

Wild, Wonderful, Lost

By Justin Nichols

“Are you ready?” Anne asked me, smiling, as we sat at the kitchen table of her family’s farmhouse in the wilds of eastern West Virginia. I had gone with Anne and her family on the previous two July’s to their yearly summer retreat. That’s about how long she and I had been dating. The house itself was nestled between two peaks of the same mountain, along with a small community of other farmsteads, and was on the verge of dilapidation. The foundation leaned, the paint had peeled so much you could hardly tell it had been painted at all, and every floor board groaned its disapproval when stepped upon. The old wood stove gave the house its aroma of smoke from fires long past. I loved the place.

“Absolutely,” I replied enthusiastically. This was the day that Anne and I were going to find a new mountain bike trail to ride, as we had exhausted ourselves on nearly all of the trails locally. I loaded up the bikes on the back of Anne’s Dodge Colt hatchback. It was only nine o’clock or so, but the heat and humidity of the coming afternoon was already apparent. I climbed into the passenger seat and cranked the key to get the air conditioner going.

The fact that the bikes made it difficult to see out the enlarged back window was not as concerning to Anne as it was to me. She had plastered it with scores of Grateful Dead stickers and decals the year before, making it nearly impossible to see out of anyway. I was still used to driving with actual clear glass, so whenever we used Anne’s car, she drove. This was year two of Anne’s three-year Dead kick. Which, by association, made it year two of my Dead kick. So, as usual, a Grateful Dead CD was playing when Anne got into the driver’s seat.

By the time we reached the town of Slatyfork, where we would pick up the Gauley Mountain Trail, ride it 5.6 miles south to the Highland Scenic Highway and back, I was

becoming car sick from the mountain road, hoarse from poorly singing “Truckin,” Anne’s latest favorite Dead song, and ready for the ride to be over. Surprisingly, we found the trail head on a little road off of route 219 without much trouble and Anne parked the car. I unloaded the bikes as she fished out our helmets and two water bottles. Now we were ready to ride.

The first part of the trail was easier than advertised. It meandered through the forest with only slight hills and was hard-packed and wide. It didn’t take long for Anne to stop her bike in front of me. Taking a drink of water, she commented “this is boring.” I’ve never cared much for the technicality of rugged mountain biking. Mainly because I wasn’t very good at it. Not like Anne. My appeal to mountain biking was getting into the forest and getting lost in thought and serenity. This trail was great for me. I replied, “Let’s keep going a little further and see if it gets any better.”

On we rode, Anne in front and me in back. The trail took us further into the forest where few patches of sunlight broke the canopy. Eventually, the trail narrowed and became studded with rocks and roots. A much more technical ride. Anne was in her element. She whooped her delight as she jumped over protrusions and skirted near disasters down increasingly sketchy slopes. I just tried to hang on to the handlebars and not fall off.

It was around eleven o’clock when Anne stopped again. She looked back, grinned, and waited for me to catch up to show me what she found. Perpendicular to our trail, ran an old logging road. It had been gravel at one point, but most of the gravel had washed away over time, giving the once used thoroughfare back to the forest. The growth was short and fairly sparse. Riding on it would be easy enough. With our curiosity and sense of adventure piqued, we decided to follow it for a while. I commented, “We can always just follow it back and find the trail again.”

My enthusiasm was high as we pedaled down the old road. I felt that I was going somewhere few had gone before, further enhancing the excitement. Too soon, the road came to an abrupt end into a cul-de-sac, rounding widely at the end. I was initially disappointed that this side adventure had run its unceremonious course, until Anne pointed out our next objective. In the direct center of the cul-de-sac was another trail continuing in the direction of the logging road. This trail, like the one we had left to get onto the logging road, seemed a bit overgrown, but obvious. Like it led somewhere. We rested, drank water, and discussed this new option. Still filled with an adventurous spirit, we chose to follow the new path.

As we rode, the forest seemed to gradually encroach on the trail, ever so slightly making the trail narrower and narrower. We hardly noticed the change to a single tire width by the time we burst out of the forest and into a meadow.

By now, the sun was directly overhead and hot. Even the flying insects seemed to take cover in their individual hovels as I noticed they weren't biting. The cicadas were singing their rising and falling songs, indifferent to the heat, or maybe their song was to complain because of it. Despite the direct sunlight beating down on me in the meadow, I was somewhat glad to get out of the forest for the time being. The still air was becoming sticky and stifling. We rode through the short, sun dried grass of the meadow toward a small grove to rest for a while; grasshoppers clearing the way in front of our tires like dolphins before the bow of a ship, hopping into sight just in front and falling away into the grass just to the left or right. The grove, we decided, would be the last stop before the return journey.

We sat in shaded silence for a time, catching our breath, drinking more water and taking in the open view of the meadow. Amid the sun-bleached grasses, wildflowers dotted the undulating hillside landscape in yellows and whites. The trees above us hissed slightly with a

passing breeze, and the cicadas continued their haunting calls. It was the very essence of peaceful.

By one thirty, it was time to head back. Anne didn't want to worry her parents unnecessarily and we were already going to be much later than we originally anticipated. We saddled up and headed in the direction we had come from, me in front, Anne behind. When I reached the tree line, I expected to see a bike path directly in front of me. Wide and inviting and shaded. What I saw was forest floor. Saplings in no discernable order punching through the leafy detritus. Long dead limbs lay haphazardly on the ground. Moving to the right, I scanned the forest boundary for my sought path. Anne, right behind me, was also looking hard. "Where the hell is it?" I commented aloud. "Did we go the right way?" I stopped and aligned myself to the still visible grove we had rested under, trying to remember what the view had looked like as we emerged from the forest into the meadow to begin with. I just couldn't recall. Anne kept scanning the ground. "How could we have lost the trail?" I thought. Anne had stopped about a hundred yards from me and was now coming back, still looking into the forest. When she got to me, she looked up. Her easy-going smile was gone, and worry was etched on her face. She just shrugged and shook her head.

We scoured the same stretch of forest for another hour before giving up hope that we would find the trail there. Realization slowly dawned on me that we may have been lost. We sat on our bikes commiserating, then took stock of our situation. We didn't have a phone, our water bottles were less than half full, we detoured from the route we told her parents we were taking, and if we were stuck in the wilderness overnight, neither one of us knew how to build a fire without matches. The night time mountain air could be cold.

We started our trek from Slatyfork heading south, toward the scenic highway. Anne logically pointed out that we should continue south. The original trail was only five and a half miles long, and we had covered a good portion of it before we turned off onto the logging road. Assuming we didn't go north on the detour, we should only be a few miles from the road.

We quickly decided which way was south and stared through the meadow to a tree line that sloped up. Way up. The climb seemed impossible. Especially with two bikes and no trail to ride them on. With little water and time becoming a factor, we were faced with another monumental decision. Do we continue the painfully, slow and arduous task of climbing the hill to the south, or do we follow the path of least resistance toward a valley, probable water, and possibly people to help us? Going downhill through the meadow, which hadn't been explored thoroughly, seemed counterintuitive to me. Anne was of the opposite opinion.

"We don't know what's over there, Anne!" I yelled at her, a bit too harshly. "We could be getting ourselves into deeper trouble! At least this way we know where the road is!" I said, fiercely pointing my finger toward the hillside.

"We can cover a lot more ground going down than we can going up," she told me calmly. She argued that we don't know if we'll run into the road even after we get over the mountain. If not, we are even further from getting out of here with even less, if any, water. Besides, "Slatyfork is north," she said.

This argument shut me up. If we could get somewhere close to Slatyfork, then I knew we'd be okay. Travelling downhill sounded a lot better than straight up a mountainside anyway. I was hot, exhausted, thirsty, getting hungry, and terrified of the events unfolding.

"Fine," I acquiesced. "Let's just get moving."

We rode down through the meadow and past the grove of trees we had rested under. Picking up speed, the air felt good on my exposed skin. The ride was jarring, and despite letting gravity do the work, by the time we reached the middle of the hill where the land plateaued before dropping again, my muscles were sore from tensing through the jolts. With this vantage point, we could see that the meadow below us curved to the left, bending the outline of the forest, though we couldn't see around the bend far enough to tell how far the field went. As long as the meadow went downhill and north, we were going to stay in it.

Without wasting time on the view, we plunged down the second slope toward the meadow's dogleg and on a more parallel line with the main slope of the hill. Once we rounded the curve of the field, we saw a glimmer of hope. A barbed wire fence studded with gnarled wooden posts ran the width of the meadow and disappeared into the trees on either side.

"Thank God!" I yelled to Anne with relief. Her smile was back.

Without hesitation, Anne ducked the wire and I handed her the bikes before crawling under myself. The field was littered with old, dried cow patties, so it was obviously a pasture. There were, however, no cows that we could see or hear.

Afraid to lose touch with a piece of humanity, we followed the rusty wire fence into the trees on the left on the upper part of the hill. As it turned out, the fence ran parallel to the meadow's border, rising and falling with the swells of the mountain. To avoid the sun, we stayed hidden in the shaded forest.

The meadow was extremely long. We walked our bikes through foliage and over and around deadfall for what seemed like miles of hilly terrain. The heat, hunger and thirst were really starting to zap my energy. We finished our water as we walked. I was focused on putting

one foot in front of the other, giving a push to the handlebars to clear the latest obstacle. My legs, back and shoulders ached from the effort. Yet on we trudged to who knows where.

“STOP!” Anne said abruptly, holding a hand up to me. “Listen.”

For a long minute, I didn't hear anything. I was beginning to think she was hallucinating. “What did you hear?” I asked.

“Shhh! Wait,” She said quietly.

And then I heard it. It was distant, but definitely moving. The car, sounding like it had seen better days, changed its pitch as it approached nearer to our position on the mountain, then faded into silence as it passed and disappeared. The noise location was hard to pinpoint, but we had a general idea. It meant we were leaving the fence line. Fine. I was all for it.

It felt good to ride again after the long walk through the woods. Even if it was only for a few minutes to cross the pasture. The sun was beginning to lose its bite. As the time neared six o'clock, we slid under the fence on the other side of the meadow. Though we were both desperately wanting water, the downhill slope and the fact that we knew there was a road somewhere down there hurried our steps.

The road was easy to find. It was also unreachable. At least from where we were. It was only a few hundred yards away, but completely inaccessible. We had to come to a stop when the hillside sheered to a drop of a hundred feet. I threw my first temper tantrum since I was a child, kicking the ground, slapping trees and cursing God. Anne sat down and cried tears of frustration. When I finished my tirade, I sat beside her, huddled her close and told her we'd be okay. We'd just have to walk a little farther until we could find a way down. They were just words. I wasn't sure I believed it myself. She said nothing.

When at last we found our path off the hillside, it was nearing eight. It would be getting dark in an hour. The two-lane road stretched out before us in both directions running parallel with the hill we had just come down. Across the road was another hill steeply inclining to its summit. In one direction, the sun's brilliance blocked it from view. West. The other side curved lazily to the right and out of sight through the forest. The road was dipping to the east and rising to the west. With little energy left, we took the path of least resistance, not knowing if we were heading to our salvation or a night lost in the forest.

Downhill on blacktop was heaven. It had been hours since I had enjoyed any part of this trip. The bikes picked up speed as the slope increased downward. The hum of the tires on the road was hypnotic and I allowed myself to relax a bit. I stared at my growing shadow on the road as we were heading due east again, watching the pavement fly past.

My attention was seized by the sun's light glinting off an upcoming sign. We had only been on the road for a few minutes when we passed the sign reading "Scenic Highway Ends 2 Miles." That sign was soon followed by another that read "Jct 219 1.5 Miles." I raised my arms in celebration and Anne whooped her pleasure at the sight. We knew where we were.

At the T junction, a green sign read "Slatyfork 11" with an arrow to the left. Eleven miles to go. Much of the eleven miles was uphill. We rode some and walked some, but always with a determination to arrive at the terminus of our agony. Exhausted, we kept moving forward. I fell into a rhythm with my breathing while I was riding...inhale-pedal-exhale-pedal-inhale-pedal-exhale-pedal. It became my mantra, my sole reason for living. Keep the rhythm going until the end. Don't give up, don't stop...inhale-pedal-exhale-pedal... I could hear Anne's breathing behind me following its own rhythm. In-in-out-out-in-in-out-out. Come on Anne. Keep it up. As

the Grateful Dead told us in the car this morning on the way to the trail head, “Just keep truckin’ on home.”