

A man with a large backpack is walking on a paved road in a rural area. He is wearing a white bucket hat, a white jacket, and blue pants. The road is flanked by green fields and utility poles under a blue sky with light clouds. The man is looking to his right.

Lost in America

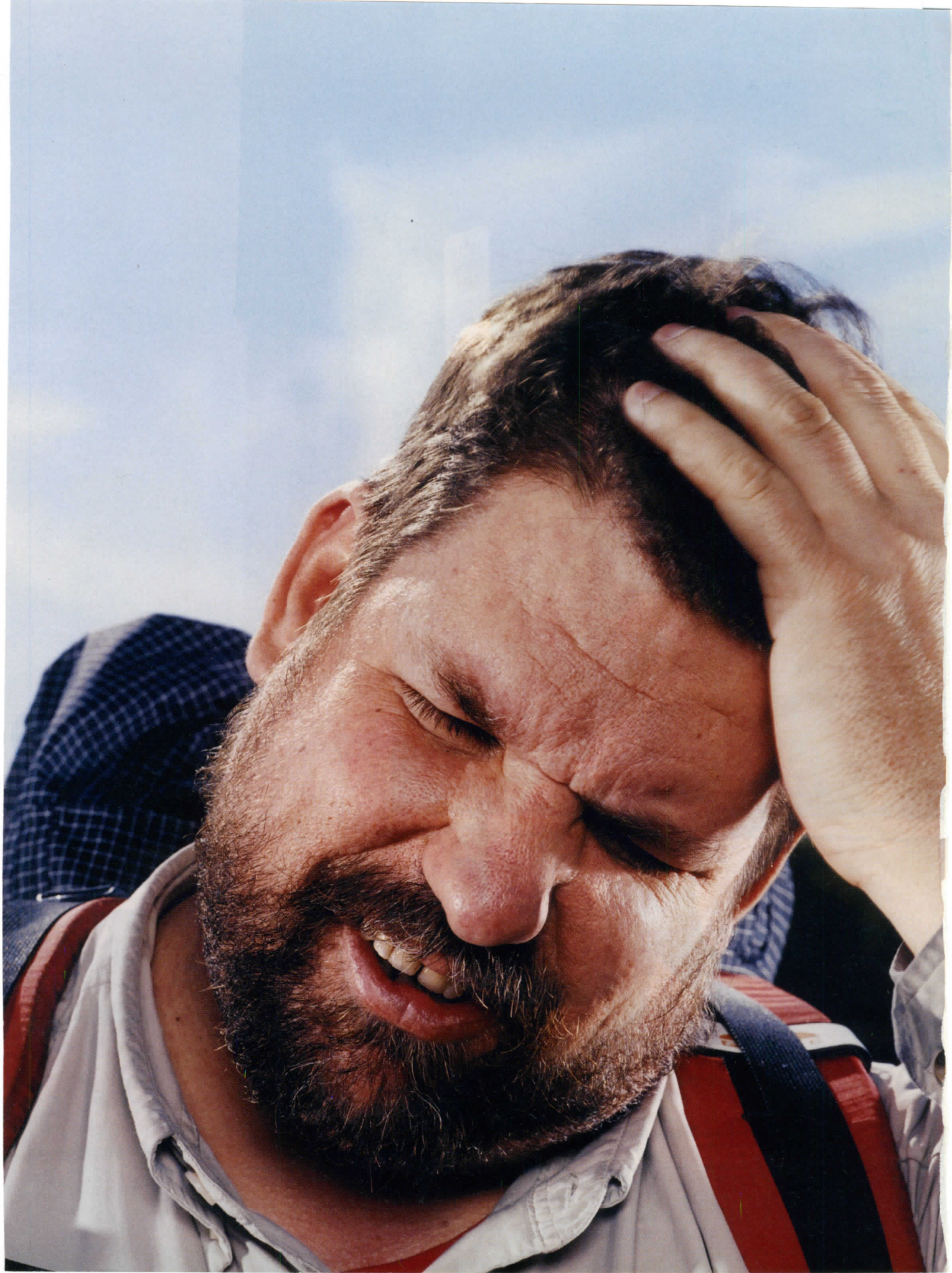
STEVE VAUGHT'S STAGGERING JOURNEY TO FIND REDEMPTION

A 410-pound man sets out to walk cross-country to lose weight and find happiness. Along the way, he becomes Fat Man Walking—rich and famous, an inspiration to countless Americans desperate to change their lives. But how can he save thousands of people he's never met if he can't save himself?

By Steve Friedman



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The trip was not going according to plan.

He knew he couldn't have prepared for everything—you don't get to be a 410-pound ex-Marine, clinically depressed and a quasi-Buddhist and halfway across North America on foot without accruing some wisdom about things like nasty surprises and the necessity of acceptance—but by the time he reached Dayton, Ohio, even for Steve Vaught, things were getting to be a little much.

It wasn't the two rattlesnakes, or the cases of poison oak, or the kidney stone. It wasn't the 20 blisters, or the heat, or even the guy who emailed him to proclaim that he could absolutely not, under any circumstances, let Vaught pass Kingman, Arizona, "because it would bring on Armageddon." It wasn't that his wife had told him she wanted a divorce, or that his ghostwriter had complained that Vaught's journal entries were "boring" and "pedantic." It wasn't the clowns who jumped out of the car while he was still in California—real clowns, with noses and floppy feet and everything—and danced around him yelling, then jumped back in their car and drove off. It wasn't the other guy (at least he thinks it was a guy) who emailed, "You vulgar maggot...you are a fiend and a sniveling backboneless coward."

It wasn't the reporters—"Short and fat and drunk, they all say the same thing. They say, 'Oh yeah, it'll be great to walk with you' and they end up sitting there talking for three hours for two inches in the paper." It wasn't the woman who showed up in three towns and said she wanted to "absorb" him. That was creepy, no doubt, but it didn't make him want to quit. It wasn't the heat of the desert or the cold of the mountains or the loneliness or the rage that came over him after he'd thrown his antidepressants down a sewer drain.

It was all of that and it was none of that. It was as shallow as vanity, as deep as the confusion that can steal into a man's soul at 3 a.m. when he looks in the mirror and doesn't recognize the sallow apparition staring back.

He thought about how he would appear the next time he was on TV. He worried that he would look too fat. It was as simple as that. It was also much, much more complicated

than people might imagine, because although he desperately wanted to lose weight, he knew that to focus on weight loss was to lose himself. That's the kind of Dr. Freud-meets-Dr.-Phil puzzle that presents itself to a morbidly obese man as he trudges alone across the deserts of the American West. It's also the kind of insight carried by any man who as a child was ever called fat boy or forced to pull on a pair of Husky jeans. It's the knowledge earned by every teenage girl who is assured by her worried mother, "You have such a beautiful face," then asked, "Do you really need that dessert?"

Everyone is special. In the United States, at the turn of the 21st century, that's a truth as self-evident as the ones about life and liberty. Here's another verity of our times: You can make yourself more special. You can get whiter teeth and a nicer car and better job and firmer thighs—all in easy monthly payments. You are a wonderful person. Now here's how to get more wonderful.

It was Steve Vaught's luck—or curse, or both—to captivate a sizable segment of the sizable segment of the American public that has found itself pinned between those two shiny, grinding truths. It hadn't been his intention. He didn't hug and kiss his wife and children and start a 2,900-mile hike to lug with him the hopes and dreams of every chubby—and depressed and lonely and lost and just generally dissatisfied and yearning—adult in the country and worldwide. But by the time he reached Dayton, that's what had happened.

What had started as a plan at once unadorned and profoundly unhunged—to walk across America to drop pounds and find joy—had become a mega-book deal and a publicity scrum and a quasi-corporate enterprise. He wasn't just Steve

Vaught anymore. Now he was the Fat Man Walking. He had a website, thefatmanwalking.com. Soon enough, a Mythology of the Fat Man Walking had taken hold. It was this: A man who suffered through things worse than most of us can imagine had eaten more than most of us can imagine until he was more gargantuan than most of us can imagine. Now he was undertaking an epic trek, and it would save him. A variation of an old story, more popular than ever, 2,000 years later. Suffering and redemption, writ extra, extra large.

A hike? Hardly. It was Paul Bunyan meets *Pilgrim's Progress*. People checked out his route on thefatmanwalking.com and emailed him to tell him if he could lose weight, they could quit cigarettes. Or start exercising. Or lose weight. They could change their lives. Naturally, Oprah's people called.

But how could he save anyone if he couldn't even save himself? By the time he got to St. Louis, right around Christmas, he had been stuck at 318 pounds for more than a month. That's when his wife told him she wanted a divorce. By the time he got to Dayton, he was 345 pounds. Once, he had to use the scale at a truck weigh station to make sure. People emailed him, told him to avoid fast food restaurants. Had those people ever walked along the highways of Middle America? The Fat Man was getting fatter. And desperate. And when word got out that Vaught was calling timeout in the middle of his path to salvation—that the trail to happiness had hit a roadblock in Dayton and he was returning to California for a month to work out with a personal trainer—the Mythology of the Fat Man took a hit. Have gods with clay feet ever been treated kindly? Some of his would-be corporate backers were not happy. His ghostwriter from HarperCollins was not happy. The television folks were not happy. Some of the visitors to his website were not happy. The truth is, Vaught was not happy.

"First, he's this big schlub," says David Mollering, one of two documentary filmmakers who spent 20 weeks with Vaught on his journey. "And then all of sudden he's Forrest Gump. That's a lot to handle for anybody."

No doubt the schlub-Gump metamorphosis was proving taxing, though Vaught handled it with some aplomb, referring to himself in the third person as "Forrest Lump." But there were other problems, too. He hated being fat. He hated disappointing people. He hated the idea that he might fail. These were all issues that a lot of people could relate to. All were challenges that any man—even a skinny man—could understand. But a man doesn't eat himself to the land of truck-stop scales because he's like the rest of us. Oprah's people aren't holding for you and me. We all have demons. Vaught had a fiend. Or maybe he was the fiend.

"He's been carrying a 600-pound gorilla," says Pierre Bagley, the other filmmaker. "I used to say, 'Steve, if there's a monster in this thing, then you're Dr. Frankenstein.'"

A Bad, Bad Place

He made the decision in a Target store. Friday night, March 25, 2005, in a pharmacy aisle. He was with his wife, April, and his kids, Melanie, then 8, and Marc, then 3. Vaught felt a stabbing pain in his back, a tightness in his chest. He struggled for breath. He thought he might be having a heart attack. By the time he made it home and sat down, and realized he wasn't dying, he'd come up with a plan.

It was a big plan, a bold plan. It was the kind of plan we all cook up from time to time—quit the job, hug the wife goodbye, hit the road—but that only a few follow. Vaught had already followed a few.

He had dropped out of high school and joined the Marines at 17, gotten married at 20, divorced at 24. He was living in San Diego then, a muscled 250 pounds, an honorably discharged lance corporal with a new girlfriend and a job as manager of a tow truck company. It doesn't sound too bad. It probably looked good. But people didn't know that his father had left Vaught and his mother when Vaught was 3. They didn't know his father had spent much of his life in prison, for crimes Vaught doesn't want to discuss. Vaught applied for a job as a cop after the Marines, and they hooked him to a polygraph and asked if he'd ever thought of killing anyone, and he had said no. The lie stopped the interview. "Not only had I thought about it," he says, "I'd worked it out." He was thinking of his father.

But other children survive abandonment. Other children endure less-than-ideal parents.

Vaught loved drawing. He wanted to be an artist. When he was 13, his stepfather told him drawing was for sissies. "I could have sweated gold, and it wouldn't have been good enough," Vaught says. "I could have been playing classical piano, and he would have hated me. It wasn't what I was doing. It was who I was."

Before he became the Fat Man, Vaught was simply a Very Unlucky Boy who became an Unhappy Grownup. But that describes a lot of people. They get by. They don't decide that the answer is a coast-to-coast stroll. Maybe Vaught would have gotten by, too, if not for the accident.

It happened late in the afternoon. He was on his way to pick up a birthday card for his girlfriend. The sun was in his eyes and he was going too fast. Even if he had seen the elderly couple in the intersection, he might not have been able to avoid them. But he was going too fast, and he didn't see them until he was on them. The woman, Emily Vegzary, 75, went through the windshield and died instantly. Zoltan Vegzary, 81, lived 21 days before he died. Vaught spent his first night in jail (he would serve 13 days for vehicular manslaughter), with the dead woman's blood and pieces of her skin in his hair.

A year later, Vaught had gained 60 pounds. He and his

Vaught spent his first night in jail with the dead woman's blood and pieces of her skin in his hair.

girlfriend had split up. After a brief stint in Las Vegas with an uncle, he ended up in an attic apartment in Youngstown, Ohio, where he was born and which he hated, unemployed, barely paying the \$35 a month rent.

One night, he hears a noise—pop, pop, pop. There's a man outside his window, shooting a pistol. Vaught leans his head out the window, sees the man, starts laughing. He can't stop laughing. The man looks up and sees the fat man leaning out the window.

"What are you laughing at?" the man with the gun yells. "I'll put a bullet through you."

Vaught keeps laughing, then stops. "Go ahead," he says.

"I just didn't care," he says. I knew that eventually something bad was going to happen to me, so why be concerned about it? Maybe I was hoping that would be the night."

Are those the words of a mad scientist, or the monster he created? The Fat Man's not sure. How could he be? Imagine hating your father and stepfather. Now imagine killing two people. Imagine being Steve Vaught. Would you have been able to leave the attic? Vaught speaks about fear and despair with eloquence; he quotes Lao Tzu and the *Tao Te Ching* and Alan Watts with passion and precision. When it comes to what saved him, though, when it comes to love, there's this: "I met a girl, and the girl sort of drug me out of it."

They moved to California, he got a job at an auto repair shop, and one day Vaught came home and the girl said she'd been sleeping with her boss. He sold everything he owned, bought a one-way ticket to England, where his ex-wife was living, and when he told immigration agents he had never been married, they checked their records, saw that his ex-wife lived in England, then sent him back. He took a Greyhound from Newark to Harrisburg, and from Harrisburg back to Youngstown, and from there he managed to fly to Albuquerque, where he stayed with an old friend named Jeff for a few weeks, and from there to San Diego. It was a long, meandering trip undertaken by a man who had nothing better to do than drift, and as anyone who has ever drifted knows, salvation can bob up in the most unexpected places. In San Diego, he stopped to say hello to Jeff's girlfriend. And there he saw a friend of hers who looked familiar.

Vaught knew her from a happier time in his life, when he was 20, freshly discharged from the Marines and life was filled with possibilities. She had been 13 then. Now, she was 23, and he was 30. And three months later she was pregnant, and Steve and April were living in San Diego, expecting.

In the Mythology of the Fat Man, April saved Steve. The love of a good woman and all that. And maybe there's some truth to that. Other men are saved by love, grounded by children. Maybe Vaught was, too. Maybe without April, and without the births of Melanie and Marc, things would have unraveled faster. Maybe things would have been worse. But they were bad enough.

He couldn't stop eating, for one thing. He couldn't stop thinking about how empty he felt, for another. Maybe they were the same thing.

"I said, 'If the next 33 years are as good as the last 33,

I don't need to hang on anymore.' I thought, 'What kind of father am I going to be?'

"I thought, 'They're almost better off without me.' Once you think that, you're in a bad, bad place. I thought, 'I'm just polluting their environment by being around. If I can't fix myself—and I was convinced I couldn't—then it's better if I'm not around.'"

He couldn't stop the monstrous thoughts. Soon, he was looking like a monster, too. His weight climbed from 300 to 320, and from there to 350, and from there to 375. "Go see someone," April said. "Or just go." So he saw a therapist who put him on Paxil and Wellbutrin, antidepressants. He remembers the day they kicked in, how the smell of the pavement and the colors of flowers "almost knocked me out."

He had a beautiful wife and two great children. He had a therapist and antidepressants that allowed him to function. He'd found work managing an auto repair shop. He had two exercise machines and two mountain bikes in the garage, but he never used any of them. And he ate alone, because he couldn't stand to have people see how much food he consumed. He couldn't stop eating.

"I'm killing myself," he thought, "and I don't know how

▶ He couldn't stop eating, for one thing. He couldn't stop thinking about how empty he felt, for another. Maybe they were the same thing.

to stop." The night he left the Target store, he was 39 years old. He weighed 410 pounds. He had gained more than 100 pounds in seven years.

After the children were asleep, he and April sat up for hours in bed talking. "The kids don't get the father they deserve, I don't get the husband I deserve, and he doesn't get the life he deserves," April told Bagley. (April Vaught declined to be interviewed for this article.)

She told him he should hurry up, that he should get started as soon as possible.

On Monday, he quit his job. The same day, he took a warm-up hike. He carried a pack loaded with a 50-pound plate from one of the weight machines.

"Almost killed me," he wrote in his journal. "The back and leg pain was unbelievable."

The next day, he tried again. "Same route, much less pain." Over the next two weeks, he made it as far as four and a half miles, did a few local television interviews, and lined up two camping stores to donate equipment.

On April 10, 2005, he lumbered away from Oceanside. He carried four flashlights, ten D batteries, two sleeping bags,

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an electric fan, and no cell phone. He had \$200 in his pocket. His pack weighed 85 pounds.

Facing the Truth

The plan was to get from the Oceanside pier to New York City in six months. He walked nine miles the first day, ten the next. Drivers screamed obscenities at him. One threw a Big Gulp cup at him. He developed a blister on his left foot. So he took a day off. Then another day. The fifth day, he managed to make five miles. Not what anyone would call a steady pace. But before he became the Fat Man, before legions of wounded seekers made him their standard-bearer, no one had ever accused Vaught of being the steady sort.

He thought about his feet. He thought about the rain. He thought about different ways of tying his shoes, and his fancy hiking pants that ripped twice and that he sewed twice, and then they ripped again, and he thought more about his feet, and how when he moved up from a size 11 to a size 12 shoe, his whole life improved and how "it is funny how something that is normally a minor incident in one's life becomes epic when you are involved in something like this."

Why couldn't he be happier? He thought about that a lot. Any tortured soul who's ever decided that peace depends on the successful completion of one task knows it's a nerve-racking way to live. "Not because of the pain," he wrote in his online journal on April 27, when he stopped at the Ontario Mills Mall in Riverside County, "but because I cannot face the possibility that I may have a serious injury and this trip might very well have ended for me tonight. I absolutely cannot fail at this, because to do so means that I am going to fail at living, fail my kids and my wife."

April drove to the mall and picked him up, then took him to a doctor. He had a strained tendon, painful but not serious. A week later, she drove back to the mall, and he started again.

He started, and he almost stopped.

"I got to the desert and I thought, 'Oh, my God, what have I done?'" It was 105°F, he was running low on water, and he didn't see a store anywhere. That was in Dagget, near Barstow. "I'm hot and miserable and depressed and sitting in abandoned Shell station, thinking, 'Why is this happening to me?'" He wasn't even halfway across California.

Another morning, still in the Mojave, short on water again, he came to a cool little creek under a bridge.

"It wasn't that hot yet, but I was tired. I see these little watermelons growing on the side of the road. Turns out they were gourds. I put my feet in the creek for a little while, then I fall asleep, under the bridge."

When he woke, ready to fill his two-gallon water bottles, he noticed something had changed. It was quieter now. The creek wasn't burbling. It wasn't running at all.

"I just kicked myself," he says. I felt like, that was my life. You find a beautiful creek in the middle of the desert, you wake up, it's gone. You've got to seize the moment."

By the time he made it to Arizona, he was more careful about water, more cautious about mapping his daily route. He had a cell phone, courtesy of a California radio station, and a national following, courtesy of the media. *Today* called. *Dateline NBC* called. One day, he had 51,000 hits on his website. He had groupies. Yet with all that, he was still a man walking across a country. In the Arizona desert, he was daydreaming when he heard a strange noise. In front of him, almost underneath his foot, a diamondback rattler, about to strike. Vaught pulled out his 9mm Ruger P89 and shot it. (Later, a British newspaper would describe how Vaught had dispatched a cobra. What was weirder, shooting a snake in the desert, reading about it in a British paper on your website, or seeing it described it as cobra?)

By Winslow, he had a book deal worth almost \$250,000.

"When he got book money, he could afford hotels," Bagley says. "That became a problem. It was, 'I got

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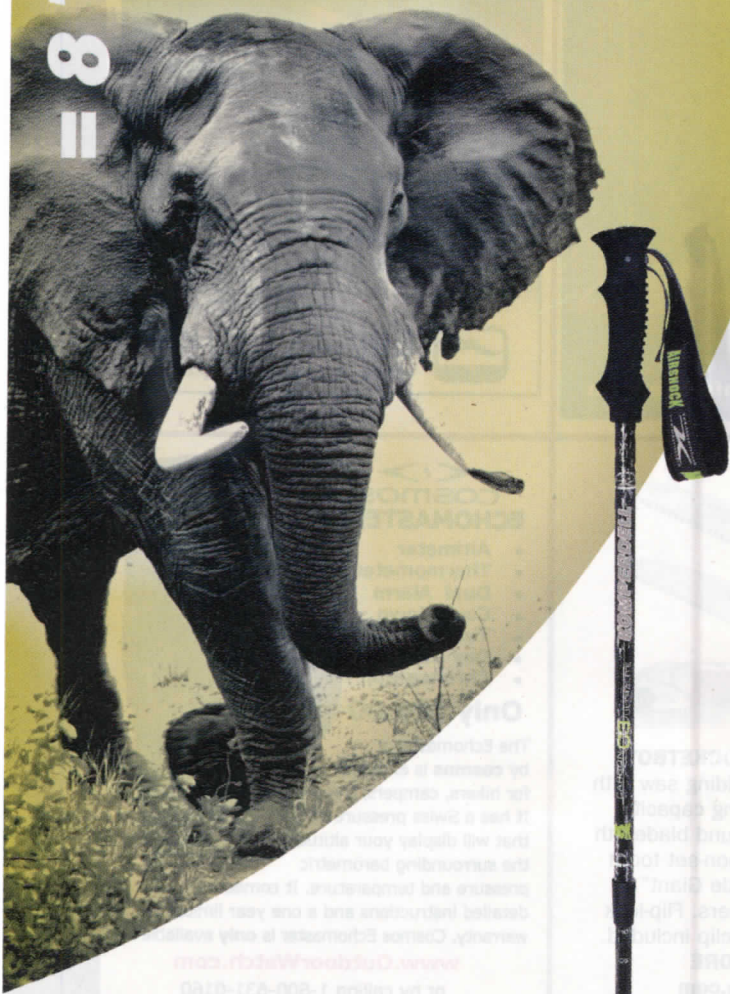
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a bath, I got a toilet, I got running water'. It was hard to give that up."

About 20 miles east of Gallup, Vaught wrote in his journal, "I didn't feel like I was going to quit, I just wanted to sit in a comfortable chair, in a warm room, and relax. So I indulged myself and that turned into four days quite easily."

In Seligman, he stopped at a place called the Roadkill Cafe and tucked into a chicken fried steak, with biscuits and gravy. A reporter and photographer were there, and the picture went up on thefatmanwalking.com.

April knew how easy it was for Steve—who had already dropped to 346—to stumble, so she told a group of middle-aged Albuquerque women who'd contacted her online where her husband was. They called themselves the Kat Walkers. The Fat Man called them a "Dr. Phil weight-loss group."

From Vaught's online journal: "Well, they came on like gangbusters, snatching me up from my low point...and we hit the road. They eagerly listened to my complaints and excuses, agreed that they were valid, and then said, "OK then! Let's get to the walking" and they have not let up yet. I would have hidden from them because facing the truth about my weakness and forcing myself to be responsible to myself, my family, and my journey is not what I was looking for. Comfort, sympathy, and macaroni & cheese is what was I was looking for...self-indulgence, in short. What I needed though was some good support, motivation, and a swift kick in the shorts, which is exactly what they provided."

People surprised him. People were nice. A fruit vendor gave him an orange. A couple offered him a bed and shower. A woman asked him to help her. Her mother was morbidly obese. She was dying. What could the woman do?

People were depending on him. People were helping him. He was losing weight. He was calming down (when he came upon another rattlesnake in New Mexico, he didn't shoot it). He should have been happy. Even the Frankenstein monster had moments of bliss, stretches of solitary, uninterrupted, contented grunting.

But reporters kept calling. Bagley and Mollering wanted to spend more time with him. Before he arrived in Albuquerque, HarperCollins informed Vaught that he would be working with a ghostwriter. The ghostwriter called, and he demanded access. The ghostwriter told Vaught what his journey meant. Vaught thought he already knew what his journey meant.

Was Vaught miserable because people were hounding him, or was it because he was afraid of failing, or was this the garden-variety despair of a man with too many miles to go, too many promises to keep? Or was it that no matter how far he walked, he couldn't escape his childhood? Or was he just constitutionally predisposed to misery and self-destructive behavior, if not an ogre with bolts in his head, then at least a world-class head case? He wasn't sure. He needed to be sure. But how could he be sure of anything with antidepressants clouding his thinking? He decided that was the problem.

He needed to do something bold. Something drastic.

"Why does a 400-pound guy not just go to the gym, not eat right?" asks Bagley. "Why does he think he has to walk all the way across the country? He's not great at making life decisions."

In Amarillo, he threw his antidepressants down a storm drain. Then he filled the bottle with Skittles. When Bagley or Mollering asked if he was still taking his pills—they worried about him—he would shake the bottle and smile.

Over the next few weeks, through the Texas panhandle, he would lock himself in his hotel room for days at a time. He would refuse to talk to anyone. He would cry. Once, he threatened Bagley's teenage son, who was working as a cameraman for the documentary filmmakers. Once, he threw his phone against a hotel room wall.

Things didn't improve in Oklahoma. He was laid up while he waited to pass a kidney stone. He suffered three bouts of poison oak.


By late August, he'd been written about in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, featured in Italy's *Gazzetta del Prione* and Germany's *Stern*, interviewed twice on *Today*. Oprah sent a crew to meet Vaught in Weatherford, Oklahoma. She asked about his diet and exercise and how he was losing weight.

"Oprah was like, 'Call me, it's a weight-loss story,'" says Bagley. "It's not a weight-loss story! He hasn't lost that much weight. I'm not sure what it is, but it's not a weight-loss story."

Was it a quest for clarity? If so, Vaught found it in Elk City, Oklahoma. "It was a day of awakening," he says. "I know it sounds corny, but one day I woke up and a lot of the nonsense seemed to have evaporated. A lot of the noise inside me was gone. The sky was pretty, the people were nice. It seemed like the whole world had lightened up."

How? The isolation, for one. The hiking. And being drug-free.

"I don't say that medicine is bad for everybody who uses it," he says. "I know some people need it. But for me, it dumbed me up, I felt like I couldn't function on it."



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The discomfiting thing about heightened awareness is you start noticing things that never made you miserable before. Even though he weighed less than 340 now, and even though he had reduced his pack weight from 85 to 55, it was still a lot to carry. He had been talking to people from GoLite almost since the trip began, and they had been imploring him to reduce his load. "If you want to be an idiot," he says an employee told him, "go ahead and keep on with what you've got."

In Oklahoma, a GoLite rep named Kevin Volt flew out and met him. He spread Vaught's belongings out on a tarp. He looked at his two-pound first-aid kit. "Are you going to do surgery?" Volt asked. He nodded at Vaught's three canisters of fuel. "Inviting people over for a barbecue, are you?" When Vaught left Oklahoma City, his pack weighed 16 pounds. Left behind were flashlights, notebooks, a tape recorder, a digital camera, clothes, and a sleeping bag liner. He kept his laptop computer. He ditched the pistol.

By the time he left Oklahoma, at the beginning of November, he was down to 330 pounds. He got to 325, then 320. By the time he reached St. Louis at the end of 2005, he was down to 318, but he had been at that weight for weeks. He could not break 318. And then he talked to April on the phone and she said she wanted a divorce. (Vaught will not talk about the divorce, but says both he and his wife are committed to being friends and good parents.)

His weight started to climb again. He tried sit-ups. He tried high-protein diets. He heard from 18 personal trainers, scores of anonymous emailers (whose advice started at "Why are you eating a chicken fried steak, you fat pig?" then got really nasty) and a host of self-professed experts. "One person said, you should eat nothing but egg whites. Another guy kept emailing me about diet. He's got a chemical equation that would drive Einstein crazy. A lot of people said, "Why don't you just start eating less and exercising more." I said, "Goddammit, why don't you have your

own fucking show, instead of Oprah?"

Only one person made sense. His name was Eric Fleishman, though he's better known as Eric the Trainer. Fleishman is a Los Angeles-based trainer who, like more than a few Los Angeles-based trainers, has a website and a vision that goes far beyond good cardiovascular health. He offers, according to his website, "programs [that] provide a holistic approach to fitness that incorporates gender-specific exercises, Eastern philosophy, and diet to achieve a perfect version of you."

"Sign Up," he encourages online visitors. "Call in. Get Fit. Be Beautiful."

Like Vaught, Fleishman is a talker. Like Vaught, Fleishman likes to talk about a wide range of subjects.

They talked on the phone about loneliness and despair, about exercise and eating, about running away from trouble and the search for self.

Fleishman drove out to a truck stop in California, walked around, tried to discover the dietary reality in which Vaught lived. He flew out to Dayton, and they talked some more. An hour later, according to Vaught, Fleishman said, "You're a great guy and a wonderful person and I respect the journey that you're on, but it's a much more complex situation both physically and emotionally than I'd anticipated."

To Fleishman's surprise, Vaught suggested returning to California to work together for a few weeks.

So 11 months into a trip that was supposed to be completed in six, Vaught flew to Los Angeles. He spent 21 days in a hotel down the block from Fleishman's gym. Every day he would lift weights for an hour and do martial arts for an hour and walk backward for an hour. He accompanied Fleishman to local schools, where he talked about motivation. He talked about determination and how even when you were feeling helpless and scared, you kept going. He was big and scary-looking and gentle. Is it any wonder that children loved the Fat Man?

"A Little Too Murky"

He flew back to Dayton, started walking again on March 3. He weighed 282.



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Some days he made it 15 miles. On those days, likely as not, he'd walk into a restaurant and order a stromboli for dinner. Some days, he stayed in town. He might have stromboli then, too. He got back to 300 quickly, then to 305, then to 310. "One television producer calls and says, 'You've walked two-thirds of the way across America and you're still fat? Have you considered surgery?' Another one says, 'The story is a little too murky now.'"

Didn't they realize? His life had always been murky. But the saga of the Fat Man—the Mythology of the Fat Man—there was nothing murky about that story. Tragic, maybe, but ultimately redemptive. That's what the public wanted. That's what the TV producers wanted. That's certainly what the publisher wanted. Didn't they realize? He wanted it more than anyone.

The ghostwriter was calling regularly now. He had already written what he called the backbone of the book, sent it to Vaught. "Fill in the rest" is what Vaught says he was told. In the backbone, Vaught breaks down sobbing 11 times in the first chapter, exclaims at one point, "Hey, I'm a big fat loser."

Vaught was not happy about that.

"You know," he says, "a guy who walks across the country is not a big fat loser."

Other long-distance hikers pay attention to landscape, to soft dawns, to the way the birds sound at dusk. Vaught spent much of his journey next to highways, listening to diesel trucks. In Pennsylvania, he suffered two more kidney stones and one more case of poison oak. At night, he stayed in motels, plugged in his laptop, and tapped away miserably at the backbone of his book.

Now Vaught and his ghostwriter were arguing about tone, about structure, about almost everything.

It's doubtful that any ghostwriter would have an entirely easy time with someone as simultaneously driven and lost as Vaught. It's also a safe bet that no one but Vaught would proclaim to a visitor, "It's bad if you have a

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ghostwriter and you've said to him on more than one occasion, 'You're lucky you're not within choking distance.'

He was rarely camping out now. He could afford motels. Plus, he had to keep in touch with the ghostwriter, and he had to work on revisions, and there were endorsement deals to consider.

A shampoo manufacturer offered him \$50,000 if he would hold up a bottle of its product every time he was interviewed on television. He declined. A company offered a phone, computer, and RV, if he agreed to sing the praises of its wheatgrass, and "it sounded pretty good," but the company wanted to take over thefatmanwalking.com, so he refused. A company that marketed patches to help people quit smoking asked him to wear its product. "But I had never smoked. The guy says, 'You don't have to say you smoked, you don't have to lie, just that you're wearing a patch, people will assume that's why you don't smoke.'" He turned him down. "Another company wanted me to sponsor their glucosamine product. Same kind of deal—I can't make it across the country without my blah blah. But I don't think you need supplements. So that was no deal."

Some vitamin company people made an offer, too. They would market "thefatmanwalking" vitamins. He said that sounded okay. And they wanted to sell "thefatmanwalking" cholesterol-reduction pills, too. He, oddly enough, had never had a problem with cholesterol, but okay, that was fine, too. High cholesterol was something a lot of people needed help with. And they would sell "thefatmanwalking" diet pills, too. That was a dealbreaker. "I'm not going to accept ads that are exploitative of people who are overweight," he says. "They wanted me to prostitute myself."

"I had started to realize there were a lot of people getting a lot of inspiration from what I was doing, and I didn't want to jeopardize that." It's easy to mock a man who makes a grab for the moral high ground just after he admits how delicious it would be to throttle his business partner. But what would you do if someone offered you hundreds

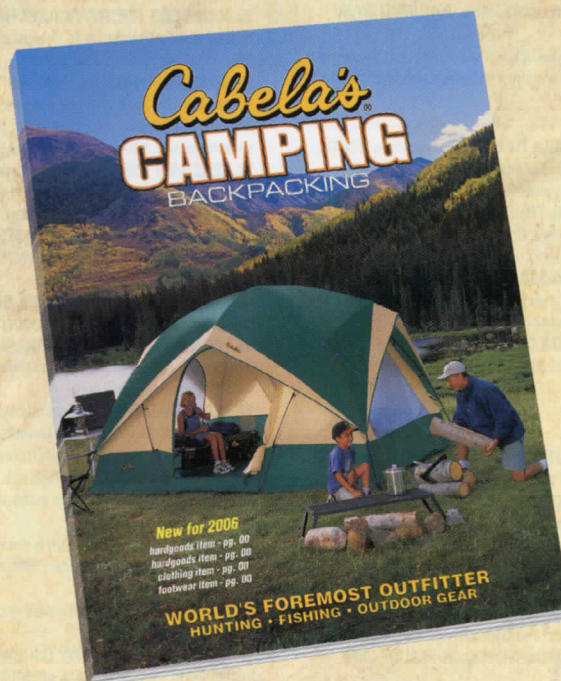
of thousands of dollars to expose your most terrible secrets, then hired someone else to make them prettier? And how many people would turn down endorsement deals worth millions?

It's doubtful he was ever a jolly Fat Man. By mid-April, he is weary, eager for the trip to be over. He needs to hurry now. He is in rural Pennsylvania, about 400 miles from New York City, and if he doesn't make it across the George Washington Bridge by May 15, HarperCollins might cancel the book.

"Sometimes I think I should have turned around at the Mississippi River and just walked back," he says. "Since St. Louis I've had no time to walk around and meet people. I've been dealing with the fucking book. I'm on chapter nine now, and I still have four more chapters to go. A long time ago, this walk stopped being about weight loss and personal redemption. It's about business now."

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LOST IN AMERICA

Continued from page 119

He just passed his third kidney stone a week ago. He is in the midst of his fourth case of poison oak. He's worn fifteen pairs of shoes, lost four toenails, and suffered 20 blisters "before I got smart about it." It is pouring outside, so he's taking the day off. Maybe he'd be taking the day off anyway. He is back up to 310 pounds. He is seated at a Denny's off the highway in Bedford, Pennsylvania. He orders the pepper jack omelet, with no pancakes, and he eats it in front of a reporter, which is a very big deal to Vaught, because he still doesn't like people to watch him eat.

"We need to medicate ourselves against the hollowness and pain," he says. "We think we can buy happiness, buy a cure or relief of our symptoms, but we can't. This has become crystal clear to me. The solitude of this walk has made this clear to me."

He has dark-brown hair and bottle-

green eyes. He flirts with waitresses, complains about being a prisoner of the people who love the Fat Man but don't know Steve Vaught.

He doesn't say much at first, but once he gets going, he says a lot. He quotes from *The Madness of Crowds*, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, *The Best Buddhist Writings of 2005*, and *The Healing Anger*, by the Dalai Lama ("that was a big thing for me") and references the *Girls Gone Wild* collection; ponders the ubiquity of the Internet and the meaning of Taoism and proclaims that "the inevitability of life is failure." His is the trippy wisdom familiar to anyone who has spent more than a couple days in the backcountry, or the desert, or even a weekend alone shuttling between a Motel 6 and Denny's, cut loose from the moorings of things like jobs and deadlines and family and friends.

The thing about such trippy wisdom is this: It might be trippy, but it's wise.

"Stop looking for the pill or the miracle cure," the Fat Man says. "You

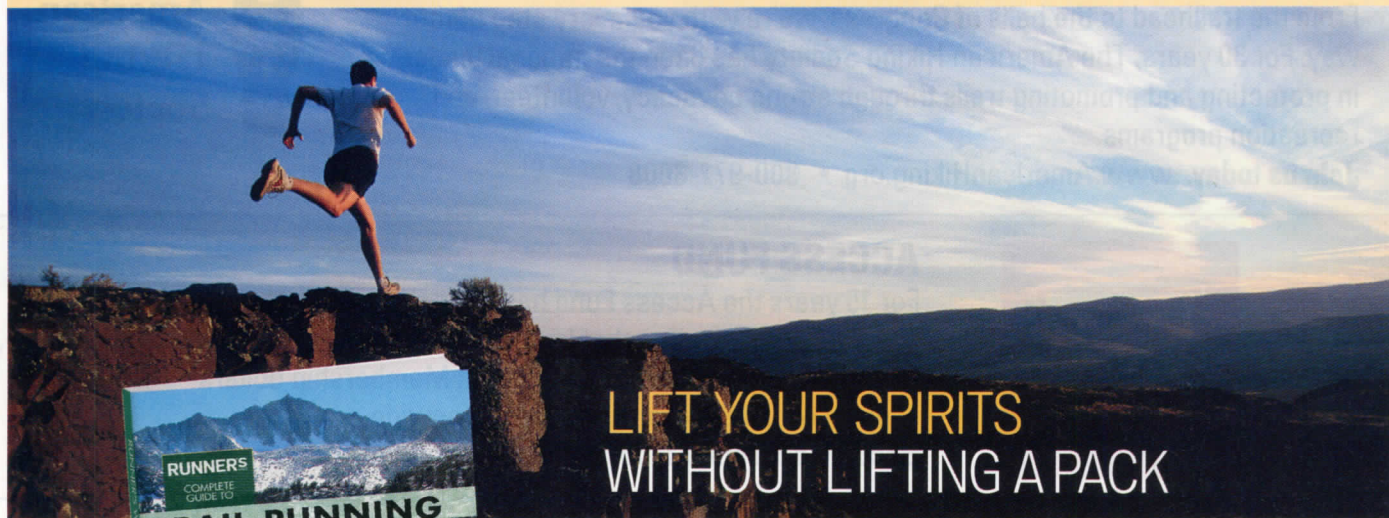
know what's going to cure me? Sausage and eggs."

"I tell people, 'You gotta stop watching TV, you gotta unplug.'" The news would have you believe you walk out your door, there are gunfights and mayhem. But people are awesome. I've met some angry people, but no evil people. With the exception of a couple weird things here and there, it's been great."

"You can live in the past, you can live in the future, or you can live right now. This is your only true reality. Tomorrow will happen..."

It's easy to smile indulgently at the philosophical musings of a man who left his job and his family to find himself, at the proclamations of a guy who rails against the evils of consumerism while being defeated by chicken fried steaks and stromboli. But can you imagine killing two people, gaining 160 pounds, losing 105, and walking 2,900 miles?

On May 9, he crosses the George Washington Bridge, and the next day, he appears for his third and probably



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final interview on *Today*. He weighs 305, but he knows it's just a number and to focus on the number is to be lured back to misery. Soon, the book will be out. After that? He's not sure. He might teach. Oprah might finally air his interview, might even have him in the studio. He might walk across England with Eric the Trainer. Fat Man Walking and Eric the Trainer together. That's a thought.

He will be 41 on August 1. "What are my plans for the future? Attachment is one of the biggest problems we have as human beings. The stronger you hold something, the more attached you get. Consumerism is just destroying people. They worry about the future, they worry about the past. My only responsibility in life is to take care of my children. That's not a big deal. You feed them, you love them, you guide them. College funds and things like that? Worrying about that stuff doesn't make it happen."

Before he got held up by the rain and poison oak in Bedford,

Pennsylvania, he received an email from a girl named Kristin in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She wanted to tell Vaught that on Easter Sunday, her pastor had mentioned him in his sermon. "It was inspirational," she wrote.

"I get tons of those," he says. "I almost feel guilty for getting them."

Can you imagine what it feels like to be famous for your girth, soon to be divorced, technically unemployed, to wonder what's coming next? Can you imagine the most successful thing you've ever done or are likely to do, about to end? Can you envision what it's like to serve as inspiration to people you've never met, to be a disappointment to yourself?

It's easy to think Steve Vaught is different, that his story is singular. It's comforting to behold his awesome bulk and to decide that his torment and confusion and even his murky triumphs belong to a creature unlike the rest of us. But to do so is to miss what's most important about Vaught's struggle.

He's not a savior. Not a monster, nor

a monstrous inventor. Those are all myths. He's just a fat guy trying to lose weight. He's just a self-taught, hyper-articulate, sometimes very cranky person trying to navigate the distance between where he is and where he wants to be.

When it comes to that never-ending, utterly human journey, we could do much, much worse than to heed the wisdom of the Fat Man.

"As far as worrying about next year," he says, "I think about it, sure. I don't want to say, 'Next year I want to be a writer, next year I want to be this, or that.' You set yourself up for failure. No matter what happens next year, I'm going to make it the best possible moment, because that's where I'm living, in my moment. You're going to have good and you're going to have bad, and they're both equally as important. Wherever the road takes me, that's where I'll go." 🍎

Writer at large Steve Friedman wrote about solitude in our April 2006 issue.

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