



# THE LONG TRAIL TO JAIL

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Sandy Langelier was frightened when they came to arrest the friendly hiker, then annoyed, and, finally, like so many people whose lives were touched by the strange man, profoundly confused.

It was January 21, 2005, almost midnight, in a drowsy Georgia town. Langelier was sleeping when she heard car doors slam, then loud, demanding voices. There was pounding on her door, lights flooding her house. She cowered under the covers until she saw badges thrust up to her window.

By then, U.S. Marshals had arrested and handcuffed the nice young man who'd been staying in the trailer next door. His name was David Lescoe, and Langelier knew there must have been a mistake. Lescoe, in his early thirties, had been living in the trailer since he had wandered into Lizella just three months earlier, dirty, smelly, famished, telling tales of a miraculous conversion in the wilderness. He was from up north – Pennsylvania - and he had laughed right along with the people in town who made fun of his Yankee accent. Later he would say that he had been seeking love and acceptance and that in Lizella, he had found it. The first building he'd entered was the Baptist church, and he returned there every Sunday morning.

In the days before he was taken away, he had been preparing a talk for the church youth group. It was a saga of salvation on the

Appalachian Trail, an epic account of suffering, and some sin, and the gentle light of forgiveness that was right there waiting if only a man was humble enough to walk toward it. It was a story as old as history, forever fresh. Once, in the woods of New Jersey, he had been lost. Now, in Lizella, he was saved.

Sandy Langalier told the men with badges as much. She told them they had the wrong guy. They told her to go back to sleep. That was six years ago. Since then, she has thought often of the man who so quickly insinuated himself into the life of her family, then just as abruptly left. She has wondered about the nature of good and evil, the promise of redemption, and the high cost of blind faith.

He is in prison now, serving a 10-year sentence for crimes to which he readily admits, while adamantly denying the accusation that drove him onto the trail in the first place.

Is Lescoe a good man who fell on bad times, or a bad man who preyed on the goodness of others? Was he drawn to the Lizella Baptist Church because he needed to confess his sins, or because he wanted to hide from those he had sinned against? Did the Appalachian Trail provide a weary and beleaguered man the bracing tonic of the wild, or a leafy hideout? I heard of Lescoe when an editor told me about him. He had seen an article called “The Con Man Wore Hiking Boots” in the *Washington Post* and thought Lescoe’s trials and tribulations would provide a fascinating prism through which to explore trust, and crime and the culture of the Appalachian Trail. I immediately agreed. What I didn’t realize is how timeless and vexing Lescoe’s mistakes still seem to me. For his entire life, Lescoe seems to have provoked troubling questions in the people who knew him. During the summer and fall of 2004, Lescoe provoked love, too. And burning anger. Men and women from New Jersey to Georgia sought his capture. Others prayed for his soul. Some did both.

He left Woonsocket, Rhode Island, on July 14, 2004, drove his

Chevy Cavalier to a patch of dirt north of New York City, and started hiking. He says he was “possessed,” that he had been recently plagued by nightmares, “two actual demons coming through a mirror reaching out to grab me.”

He never knew his father, and never got along with his stepfather. His aunt and godmother, Shirley Sincavage, told me Lescoe was molested when he was seven. He had his first beer at about 12, his first hit off a crack pipe a few years later, and at 32, when he first set foot on the Appalachian Trail, he had been in and out of three drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers and jailed at least a few times - for offenses ranging from breaking and entering to failing to pay restitution to people whose property he had destroyed. Each time he left rehab, or jail, he vowed he would change. “David has said to us more than one time that he’s been saved,” Sincavage recalled. “He uses that God and Bible thing a little too much,” his younger brother Andrew told me.

They say that in hindsight, but back then, they believed him. His grandfather gave him the air-conditioning business he’d spent 30 years building. Lescoe’s mother co-signed the loan for thousands of dollars’ worth of new equipment that he wanted to buy. She also co-signed on a home for her troubled son. Shortly thereafter, he left town, leaving her holding the debt on both.

He blames drinking and addiction to crack cocaine for many of his woes. He blames an ex-girlfriend who took out a Protection From Abuse order against him in his hometown of Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, forcing him to move away to Rhode Island, so, he claims, she wouldn’t be able to falsely accuse him of violating the order. He blames his family for “abandoning” him. What he doesn’t mention is that the law was after him. Woonsocket investigators called Lescoe in the summer of 2004 and told him they wanted to interview him about a six-year-old girl’s statements that he had had sex with her.