

# ONLY WHEN I STEP ON IT

ONE MAN'S INSPIRING JOURNEY  
TO HIKE THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL ALONE

*A Memoir*

**PETER E CONTI**

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I’ve altered the names of some places and people as well as edited timelines to protect the innocent. This indulgence allows me to share every part of my journey without maligning or disturbing the many interesting characters I met along the way.

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*Front Cover Photo—McAfee Knob, the most  
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*This book is dedicated to all the seriously injured people that I've met over the past eight years. I know that each of you is challenged every day to make the most of your new normal. If this book helps you to feel a little bit better or perhaps distracts you from the pain that may continuously demand your attention, even for a moment, then I will consider this writing to be a success.*

*For it is in that split second, when you are first able to “not notice” the pain, that a window in your soul opens up to give you that first spark of hope, a hint of possibility for a better life to come.*

*This adventure would not have been possible without mountainous amounts of encouragement, support, and understanding from my beautiful wife, Joanna.*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue.....	7
Chapter 1: Please Stop the Pain.....	9
Chapter 2: A Wolf in The Dark.....	23
Chapter 3: A Good Time to Begin is Now.....	30
Chapter 4: Everything Changes in a Second.....	56
Chapter 5: Caring Angels.....	62
Chapter 6: In The Trauma Center.....	97
Chapter 7: I Can't Do This Yet.....	119
Chapter 8: Summer – Getting Energy Back.....	158
Chapter 9: Fall – Tiny Steps Forward.....	163
Chapter 10: January – I'm Perfectly Fine.....	178
Chapter 11: February – Back on the Trail.....	192
Chapter 12: March – A New Tent.....	219
Chapter 13: April – Magic Spots.....	237
Chapter 14: May – Finding a Buddy.....	266
Chapter 15: June – Another Close Call.....	295
Chapter 16: July – Help From Tim Ferris.....	324
Chapter 17: August – Meeting Weird Characters.....	356
Chapter 18: September – A Different Ending.....	386
Epilogue.....	462
Appalachian Trail Hiking Clubs.....	464



## PROLOGUE

### *Somewhere on the Appalachian Trail*

**M**y fingers were beginning to cramp up from holding onto the rock face in front of me. I hadn't seen anyone all day. I'd spent the entire morning clambering up the mountainous pile of rocks, using my hands and feet like a chimpanzee.

Now I tried and missed for the umpteenth time to swing my leg up to a toe hold that would allow me to push up and grab onto the tree root that was just beyond the reach of my right arm.

*What the heck am I doing here? I can't do this!*

The aching, burning sensations in my leg reminded me of why I was there. I guess you could call it a mission. I was determined to heal myself.

I wanted to get moving so I could warm up, but I'd been stuck there for half an hour.

I looked around, searched for other options, and finally decided to retreat down after finding none. Using my bum leg, I tried to feel around below for a place to step, but all I could find was the mountainside's smooth rock face.

And to think that a blind guy hiked the Appalachian Trail. That's when the rain came pouring down.





# 1



## PLEASE STOP THE PAIN

---

FOR THOSE THAT LOOK AT THE  
REASONS WHY YOU CANNOT DO  
SOMETHING, PERHAPS YOU ARE  
LOOKING AT IT THE WRONG WAY.  
CONSIDER WHY YOU MUST.

---

**M**y wife, Joanna, and I were having lunch at the Park Tavern with Tom, a friend of hers who had been paralyzed ten years ago. It had been 18 months since I had been injured and I was doing my best to keep it together. My foot and leg were hurting so much that I couldn't sit still.

Tom, the poor guy, had been working as a ski patrol when he caught an edge coming down the bunny hill, of all places.

His accident had left him paralyzed from the waist down with, as he described it, “intense pain in my butt.”

Joanna brought him up to speed on how I had gotten injured and explained that I was still on opioid pain medications.

“He needs to get off that stuff. It’s not good for him, and his memory is getting really bad,” she said.

My mind wandered, occasionally focusing long enough to think, *she can say whatever she wants. I’m not getting off Oxycontin. At least not until they give me something else to take this never-ending pain away.*

“I didn’t want to be on pain killers, so somehow I found a way for me to just not think about it,” Tom said.

“What? How do you do that?” I asked. *He must be delirious. He couldn’t possibly have dealt with pain like I have, could he?*

“I tried to notice a moment when I wasn’t thinking about it,” he said. “Once I realized that I could do that for a few seconds, it opened the door to be able to go for longer periods of time. It doesn’t always work, especially when I get tired at the end of the day. But if I have a hard day, then I go to bed at night knowing that tomorrow will be a better day.”

I didn’t believe him. I figured that maybe that worked for him, but it certainly wouldn’t work for me. My leg and foot were hurting every single second of the day, and that was *with* all the pain medications that I was on. I’m a bit ashamed to admit that I sat there pretending to listen while assuming such an outlandish idea would simply never work.

In hindsight, I can see that he had planted a tiny little seed of possibility in my mind that day. I desperately wanted a way to fix my life. Things had gotten out of control. Every day was never-ending pain. I had to find a way out.

Over the next few months, I continued to feel like chronic pain had kidnapped my life. I wanted it back. Instead of getting out and doing things, I lived each day sitting on the couch watching Netflix to try and distract myself from the searing sensation in my leg.

By this point, I'd been to twenty-three different doctors searching for a way to reduce the pain, hoping for a solution that would allow me to heal. With each new doctor, book, and web search, my hopes rose as I envisioned myself getting back to normal within a matter of weeks or, worst case, within a few months.

Having raced motocross when I was much younger, I had plenty of experience with injuries and broken bones. When I was initially injured, I expected that my shattered hip and crushed nerve in my leg would take several months, maybe a little longer, to heal up most of the way. When I was much younger, after an injury I'd wear a cast for six weeks or so, my damaged body part would be sore for a few months and then I'd be all healed up. Not such a big deal.

The truth is that breaking bones is bad, but damaging nerves is a whole new ballgame.

I had tried everything from morphine, opioids, and a bunch of nerve medications to physical therapy, walking in pools, hanging upside-down, and various anti-depressants and anti-convulsants that were supposed to help reduce nerve pain. I couldn't move my left leg below my knee for the first year, so my muscles had atrophied away. I had to wear a clunky foot brace to keep from tripping over my own foot.

I went to a neurologist who ran some tests only to tell me, "I'm sure they told you it could have been much worse. You shouldn't expect to get any better than you are now."

*Oh really? %\*\$# you*, I thought while trying my hardest not to cry. *I'm not going to believe that!* I went to get a second opinion. But the other neurologist told me the same thing. "Sorry, but your lower leg isn't getting any nerve signals. Whatever you were able to get back in the first year is all that most people can expect."

What if it really wasn't possible for me to overcome this constant pain? That thought was too much to deal with, so I pushed it off to the side. One thing was certain: I wasn't going to live the rest of my life this way. Suicide wasn't really an option, although to be honest, I had considered it at one point. Maybe I'll share that story with you when we're sitting around the campfire sometime. For now, I'd reached a point where I knew that I wanted my life back, but I couldn't find a way to make it happen.

Five months later, I was sitting at City Dock Coffee, one of my favorite coffee shops where I live in Annapolis, Maryland, writing in my journal. I like to write down all kinds of thoughts and ideas and have found that this can sometimes lead to practical answers or solutions. I'll write out a question and then mentally step out of my limited viewpoint by pretending to be the wise old sage who has answers to everything.

So, here's what I wrote:

- I need to find a way to embrace my injury and quit this life of avoiding it because it sucks!
- How can I make my injury an advantage?
- How can I become surrounded by people who cheer me on to challenge this and overcome my injury?

I checked in with the wise old sage but wasn't able to come up with any answers. I've found that sometimes bigger challenges take more time. I let this sit, trusting that God, my mind, or whatever would eventually come up with something for me to try.

A few weeks later, my wife and I saw the movie "Wild" where Reese Witherspoon's character hikes the Pacific Crest Trail. There's a scene where her hiking boots go over the edge of a cliff, leaving her in the middle of the wilderness with no apparent way out. I could relate to this because I didn't see any way out from the pain that had haunted me every day for the past twenty-three months.

After seeing the movie, I read David Miller's book *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* and a few others written by people who'd thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail. To become a thru-hiker, you must complete all 2,189 miles of the trail within a year. Most people attempt this by leaving everything else in their life behind and taking about half a year off to hike the whole way from Georgia to Maine.

Thru-hiking the entire Appalachian Trail is no easy feat. It's roughly the distance between Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. A thru-hiker will experience 464,500 feet of elevation change, or sixteen climbs up Mount Everest and back down to sea level. Thousands of people attempt an Appalachian Trail thru-hike every year, yet only one in four hikers finish the journey. They typically take five to seven months to complete the entire trail, according to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

Officially it's called the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, but most people know it as the Appalachian Trail or simply

the AT. I had been introduced to the AT many years ago by reading *A Walk in The Woods* by Bill Bryson. At the time I had thought hiking the AT would be fun to do but figured I'd never have the time to do it.

After reading a few more books about the Appalachian Trail I thought, *I wonder if I could do that?*

I knew that I couldn't run or even ride a bike, but I could walk as long as I had my cane. And I figured that hiking couldn't be that much more demanding than walking.

And then I thought, *if I were to hike 2,000 miles, then my foot and leg would have to be better.* And after thinking about it some more, I decided that I would do it. I would start my hike on March 3rd, the two-year anniversary of the day I was injured. This anniversary was significant to me because I *never* expected I'd still be hurting two whole years later. It was a point that I thought I'd never reach. What better time to set off on an adventure that I hoped, dreamed, and prayed would finally solve the seemingly inescapable trap I'd fallen into.

If I were going to head off into the wilderness for five or six months, the first challenge would be to find a way to warm my wife up to the idea. We've always supported each other during our twenty-plus years of marriage. Both of us have started and run various businesses. Joanna founded an international non-profit and even ran for U.S. Congress at one point.

The next day, I managed to casually mention to her that I was thinking of hiking the Appalachian Trail. She smiled and said, "Oh, that's nice, honey. Maybe that's something that you could work up to."

I don't think that she really believed me and, to be truthful with you, I had major doubts myself. My boastful claim to

hike several thousand miles to heal my leg wasn't based on any experience or even reality, for that matter. With all the pain I was in, I was hesitant to take the dog down the street for a walk, much less hike over 2,000 miles through fourteen different states.

Since I hadn't ever backpacked before, I started watching YouTube videos and reading what I could online along with every hiking book that I could get my hands on to find out what type of supplies and gear I might need if I were going to go on a long hike like this. Each book or article that I read would mention two or three other new things that I thought I might need to take with me.

I discovered that long-distance hiking was a whole different ball of wax compared to taking the kids car camping. I would have to get into shape, buy freeze-dried food, energy bars, and other supplies that would need to be organized into "resupply boxes" that could be shipped to towns along the trail.

I would also need a tent, sleeping bag and pad, a water filtration system, portable cookstove, cold weather gear, raincoat, rain pants, and a whole bunch of other stuff. I quickly figured out that I would need to carry all this stuff in my pack. Therefore, I also needed to purchase the lightest possible version of each item.

I drove out to our local REI store to look at some gear and figure out how much all of this would set me back. I looked at some of the basics and could see right away that this wasn't going to be cheap. As I wandered around the store, I discovered all kinds of handy-looking camping stuff, most of which I didn't even know existed. While all of this looked enticing, I was hesitant to buy a bunch of gear until I was sure that I would be able to actually go hiking.

My concern was alleviated once I discovered that REI has a lifetime “no questions asked” return policy. Despite this liberal policy, I was hesitant enough to limit myself to getting just a set of hiking poles. I figured with the poor balance I had with my injured leg, I’d for sure need those. Besides, how much could they cost? Thirty or forty bucks?

I went over to the hiking-poles section to see what they had available. I focused on a pair that appeared to be lightweight and folded up nicely. That must be an advantage—why else would they make them that way?

I looked at the tag to see what the price was. It said \$139.00, but that must be a mistake. Maybe a clerk had meant to put \$39.00 and accidentally hit an extra digit. I checked the price tag on all the other sets.

*\$139.00 for hiking poles?*

I put them back down and walked away, asking myself, *am I really going to do this?* Then I pictured myself back at home, sitting on the sofa with my leg killing me. I picked the poles up, paid for them, and drove home.

The next day, although I still had quite a bit of concern over my abilities, I confidently announced to Joanna, “I’ve decided that *I am* going to hike the Appalachian Trail.”

Joanna had a puzzled look on her face and didn’t say anything.

I spoke up and added, “I’m starting in three weeks, on March 3<sup>rd</sup>.”

“Okay . . . Do you have anyone you can go with?”

“Ah . . . No. I’m going by myself.”

“You’re going alone? ALL ALONE?”

“Well, I, uh . . . might meet some people on the trail.”



“What happens if something goes wrong?”

“I’ll be fine!” I insisted. “What could possibly go wrong?”

“And you’re starting March 3<sup>rd</sup>?”

“Yup, that’s the plan.”

“That’s in three weeks.”

“Uh . . . yeah, I guess so.”

“And you’re going to be down in Georgia by then?”

“Yeah. I was thinking of taking the train.”

“Well, I’d feel a lot better if you found someone you could go with.”

While it was pretty clear that she didn’t think this was a good idea, I took her response as tacit approval since she didn’t explicitly say no. The truth was, I really had no idea if I could hike or not.

The next night at dinner, I said, “I’ve been thinking about what you said about hiking and I’ve come up with a good solution.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“Let’s get an RV, and then you can meet me each night at the next trailhead with dinner all cooked up. I could get cleaned up and sleep in it, too.”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha,” she replied. “That’s not going to happen.”

Oh, well. I didn’t think she would go for that, but it didn’t hurt to ask. When she tells this part of the story, she says, “And then he wanted me to hike in each night to *bring his* dinner to the shelter! Isn’t that crazy?”

After researching some more, I made another trip out to the REI store. While getting a pack and a pair of hiking boots, I discovered even more stuff that looked like it might be helpful to have while I was out in the woods. In addition to what I

found on my own, I ended up having long conversations with the friendly staff about things that I'd already purchased, like the lightweight tent I'd ordered online.

"Oh, you don't want a tent. What you really need is one of these hiking hammocks. It's lighter, and you don't need a flat spot to set it up. All you need is a couple of trees."

"Can I stay dry and warm enough?"

"Oh, that's no problem, as long as you have this tarp, under quilt, suspension system, and bug netting.

"What does all that cost?"

"Oh, it's only \$520."

After several hours of this, I'd spent another five or six hundred dollars and brought home eight or ten other things to add to my growing collection of camping gear. Then there were all the boxes arriving daily from Amazon. Mountain House freeze-dried meals, peanut butter crackers, Pop-Tarts, trail-mix, Peanut M&Ms, Snickers bars, protein bars, cotton balls, Q-Tips, and a first aid kit.

My plan at this point was to have my wife send me boxes of freeze-dried food and other hiker chow to some of the towns and hostels along the trail. I had no idea how many peanut butter crackers I might need to hike 2,000 miles, so I ordered plenty to make sure that I didn't run out.

Now that I had my pack, I was eager to go out and see if I could hike with a heavy load on my back. I put most of the gear I'd purchased so far into my new backpack and then added a few hand weights to get it over 30 pounds.

Then I laced up my new hiking boots, put a leash on Snickers, my Yorkie, put my pack on, and grabbed my new hiking poles to go on a test hike around the neighborhood. I

planned to hike around a four-mile loop that, despite being perfectly flat, would give me an idea of whether or not I'd be able to pull off this crazy idea.

I felt a little silly hiking along the side of the road with my backpack and poles. I wondered if the neighbors thought I was running away from home. I wasn't used to walking with hiking poles, and I found it hard to sync them as I walked. On top of this, Snickers was running back and forth, sniffing everything, and getting his leash tangled up in the poles.

I did okay for the first 10 or 15 minutes, but then the pain in my leg started to flare up. As I walked along in my hiking boots, I did my best to ignore this, hoping—willing the pain to go down. When I was first injured, I hoped I'd be completely healed within a few months or so. Once I reached 90 days, I moved my goal out to 6 months. I told myself and others, "Surely I'll be better in time for my daughter's wedding." At 6 months' time, I was still limping around using a cane, so I pushed my goal out to a year. Then the one-year mark came and went. I'd been searching for a way to get better for almost two years. I felt like this was my final chance. I knew that if I could hike the Appalachian Trail, then I'd finally get better.

I continued to nudge myself along, pushing mentally and physically against the growing pain in my leg. *I'll just ignore it*, I told myself, as I kept walking. The pain resisted this idea by hurting even more, almost as if it were saying, "*How about THIS.*" I tried shouting out some affirmations.

"I can do this!"

"I am a champion!"

"I *am* going to hike the Appalachian Trail!"

These mental gyrations worked just well enough that I was able to make it another quarter mile. Meanwhile, the pain in my foot and leg was growing stronger and stronger until it took over all my mental capacity. It was as if my brain and foot were having a shouting match, bouncing the unwanted pain back and forth against each other.

I knew at this point that I could force myself to go a little bit further, but there was no way that I was going to be able to make it around the four-mile loop. Snickers and I had made it just over a mile. I considered calling my wife to come and get us, but the idea of calling my hiking adventure off so soon was embarrassing. I pushed the pain aside long enough to give my brain a moment to decide if I could walk back home.

*No. That's not happening.* My leg was killing me.

I pulled out my cell phone and called Joanna to come pick us up with the car. I made up a story about how Snickers was having a hard time, but I'm pretty sure she saw right through that. She was sweet to not say anything about whether she thought I'd be able to hike the Appalachian Trail.

Even though my test hike failed completely, I was still bound and determined to start hiking the Appalachian Trail. If anything, I was more determined than ever. There was no way that I was going to admit to Joanna or myself that I wasn't in condition to hike through fourteen different states. I ignored all the indications that I wasn't ready for this great adventure and doubled down on my preparations. I did extra physical therapy at home, climbed up and down seven flights of stairs at the hospital twice a week, and walked in the therapy pool every other day.

Emily, my physical therapist, was excited about the idea and provided encouragement. She had hiked parts of the Appalachian Trail in Maryland with her father and was familiar with it. She made a sign for me that said, "You Can Do It!" I had plenty of doubts, but what other options did I have? Just sitting at home hurting day after day wasn't the life that I wanted to be living.

The big kahuna when hiking the Appalachian Trail is to earn the title of a thru-hiker, someone who completes the entire trail within a twelve-month period. Most thru-hikers can do this within four to five months. By starting in March, I'd have seven months to finish and reach Mt. Katahdin in Maine before the mountain is closed due to weather, which usually happens by October 15th.

Shortly after choosing my start date, I got a call from Mona, the widow of my best friend Brian, who had unfortunately died from a brain tumor about six months earlier. When I told Mona about my plans to hike the AT, she said, "Oh my goodness!" She then explained that Brian had hiked the Appalachian Trail in 1994 and asked her to spread his ashes along the trail after he died. She also said that Brian discovered his illness on March 3rd, and she couldn't believe that I was starting on that date.

Here's the letter she wrote me:

*Dear Peter,*

*I am struggling to find just the right words to express the gratitude for carrying the remains of Brian to fulfill one of his wishes to have some of his remains rest at the beloved Appalachian Trail.*

## ONLY WHEN I STEP ON IT

*Brian walked the AT the summer of 1994 as he contemplated next steps in his life. He was unhappy in software and in a relationship going nowhere. His time on the AT helped him explore possibilities and come up with some answers.*

*He decided on law school and was grateful because of the career and meeting me. He'd often say it was the best decision he'd made and credited the AT for enabling him to get to that decision.*

*I wish you tremendous hope on your journey, however long it may be, for this isn't a simple walk in the woods. This is your journey into reclaiming your life after your accident and recovery. Brian loved you. No better person could take him back to the AT right now.*

*Much love from all of us,*

*Mona H*

*Golden, CO*

At this point, I knew and believed with all my heart that if I could hike 2,000 miles, my leg would have to be better.

# 2



## A WOLF IN THE DARK

---

ONE DAY THIS PAIN WILL  
MAKE SENSE TO YOU

---

**O**ne of my worst traits is my tendency to put off final preparations until the last minute. As far as I can tell, this started in Mr. Blase's English class in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I can't blame him for this, nor would I want to, as he was an excellent teacher. I think this was because he believed in us and treated us like young adults. He expected us to excel, and we knew it.

Every Tuesday, we had a vocabulary test. The bell would ring, and we always took the test first thing. I discovered that if I got to class ten minutes early, I could pull out the list of words that Mr. Blase had given us the week before and,

without any practice at all, I'd run through the list twenty times and ace the test. This worked for the test but I'm not sure how many words I still knew a week later.

I continued this tradition of last-minute preparation when I raced motocross as a teenager. I'd wait until Saturday night to start preparing my bike for the next day's race. After going to a race one weekend and discovering that my motorcycle wouldn't start, I initiated a ritual that exemplified the traditional teenager-parent relationship. No matter how late it was on Saturday night, sometimes near midnight, I'd fire up my dirt bike and take it for a run up the street and back. My poor parents later told me that they would lay awake knowing that it was coming; they just didn't know when. I'm not sure what the neighbors thought of me, but I probably wasn't too popular.

After the outright failure of my neighborhood test hike with my dog, I started walking slowly on the treadmill and stretching each day to see if I could improve my ability to hike. I determined that the best place for a second test would be on the Appalachian Trail itself, a section of which runs through Maryland about an hour's drive from my house. I'd picked an 18-mile section that ran from Turner's Gap on US 40 down to Harper's Ferry. I figured that if I could complete six miles a day, I could make it in three days.

My wife asked me how I thought that I'd be able to go six miles a day when I couldn't make it more than a mile on flat ground the week before. I didn't have an answer for that or all the other questions she was asking me like, "Is there cell service on the trail? What are you going to do if you get hurt?" I tried to brush her concerns aside. I figured there was only one way to find out.



I had planned to leave early in the morning, but of course waited until that day to get all my gear ready. If you've never gone hiking out in the wild before, the tendency is to try and bring everything. As I've mentioned earlier, I'd never backpacked before. I didn't even know how to dress in layers. All I knew was that it was the middle of February, and it was going to be cold.

It was late in the day, with the sun already low in the sky when I pulled into the parking lot at Turner's Gap. I thought for a moment that perhaps I should wait until the next morning to start into the woods but decided to press on. Joanna had asked me to find a hiking partner, but after searching some web forums, I couldn't find anyone, so I decided to go by myself.

As I was tightening down the straps on my pack, I thought about my wife's concerns. *What if something did happen to me and I didn't have cell service? In this cold weather, that could be dangerous.* I called Joanna to let her know that I had changed my plans and was just going to hike a few miles into the woods to reach the first shelter, spend the night there, and then head back out. She was happy to hear this news and I felt somewhat relieved as well.

I put on the full-body fleece I had along with a sweater and my biggest LL Bean down coat. By the time I put on my fur-lined hat, I looked like I was ready to go to the Arctic Circle. My pack was bulging at the seams. I used the straps on the outside to hold onto a big bulky foam sleeping pad I used when I'd taken the kids car camping. I had a couple of flashlights, including a recent purchase with a hand crank on the side to generate electricity while I was out hiking in the dark.

The trail had been covered with snow and previous hikers had packed this down to create an icy, slippery surface with occasional rocks poking out. I, of course, didn't have any kind of traction device, so I did my best to be careful by going slowly over the slippery parts while thinking, *can I really do this?*

I took a selfie and sent it to my kids. "Hey, look at me. I'm hiking the Appalachian Trail!" My big smile in the photo didn't reveal the thoughts that continued to bother me. *You're going to be out here in the woods, the dark Appalachian Trail woods, with no one else around for miles and miles.* I'd have been surprised to know that I'd eventually learn to love being alone in the wilderness, so much so that I missed it once I stopped hiking.

It was rather dark by the time I saw the sign pointing down a side trail to Rocky Run Shelter. I'd been using one of the two flashlights I was carrying to see my way for the last mile or so. The shelter looked almost brand new, and like many shelters on the AT, it had one side completely open to the elements. I was the only one there, so I decided to go up the ladder to the upper level just in case any bears came by to check on me during the night.

Because I hadn't known how to layer my clothes, I had overdressed, and the fleece bodysuit was soaking wet. I took it off, hung it up to dry, got into some dry clothes, and rolled out my old foam sleeping pad. I pulled out my sleeping bag and plumped it up.

I climbed into the sleeping bag and lay there shivering as I tried to warm up as quickly as possible. Since it was so cold, I decided to go ahead and eat my dinner of protein bars and trail mix right there rather than away from the sleeping area.

I had read this was important to do to avoid having a bear or other wild animal come into the shelter during the night.

I tried to send Joanna a text letting her know that I had made it to the shelter safely, but I didn't have any service. I did my best to go to sleep while trying not to think about what might be out there in the darkness. I told myself, *I'm actually here. I'm on the Appalachian Trail... I'm doing it!*

It was so cold that before long, I was shivering and moving around trying to stay warm. I don't remember if I pulled the enclosures to draw the sleeping bag up tight around my face or not. That's the best way to keep warm at night. This likely was one of the hundreds of things I had left to learn.

So, it was pitch black out, I was freezing, and yes, I'm not too proud to let you know that I was scared of being out in the woods all by myself. I took a few deep breaths and told myself that it was too cold for bears to be out and that any other animals would have a hard time getting up the ladder to the top level of the shelter where I was trying to sleep.

And that's when the howling began.

At first, it was from far away. It was a sustained doleful cry. A "Yow, yow yow yowoooo!" Then it seemed to be coming closer. The shelter was a short way down a side trail from the Appalachian Trail. The main trail ran through a valley that contained and reinforced this howling much like a megaphone. "Yow, Yow Yow Yowoooooooooooo!"

Coming closer . . .

"Yow, Yow Yow Yowoooooooooooo!"

Now getting louder...

"Yow, Yow Yow Yowoooooooooooo!"

The hair on the back of my head stood straight up, and

I could feel my heart pounding inside my chest. I thought about getting up to grab my hiking poles so that I could defend myself but thought, *No. Don't move. It might hear you.*

“Yow. Yowwwwl...Yup...Yowwwwl.”

From the sounds of this creature, it had to be a wolf, and it was approaching. *Would it be able to smell the Snickers bars that I had right next to me in my pack?*

I thought about looking for my flashlight, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't move. I was frozen with fear. I held my breath as the wolf howled non-stop, making its way down the trail and past the shelter to the south. The howling continued its frequency, but the volume receded as the wolf ran further and further down the valley to the south.

I finally was able to breathe again and tried my best to go to sleep despite the cold. Then, about an hour later, I heard it again. It faded in at first but got louder and louder as the wolf returned up the valley heading north.

“Yow, Yow Yow Yowooooooooo! Yow, Yow Yow Yowooooooooo!”

Although I couldn't see anything out in the pitch black of the night, I vividly envisioned a wolf running with big muscular legs, its mouth hanging open with a bit of slobber dripping off the side of a long pink tongue that was flapping in the breeze. It wasn't hard to track since it was yowling non-stop. Once again, it came right down the main trail and past the shelter. Then the yowling slowly faded away again as the wolf moved further and further up the valley.

Between all the excitement and the fact that it was rather cold out, I can't say that I felt rested in the morning. Happy to be alive was more like it. I looked out to see that a light

dusting of snow had fallen overnight. I made breakfast, hiked the two miles back to my car, and then drove over to say hi to my folks who live nearby in Frederick, MD. I shared this story with them and a few other people, but no one seemed to believe that it was a wolf.

I looked online to see that wolves will howl like this to communicate to other wolves about their territory, their way of saying, “stay away.” I also found that the gray wolves who used to roam Maryland have been extinct since the mid 1800s.

Then I learned that there’s a refuge for wolves seventy miles north of where I was near Harrisburg, PA. *Maybe I should call them to see if they’ve had an escapee.*

Whatever it was scared the dickens out of me during my first night out on the Appalachian Trail.