



Ginger Wallace

**The Great Smoky Mountains, USA**

Ask Ginger about how she and her husband Corey first got together, and she'll throw you for a loop: "We never met." The same could be said for her relationship with the Smokies: The youngest of four in a family of hikers, Ginger Wallace wasn't yet making memories when she first met the Tennessee-North Carolina Appalachians. Friday afternoons with a loaded car and heading for Sevierville from their Knoxville home, Ginger's fondest family memories involve camping trips to Cades Cove, Smokemont, and Rockmont:

"I remember the campfires most of all. We saw a whole different side of my parents then. Just relaxed, telling stories." Fall 2014 marks the ten-year anniversary of Ginger's own family hiking tradition: a late-year, ten-day hike with Corey that has all the marks of a personal pilgrimage: "It's my time to step back and reflect on the year. There are some things you will never learn unless you separate yourself. You have to disconnect."

Taking a Measure of Myself

To hear these reminiscences of family campfires and days spent following the sound of a distant stream, you wouldn't guess that Ginger Wallace is scared of the Smokies.

One of Ginger's childhood friends was playing hide-and-seek somewhere in the Park when he got separated from his parents. "They never found him," she says quietly. Ginger was six at the time, but the memory of the tragedy, the neighborhood banding together, the search teams, the confusion and grief, have clearly stayed with her:

It gave me a deep appreciation for just how aware you need to be of your surroundings, because you can get turned around like nothing. So I always have that sense of . . . you just have to be careful.

Is it a sense of the place being wild, as fundamentally unlike the human world? "You just have to respect it. You can't frivolously take off and expect everything to be alright." Discovering a traumatic memory behind Ginger's vista reminds me of Rainer Maria Rilke's definition of beauty:

For Beauty is nothing but the beginning of a terror that we are still just able to endure . . . .

And if Ginger has learned to endure remarkably well, she in large part has her husband Corey to thank for it. A geologist, a consummate planner, and a seasoned backpacker, Corey's more intrepid manner on the trail has pushed Ginger beyond her limits and caused her to find reserves of trust. Indeed, the abandon with which Ginger pursues the mountains today is testament to the fact that she has forged a vital part of her identity there. Neither is she alone in her instinct to turn the outer reaches of nature to the purpose of inner work. Immanuel Kant's famous depiction of the sublime extends similarly in both directions:

Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, . . . These exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might. But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided that we are in security; and we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.

Kant never did fit this idea—the idea that being overwhelmed by nature brings us to a true estimate of ourselves—into a philosophical system. But what about Ginger? Doesn't she find it strange that a place so dangerous and impersonal as this—a place that could tear a child from his parents—should make her feel calm? Silence. And then, with the suggestion of a twinkle in her eye, the indomitable Ginger Wallace deadpan: "Dudn't make sense does it?"