

Upwardly Immobile

A HIGH-ANXIETY HIKER HAS THE CLIMB OF HER LIFE!

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

I like sea level. It's my favorite altitude. Whenever anybody asks, "Wouldn't you like to see the view from the top of a mountain in Nepal?" I say, "No." I prefer the view from the middle of a beach on Long Island.

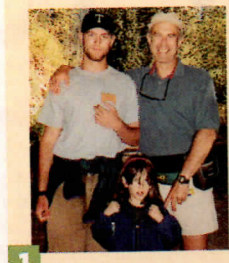
I like sea level because you don't need a lot of energy to get down to it, especially if you start from Manhattan. On the other hand, to get up to an elevation of 10,000 feet, you have to take a plane or haul yourself up against the force of gravity. Gravity, I've always felt, is trying to tell us something.

If it is, however, I'm the only one who's listening. Nowadays it seems as if everybody besides me is anxious to get to a higher elevation than the one at which he was born. That includes my husband, who believes that dragging one's body up a steep incline while hefting a heavy pack on one's back is something anybody in his right mind would kill to do. He thinks that climbing up is somehow a more lofty occupation for mankind than lying down, which I don't get at all. I mean, nobody is a better person at 11,000 feet than he is at sea level, nor are those who climb necessarily the moral superiors of those who don't.

Just think of all the drawbacks there are to high-altitude habitation. First of all, the higher up one goes, the lower the temperature drops, the thinner the air gets and the harder it is for humans to keep warm or even breathe. In my opinion, this is not accidental: We're not wanted up there.

Apart from oxygen, other necessities missing from mountain tops include menus, appetizing stores, radiators and closets, not to mention socially diverse

Bette-Jane Raphael is a writer and an editor-at-large of FAMILY CIRCLE.

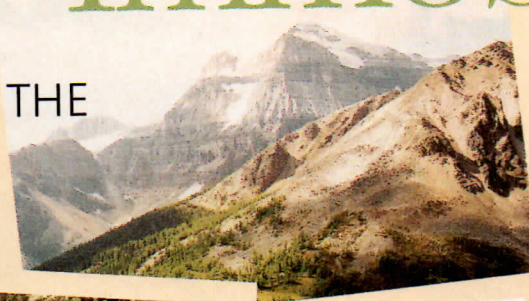


1. Son Jake, husband Joel and daughter Rose
2. kept me going uphill
3. to a great view
4. where I stood, tired but exhilarated.

human populations. What happens is that you put a lot of time and energy into getting up a mountain, and when you finally arrive at the top, a lot of people you like aren't there. And the avid hikers who *are* there make for a stultifying social homogeneity. Conversation tends to be limited, and if you prefer to talk about something other than the best trekking routes out of Katmandu, you might as well address your remarks to your hiking boots.

I'll admit that there is a good deal less crime (fewer muggings, breaking and enterings, etc.) once you get above 14,000 feet. On the other hand, while you certainly need to have your wits about you to survive in the big city, they aren't nearly as heavy to carry around as, say, a portable stove.

I had all these arguments ready when my husband and children decided they wanted to waste a perfectly good vacation last summer by forgoing the beach in order to hike in the mountains of British Columbia. I also told them I didn't think one should have to climb 7,000 feet into bed, and argued that it was hardly broadening to travel to an elevation



where three fifths of the population would be one's immediate family.

But my husband and our son and daughter pleaded with me to make their climb a family expedition. And so, even as I reminded them that our family name was *not* Von Trapp, I crumbled.

Which is how it happened that I, who never expected to find myself any higher than the Rainbow Room, came to sleep 7,200 feet up, in a bag, wearing a hat.

And there, to my unutterable surprise, I found that the climbing experience has high points unrelated to altitude. Our campsite, a sub-alpine meadow, was undoubtedly beautiful, and its inhabitants, a small herd of meandering elk, were far better behaved than the herds I usually run into on the subway. Pulling a fish out of a freezing mountain lake does feel like more of an accomplishment than pulling one out of the freezer at the supermarket. And there is definitely something delicious about waking up in a sun-dappled tent with the three people you love most in the world, one of whom, due to the hilly terrain, has rolled half on top of you, while another has gotten completely lost in the bottom of her sleeping bag. I suppose, too, it's always good to confirm the fact that your body will go where you tell it to go, even if it thinks you're nuts to ask.

I don't mean that I'm about to turn in my bathing suits for lederhosen. But sometimes I think about those three closely related folk who, dopey from lack of heat and oxygen, slept happily around me in that tent for three nights running—and suddenly the thought of laying aside my sandals in favor of Gore-Tex boots and band-aids doesn't seem like such a sacrifice after all. □