounded on the roof until it started dripping on my head, but Twitchy stroked my forehead and kept the wet tent wall from blowing in my face. The floor was lifting at the four corners, and it felt like we might sail up from the mountaintop. My stomach felt funny, but I only woke up again when Hell Yeah unzipped the tent and a blast of rain hit me in the face. He came back four times with wet jagged rocks. Once back inside, he placed them in the four corners. I didn't fall back to sleep until his weight was beside me again, and I could feel the heat coming off him from his struggles out in the storm.

"Rogaine, where are you boy?" I couldn't see him, but then I did, scratching near the door of the office. I opened the door and went in.

Greta was still wearing her St. Patrick's Day hat.

"Welcome backpacker," she said. This time she held out the plastic pumpkin so I could take a candy, and I went around the counter where she was standing with one hand behind her back.

"Do you want to see my costume?" she said.

"I can see your hat."

"That's not my costume. Just wait until you see. It will trick you good."

"Okay, show me."

She grinned and brought her right arm from behind her back. At first I didn't know what I was looking at. There were at least eight fingers. Some of them were wriggling, and some were still as a statue with perfect pink skin. The wrist was circled in silver duct tape.

I laughed when I finally understood what it was.

"That's not a costume. That's a mannequin hand duct-taped to your hand."

"People shake my hand, and they think it's my real hand."

I reached out, and she pulled her own fingers into a ball beneath the fake hand. I shook the rigid plaster hand, which was too cold to be real flesh. Then she unfurled her real fingers and tickled my wrist. It felt like a huge hot spider crawling out from beneath the hand I had ahold of, and I shrieked.

"What are you doing to that child?" Mort yelled from the back room.

"Scaring her. It's Halloween."

I let go but immediately wanted to hold that hand again. The nails were painted pink, and all the bones were perfectly in line. I reached out and touched the hand again. I could feel how solid it was, unyielding, with no pulse. We were both quiet, holding but not holding hands. It was so perfect it made me want to hold my breath.

When I opened the door of our room later, it was quiet. Twitchy was lying under the covers on the bed near the bathroom with her back turned on the room, and Hell Yeah was in the other bed facing the window. Neither of them moved, and I wondered if they were asleep. But how could they be? We hadn't had anything to eat yet, only candy. I couldn't figure out what I was supposed to do next, as we always slept close together in the tent or in one of the lean-tos along the trail.

Rogaine decided for me when he jumped up on Hell Yeah's bed. After circling around, as though he didn't know how to get comfortable, he finally settled down with a weary sigh where I would normally be sleeping.

I slipped into Twitchy's bed instead, suddenly not even hungry, and listened to the rare truck pass by on the highway heading towards Canada. Light moved fast across the ceiling with each truck, like the falling stars from the meteor shower in August when we were still down south. It was like we were suddenly too close to the cold black sky, so the stars had a wind around them, and the light was probing as it went on its mysterious way into oblivion. Twitchy didn't turn towards me but lay perfectly still, and I had the feeling that she was awake but didn't want to let on. I couldn't even sense her breathing.

When I opened my eyes, Hell Yeah was already packing. Everything looked different in the light of day. Everything was different. Her pack was gone.

"Dad?"

He looked at me, waiting. Then he sat on the bed across from me and reached out to hold my hands. They were warm and dry, and I wanted to stay like this for a long time before we moved to the next minute.

"What do you say to going back to Montreal? I'd have to get a job and find a place to live. Maybe you could go to school. How would that be?"

My heart jumped, and I knew right away what I wanted. He got up and stuffed the last few things into the loose pocket, which was hanging a little worn and slack after all these months on the trail. "C'mon, do your teeth,

and we'll grab breakfast before we head out."

"Where's mom? Where's the tent?" He was snapping closed his pack, and the poles weren't in their usual spot.

"You know what we say, right? HYOH."

"Hike your own hike."

"She wanted to peak Katahdin. More than anything, she wanted to get there."

I started to cry with all this confusion over the last day. Two thousand miles in heat and cold, bugs and storm-swollen rivers, boulders and scree, the windstorm on the mountain ridgeline, had nothing on this.

"She's going to go through the hundred-mile wilderness alone?" Now I was really wailing.

"Not alone. She has Rogaine."

That was even worse. We were torn exactly in half. He sat beside me on the bed and put his arm around me as I drenched the front of his sweater.

"HYOH. This is hers." He rocked me as though I were a little child, and after a long while I started to feel a bit embarrassed.

"It's not so far, you know. One hundred miles is nothing after all we've been through. She'll reach the end, and then she'll be back. You'll see."

I didn't see my mother for years after that. She made it to Mount Katahdin and sent a digital photo of herself at the summit, which was nothing but a knife-edge of jumbled shapes with nothing alive up there at all. Rogaine wasn't in the photo, and by the time I saw her again it was too late to ask if he made it through the hundred-mile wilderness with her. She wintered in Millinocket, got a job, and found a place to stay with a bunch of other hikers. The next spring she climbed Mount Katahdin again and became a south-bounder or SoBo, heading back to Georgia. After that we didn't hear from her very much.

How did she take her leave? Did she kiss me, or watch me sleep? I like to think of her resting her hand on my forehead in one final motherly gesture before she made her way out into the pre-dawn wilderness. But perhaps it is more expedient to do away with such gestures when a person is compelled by some drive stronger than love.

He gave me the key. "Go on and drop this off, and I'll meet you outside. I'm going to enjoy that indoor plumbing one more time."

“Are we hiking back to Canada?” I asked.

“No. You’re right. Lots of bathrooms in our immediate future.”

No one was in the office, and all the curtains were drawn in the living area behind the counter. They must have still been sleeping. The fake hand was on the counter with duct tape trailing from its wrist. I picked it up, surprised at how heavy it was, and thought of taking it with me in my pack. Weight didn’t matter now that we were leaving the trail. Turning it over, I looked down into the empty air inside the wrist where the bone, blood, and pulse should have been. I thought it would be pink inside, but it was just dark and stale-smelling. I didn’t really want it, and Greta would probably miss it if she woke up and discovered that it was gone.