



May 01, 2017

HIKING WITH STONEWALL

ELISA SHOENBERGER · NORTH AMERICA

We learned the hard way not to mess with the ghost of Stonewall Jackson.

We were in Washington D.C. for a wedding and had decided to take a day trip to hike at Chancellorsville, Virginia, an important civil war

battlefield. My husband, in particular, was a big Civil War buff and a northerner and was excited to check out the battlefield. When we arrived to the site parking lot, it was so hot that the tar and the roof of the nearby Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center were steaming; the humidity extremely high. Trees surrounded us and blocked out the sun, but did little to mitigate the heat and humidity. To me it felt comfortable, like a giant hug from the universe. My companions, on the other hand, might have used the word “sauna” to describe the weather.

We took a brief tour through the visitor center, learning about the history of the battlefield. Some tree stumps displayed bullets and cannonballs, authentic reminders of the battle. A few specimens showed how the trees adapted to the alien shapes in their trunks. Afterward, we took a short walk behind the visitor center; we passed a marker for Stonewall Jackson, who had died here as a result of friendly fire. The marker was not particularly impressive, just a nondescript stone monument a few steps away from the building. My husband, wearing a dark blue union cap with a Union Jack shirt, decided to thumb his teeth - repeatedly - at the General. That was our first mistake.

After this short ten minute walk, we decided to take a longer hike through the field and forest to see the trenches and enjoy the surrounding nature. Damp and slightly muddy, the path led us through the trees. The ground was a combination of red soil and exuberant underbrush with thin trees, sprouting toward the sky, naked of branches. We saw the trenches throughout our walk, they allegedly went on for miles. Occasionally, we walked on wooden boards over the trenches; they were too fragile for us to walk directly on the structures. These trenches themselves were covered in a rainbow of emerald and chartreuse, vivacious camouflage for these structures of war and suffering. Nature has started to reclaim them, but not entirely.





We passed a few other hikers, but it seemed like we had the forest all to ourselves. Happily, in those first few minutes of the hike, I stopped to photograph a bumpy gray frog by the side of the path and found a beautiful, but dangerous looking caterpillar. The place charmed me; nothing thrills me more than sighting wildlife; beautiful views and animals pull me outside of my urban comfort zone.

Twenty minutes into our walk, we heard the first rumbles of thunder, the roars cutting through the relative quiet of the forest. As a person who only recently learned to love the joys of hiking and nature, I felt unsure of our course of action. My husband and friend, on the other hand, were veteran hikers who had ventured through a variety of terrains and weather conditions. I asked them if we should be concerned about these sounds or if should we keep going. The consensus was that we should continue onward. Little did I remember that they had some pretty spectacular stories of ill-advised hikes on ice covered mountains with sheer drops.

About a third of a mile later, we hit our first clearing just as the rains began to fall. It was the kind of rain that you could see as it traveled across the field; a curtain of water had been pulled across the forest. The storm was our new reality. The beginning and our end.

Deciding to keep going instead of turning back was our second mistake. Surely, we were far enough along that going back would be longer, or so we thought. Incorrect. We pressed on and on. The trees above us provided no cover from the rain. No shelters. Nothing. I had left both

umbrellas and my rain jacket in the car, but of course I had both my cameras and my cell phone with me.

We tried to consult the paper map that a ranger gave us, but the rains saw to its immediate destruction. It shredded in my friend's hands. At this point, our clothing was completely sodden with water; my skin slick and cold. Even my hiking boots, intended to keep my feet dry and warm, were useless against the onslaught of pouring rain. My glasses were useless as well, but there wasn't much to see in this tempest. My friend had a thicker coat with him and so he wrapped our cameras in it, an effort to protect our belongings we had so foolishly brought with us. So onward we went. I wasn't expecting to experience such a realistic recreation of what it was like to be a soldier in these forests.

While we weaved through the trees, the lightening storm intensified. Despite the all consuming rains, I could smell smoke. The horrifying realization struck me: the lightening storm was overhead. As we kept on and on, I would jump each time I heard the crack of thunder above. Not ten minutes later, I saw a flash of light hit a tree twenty feet in front of me. Stonewall Jackson flashed his fiery middle finger at us arrogant "Yankees." I trembled at this sheer force of nature compared to our meagerness as humans.





The waters rapidly rose on the path before us, the ground unable to absorb it quickly enough. A turtle swam through the path, relishing in the relief from the heat and the humidity. But I could only think about water's conductivity. As the water climbed, I felt the panic rising within me.

Finally, the combination of lightening and waters rising switched on the "flight" instinct in my brain.

I was going to die in the forest - join the thousands of ghostly men who lost their lives here, or run like hell!

And so I did. My companions, on the other hand, seemed less concerned; both had missed the zigzag of lightning I had seen before me. So I left them behind me; instinct told me to save myself.

The car was my salvation. The car was my safety. Granted, I didn't have the car keys. And there wasn't much cover and the visitor center was closed. I didn't care. The forest was death. The forest was doom. The car was my singular goal. I stormed through the forest, clothes clinging to my body, boots engulfed with mud and water; my companions forgotten behind me.

When I finally made it to the parking lot, the rains slackened, a little. My fellow hikers caught up to me and we raced to the car and entered the safety of its confines, sopping wet and with very sad electronics. The three of us assessed our situation, the storm continuing around us, though seemingly less furious than before. Stonewall Jackson made his point.

My cellphone officially died in the battlefields of Chancellorsville, Virginia, which was appropriate. It resurrected itself from the time years before when I fell into a creek in Alabama. The two cameras,

fortunately, were saved, thanks to my friend. My spirit, on the other hand, was crushed by those giant fingers of watery vengeance.

We drove away from the site of personal and national disaster. The storm continued around us, but the intensity dissipated. The rain, a mere nuisance, pushed off the windshield with a flick of the wiper. Lightning flickered occasionally around us, but it seemed mundane and merely a feature of the scenery. There was a layer of glass, rubber, and steel between us. The panic still lingered in my body, taking its time to drain away, drip by drip.

As the car drove away from Chancellorsville, a welcome distance between us and that forest of lightening, I learned two very important things: don't hike during thunderstorms. And most of all, don't thumb your teeth at Civil War generals.

Photos by Author



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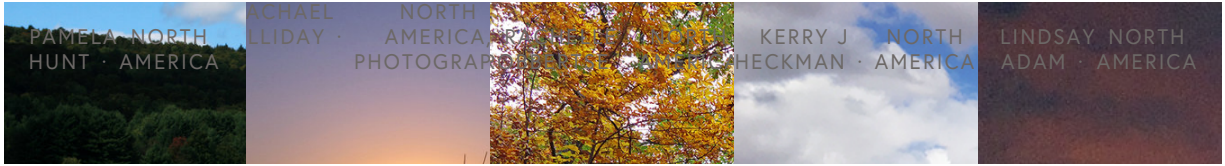
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