

# Maine

## Chapter One

All manner of natural earth—the slopes of hills, branches of trees and foundation veins of nearby mountains—were cast indistinguishable one from another, blue-black against the royal twilight. Light from far away stars burned through their nebulae, spanned incalculable distances and appeared in late June on that small track of earth carved out from the northern wilds. Grace. It shone there on the roof and through the window of an old house with sounding beams and crooked stairs, into a room where three men slept. Early the next morning, as though climbing upward through the black soil, the sun rose white and clear, above the rugged forests of Maine.

## I

Applejack woke up. *Daylight. I've missed it. How could I have missed it, today of all days?* Mike was sitting across the room from him, docile, carving the skin off an orange.

“Good morning, sir,” Mike said.

“Did we miss it?” Applejack said.

“No, we're good. It's only 4:30.”

“What do you mean 4:30? The sun is up.”

“We're in Maine. Sun comes up early this far north.”

Futureman stirred in a nearby bed but did not wake. A mouthful of dreams clamored in his beard, full and round like his belly. Broken snoring resumed. Leaned against his bunkhouse bed was a glimmering new top-of-the-line backpack, the weight of it nearly bending the struts (you get what you pay for). Futureman had burned the midnight oil in an attempt to purge the thing, yet still it weighed fifty-three pounds. Still it rested there, proud and defiant, ready to drag down the man's dreams.

“I couldn't sleep,” Mike said. “Been thinking about her all night.”

“We get to see her today. I've been waiting since I was a kid,” Applejack said.

“I know you have.”

Applejack gripped the edge of the mattress. The 80-yr-old hardwood was rough and cold on the balls of his feet as he crossed the room.

“Futureman, get up, buddy. It's time.”

Muffled response. *Get up.*

Futureman raked his eyes. *Sunlight.* He sat up quickly. “Did we miss it?”

“We're good. It's early still,” Applejack said.

“You sure? The sky is—”

“We're in Maine. Sun comes up early this far north,” Applejack said.

Mike smiled from across the room.

A cloud of profanity followed Old Man Shaw wherever he went, most of it censored by a toothless jargon. He was short, hobbled and possessed one outfit of clothes—an undershirt tucked into trousers held up by suspenders. Shaw owned and operated *Shaw's*, a hiker hostel in Monson, Maine, the first outpost southbound on the Appalachian Trail. It wasn't the only show in town. Pie Lady was just down the road. She was much kinder, and she made pies. But Shaw was the legend, and Americans can't accept good behavior in their icons.

Since 5:00 AM, the Old Man had been conducting a maelstrom in the kitchen—pots and pans clanging, wire brushes scraping, bacon sizzling, eggs frying. His wife worked beside him silently, peculiar contentment resting on her face.

“Get up, you little bastud!” Shaw shouted, rapping on the door of an adjacent room.

“Aw right, ole man, don’t have a hawt attack.” Keith Jr. answered, staggering into the kitchen in sweats, hair poking out like a kindergarten art project.

“Everybody’s sittin here waitin’ for cawfee, and ya in there fawtin in ya sheets!”

Keith looked at the floor. A pile of grounds lay underneath the coffee maker. He rolled his eyes and grabbed a broom. “Same thing, every mornin’ at the crack a’ dawn. Who needs an alawm clock?”

Mrs. Shaw watched her lover and son grab at each other. There were times when she wanted to tell her men that love is supposed to be more like warm peanut butter cookies and less like dodge ball, but today she remained silent, understanding. This was Maine. They were Mainers.

Applejack, Mike and Futureman waited at the table like curious children, eager for Shaw’s breakfast, famous Trail-wide and nearly as mythic as his persona. Across the table flipping through the (very) local paper sat a man named Reed, a dark mix of Victorian dandy and Melungeon, freshly showered and already on his way to being drunk.

“Goin’ up the ole bitch today, eh?” Reed asked without taking his eyes off the paper.

“I’m sorry?” Applejack stiffened.

“The bitch. Mount Katahdin. Ya climbin up her today?”

“Yessir,” Applejack said, anxious to get on the mountain. “Come all the way from Tennessee. Today’s the day.”

“Tennessee, eh? I’da got the hell outta there too if I was youse. And let me guess, you plannin on hikin the whole two thousand miles to Georgia then.”

“Maybe. Hopefully,” Applejack said, now a little reticent. “Yeah, since I was a kid.”

“A kid, huh? And you too, fatty?” He looked at Futureman. “Sure your up for it? Musta been a hawd workout regimen got you to this point.”

“I uh,” is all Futureman could muster.

“Good and well, ‘bout time all of ya got off ya dumps and did something worthwhile with ya lives.” Reed returned to his reading. He didn’t even bother to acknowledge Mike.

“Sir, I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of formally meeting...” Mike said, putting his fork down calmly. Reed ignored him and screamed into the other room.

“Old man! You gonna feed me before I die of stawvation? And by the way, this coffee’s colda than my mutha’s glass eye!” A mild grin came over his face. There was history between the Old Man and he. A durability that spoke of hunting and drinking. Loaning. He looked at Mike. “You wanna say something, guy?”

Mike was Applejack’s friend of many years. Before that, he had been a Ranger. Not the perky gentleman in the cupcake-brown hat at the visitor’s center. Naw. Army Ranger. Special-ops. Ghost rider. He had seen intimate combat in the Middle East, HALO-jumped into Baghdad at the end of a dishrag in the dark. Mike understood that a battle has many faces. There is a time to fight and a time to listen, so he held his tongue and nodded. “Good eggs. I was saying these are good eggs.”

Shaw emerged and slammed down an aluminum pot, mumbling a mix of English curses and Gaelic oaths. Reed grinned as he watched the old man hobble back to his kitchen.

“I just hope you guys awn’t quittahs. Seems like every other piece a’ monkey dung I run into comes back from Katahdin cryin’ about blistahs and backaches. Buncha amateurs.”

Mike tapped the table with his finger. “Sir, they are not quitters.”

Reed piled sausage into his mouth. “I guess we’ll see, won’t we guy?”

Monson greeted them differently: white houses and quiet streets, particles floating slow motion in the aureate sky. They had never been so far north. There was an edge-of-the-world slant to the light. In his own way, each man began to absorb the mystery of Maine, certain of its uncertainty, secretly hoping to run smack dab into the kingdom of hiddenness that was waiting in these great woods. This was Maine. Alien Maine. Not Tennessee or Virginia or Iowa. This was Maine.

The screen door rattled open. “Load up!” Keith said, throwing backpacks into the bed of his truck.

Born well past the years of reasonable expectation, Keith had been raised under that strange combination of grandparently indulgence and taskmaster scrutiny. He was the last hope to carry on the family business, yet as the baby, fated to struggle for manhood and independence. Out of this, he’d managed to carve out a niche for himself.

He gave people rides.

The roads, turns, ruts, ditches and jumps on the way to Baxter Park, where the Appalachian Trail begins, had been whittled into his skull. The fixedness of his life was what he loved most. People rattled on about “the world abroad” with its lightning-paced fads and one-night dreams. Keith just drove. Old Man Shaw could snort and holler all he wanted back at the hostel. Keith just drove.

As the engine idled, Keith pulled out a silver can and pinched a four-finger load of brown tobacco (large enough to kill a donkey) and crammed it into his lower lip. He laid his head back and smiled—first dip of the day. Tobacco seeped into his bloodstream. The meniscus had just started to tingle when Reed interrupted.

“Dumb little punk! I told you not to leave without me! And if ya think for a second I’m sittin between these hicks, you got another thing comin.”

“Shut up, ya lazy drunk. You want a ride, get in the back,” Keith said.

Reed mumbled and threw his pack into the truck bed and jumped over the tailgate with surprising agility. Before he had time to situate himself properly, Keith punched the gas. At the sound of the big man skidding across the truck bed, Keith pulled his hat down, his crooked smile finding the long road that wound toward the mountain.

Last winter’s chill had survived in the late-June wind. Reed slumped in the bucket seat and pulled a weathered hood over his curly hair.

“What’s his deal, anyway?” Applejack asked.

Keith shrugged. “Reed? Aw, he’s harmless I guess. Comes around a few times a year, actin’ like he owns the place.” Keith jerked the truck through a small ravine.

“Knows a helluva lot about these pawts, though.”

“What does he do for a living?”

“Do for a living?” Keith sputtered, tobacco bouillon dripping. “Drinks bea. Gambles. Dabbles in the mawket. Waits out the winters and then heads back into the woods.” Disapproval and envy co-habitated in his voice.

Applejack caught a view of sky through the dark trees. The little track they were on was like dozens of others, all cut in a futile attempt to domesticate the Maine wilderness. There were no paved roads this deep into the Great Northern Woods. Only these paths lying still and quiet. A lone plane might grace the sky every week or so.

Futureman’s belly bobbed in the ruts. He sucked it in and pulled his legs together, hoping to stay out of Keith’s driving space. “So how long you been up here, Keith?”

“Hell, forevuh. That old house is all I’ve ever known.” Spittle cup and coffee cup—both between his knees, both the same consistency and color—sloshed dangerously over the bumps and jolts.

“You ever think about getting out? Going to school or something?”

“Yeah. There’s a mechanics school out in Wyoming I was lookin at. But the Old Man got sick, so I stuck around and ran everything til he got bettuh. I know every place a road intersects the Trail. Funny thing is, I never got out on the Trail myself. Ironical, ain’t it?” He shrugged. “You fellas awn’t from New England, ah ya?”

“No. You ever been down south, Keith?” Futureman asked.

“Oh, yeah. I been to New Hampshire a shit load a’ times,” Keith said. He wasn’t joking.

Keith stopped the truck. There were no more roads to drive, only trails to walk.

“You make sure they come out in one piece, Mike,” Keith said. “The Hundred-Mile Wilderness is no joke.”

“They’ll be alright,” Mike said.

“Moose droppings. Bear dung,” Reed muttered, hefting his pack. “That’s what they’ll be in ten days, I can promise ya that.” He disappeared into a thicket.

“Don’t mind him. I expect to be takin some more of ya money ten days from now back in Monson.” Keith spat his chaw onto the dirt and stepped into his truck.

The three men watched the pickup disappear then turned toward the mountain Katahdin. They stared up toward her massive cone. Here at her base, they began to understand their size. Diminutive and pliant, they began.

## II

Mt. Katahdin, a benevolent grandmother. She watches moose lead their babies to water. Fat rabbits and squirrels play games underneath her speckled alder and sumac. Her trails wind through gardens of aster, hepatica and Indian pipe. She is also a judge, presiding over sprawling marshlands and holy mountains with a just jealousy displayed in gray and purple skies, like a train of royal garments.

Long ago, the Abenaki people believed Katahdin was the perch of Pamola, a creature with the body of an eagle and a face as large as four horses. They believed this Storm Bird had decreed no mortal would see the hallowed peak, that any who tried would be snatched up into her talons and carried away like carrion into the mist.

Thoughts, arms, hands, legs and heels sprawled out on the chopped up granite as they climbed upward on the near vertical Abol Approach Trail.

Mike's days were numbered. He wouldn't be moving down the Trail past the Hundred Mile Wilderness. He had come to encourage them through the first leg of their journey. His experience in the field had taught him that physical presence has a lasting effect. Time-release. A bond of blood and sweat.

Adrenaline coursed through Applejack's legs, carrying him steadily. Futureman struggled below, gravity hard at work on his fat body. Excitement had towed it along the first half mile, but now the extra pounds were making their complaints known in the form of a sizeable blister on his right heel.

*You can't be serious*, Futureman thought. *Already?* Refusing early defeat, he pressed on. *Ignore it. It'll go away. Maybe.*

It didn't.

"Guys, can you hold up for a sec?"

"What is it?" Mike said.

"Don't know." *Man, Mike thinks I'm a baby.* "Could just be a rock in my shoe." *He's thinking that I wet the bed.* "But take every precaution, right?"

"Smart thinking. You don't want a popped blister this early in the game. That would be awful."

"Couldn't agree more, Mike." *I'm an idiot.*

Futureman slid off his brand new (not yet broken in) shoe—yep, a blister the size of a silver dollar, right there on the crown of his heel—burst wide open. *Not even halfway up the first mountain. Damn this fat body.*

Baxter Peak, the tip of the behemoth, lay several hundred feet above treeline in a naked world stretching to the sea on one side and locked in a turbine of cloud and bluster on the other. They were eager to gain that highest point, to see the giant wooden sawhorse, a sign marking the end or the beginning of the Appalachian Trail. For those coming north from Georgia (2,175 trail miles to the south) it is a beacon of accomplishment. For the Southbounder, it is the mark of a long journey ahead, a dim lamppost at the edge of a clouded future.

Mike found Applejack standing at the sign, mouth agape. A small crowd of dayhikers had gathered around to take pictures, waiting their turn.

"Can you believe this? There's a line to get next to the sign."

"At least it's not a long one," Mike said.

Nearby, Futureman spotted an attractive woman seated on an eave of rock. Moving across the ledge to talk to her, he suddenly noticed: *handsome, well-muscled companion at two o'clock.* A retreat would be awkward. *Emasculating.* He stood his ground and soldiered bravely ahead with, "Howdy doody there, hikers."

"Howdy doody, yourself," the beautiful woman replied. She was exquisite. Magnetic. Electric. Like the Van Allen Belt.

Futureman searched for the perfect words. "Ahya va you...think about this day?"

"Uh, it's a gorgeous day. And a gorgeous mountain, and I can't wait to start this gorgeous hike!"

*You still may have a chance*, Futureman thought. *That groomed mammalian might be her brother. Don't sell yourself short, bud. You're quite a specimen, fat though you are. Just be smooth, smooth, smooth.*

“Yessum agree, is pretty girl...gray—I mean to say—this is the day...that the... Lord has made.” *Your stomach is oozing over the elastic waistline of your baby-blue shorts.*

“Boy, you’re a weirdo! I like that.” She smiled.

Her man did, too. He had really nice teeth. *Bleached? No. Natural. Bastard.* “I’m Fred Baby,” he said. “This is my wife, Little Moose. At least I think that’s who we are. The trail names might change.”

He and Little Moose spoke with the genteel accent of Old South blue bloods. Fred Baby had just finished doctor school. They had decided to hike the AT before he started practice in Pennsylvania.

“You alone?” Little Moose said, tenderly.

“No...I’m with Applejack and Ranger, who is Mike, who is a Ranger, but not a park, you know, an Army Ranger. Applejack and I aren’t in the army. We’re teachers...of Tennessee children.”

They looked at him blankly.

*Get it together, Futureman thought fast. State a fact:* “There are many school house children.” *Fffff.*

Fred Baby crinkled his brow.

“So ya’ll thruhiking to Georgia?” Little Moose asked.

“Mike is leaving after the Wilderness. He drove from Tennessee just to say goodbye.”

“That’s quite a goodbye,” Fred Baby said.

“Yes. He’s an Army Ranger. Ya’ll thruhiking?”

Fred Baby wrapped his arms around Little Moose. “That’s the plan.” They connected their foreheads and screamed through their teeth.

It was love—the kind of love that makes it to Georgia.

“That’s nice,” Futureman said.

“We’ll see you around, friend,” said Little Moose, tapping him on the shoulder. “We like you.”

Futureman watched them go, poking at each other, popping kisses back and forth. He liked them too, their love and warm Southern charm. He even liked their neat matching outfits.

Waiting his turn in line, Applejack continued to simmer. To his left, he spied two old people walking briskly toward him along the western side of the cordillera. They were really, really old. Old skin. Old hair. Old crooked backs. They too had climbed Katahdin.

Suddenly, a curtain pulled back, and Applejack felt naked. Puzzled. This was not the moment of clarity, not the dreamlike buzz he had imagined for so many years.

*Where’s the ancient wisdom floating above the peak?* he thought. *Where is the silence? The dreaming? Where is the egoless void?*

“What’s wrong?” Futureman asked.

“Nothing. What do you want? Let’s take these pictures and get down off this mountain.”

“Whoa, buddy. This is it, the start of our long hike,” Futureman said.

“So it is.”

“Well c’mon. This is what you’ve been waiting for and now it’s here! Look at that wide open sky. We have no clue what we’re doing—I know I don’t. I just hit on a married woman, and I already got a blister on the way up.” Laughter stirred in Applejack’s throat, but he forced it back down.

“Say Georgia!” The old couple said and snapped a shot.

The trio descended to the pin needle edge of the lower shelf and stood, leaning against the fragments of a gale. Applejack looked out. From there, he could see a red wind rising from the tendrils of the Hundred Mile Wilderness, moving outward. Tierra del fuego. *Here at last, he thought. I’m actually hiking this thing, and I really don’t have a clue what I’m doing.*

“Here goes nothin.”

### III

The transition forest at the base of Katahdin pulled in big tooth aspen from the north and green hawthorn from the south. The understory was thick with hobblebush and wildflower. The path was light and level. A cruel deception. It would be short-lived. It skirted a marsh and ran along the edge of a river. The wind blew steadily. The sun glistened on the surface of the water. Warblers and finches followed them through the trees, calling to them in almost audible words. They listened curiously.

*Springhere. Summernear. Windiscalm and skiesareclear. Thiswon’tlast, believemedear, dayslikethis come onceayear. Dontwaistunour, theendiznear. Berooperoo berahberear.*

The songs were interrupted by a deft sound. Someone was coming. Steps beat strong against the ground—a tap, a click, a jab—echoing, moving fast. Hiking poles (extensions of fingers) vaulted off the roots and grazed across the path. A man appeared out of the green tangle. He stepped fluidly and without effort. His stride had been forged over time. He had long hair and a scratchy beard, eyes intense, far off. His shirt was ragged. His pack was folded and cinched. His black nylon creek gaiters, torn to shreds, lay loose around his ankles. He was strong. Worn but not haggard.

Folks called him Reggae. Of course, he had a proper Christian name. But on the AT he was and always would be Reggae. [Trailname, galldarnit. It’s an AT tradition. Everybody gets one. Bunch of pagan hippy tree-huggers.]

“That’s a thruhiker,” Applejack said. “He’s come all the way from Georgia. He’s about to finish.”

They stepped aside.

Reggae stopped, barely noticing the greenhorns in front of him. He could see Katahdin above the birch. “There she is,” he whispered.

“Any advice?” Futureman asked.

“Sure. Get rid of those Nalgene’s. Use Gatorade bottles instead. Saves a pound.”

*Not exactly what I was expecting, but,* “Alright, thanks,” Futureman said.

An hour later Reggae was on the granite holds, clutching the rickety sawhorse and staining it with his tears.

The path continued light and soft. Not the kind of “wilderness” that billows red wind. For a moment, it gave Futureman a false assurance.

“You know—this trek down the entire eastern United States—I don’t think it’s gonna be all that bad.”

“Hold your horses there, partner,” Mike warned.

“This path doesn’t even hurt my blister. It’s like walking on a natural carpet.”

“This is it,” Applejack said, stopping in front of a sign. “The entrance to the One Hundred Mile Wilderness.”

“Say goodbye to your carpet,” Mike said.

A small, simple sign on the trail here marked a rather different path leading into a rather different patch of trees. On it was printed a warning: *You are about to enter the One-Hundred Mile Wilderness. Do not enter unless fully equipped for ten days of wilderness trekking.*

A shiver migrated across the base of Applejack’s neck. The weight of his pack pressed down. He felt weak, like a sentenced man, yet ready, defying the portent with a weak sneer.

Mike smiled and disappeared into the tangle. *Back in it.*

“Are we ready?” Futureman said.

“What choice do we have?” Applejack said, taking one step and then another.

It would be ten long days inside the wilderness. On the other side waited Monson. And beyond Monson, the long journey home.

## IV

### Wilderness Day 1

A steamy day. Katahdin, their northern star, was lost behind them in a haze. Morning dew dripped off the fern tail shrubs that lined the trail. Wet moss carpeted the forest. The wind was humid. It moved through the canopy as though the forest was breathing.

Futureman winced. The moleskin he’d put over his blister for padding had slipped off in the sweat. “How much further is it to Georgia, again?”

Applejack looked down as he walked. His boots were making crimson puddles in the soil. “I put a spell on you...” he sang. Tremolo clung to the branches.

“Damnation, it’s hot,” Mike said, rubbing his forehead. “I’ll see you guys at camp tonight.” A swarm of oversized deer flies followed him as he disappeared.

“Mike?” Futureman called.

“I put a spell on you,” Applejack echoed, “because you’re mine.”

Futureman looked at the moss. Was it visibly growing up the tree stems? “What are we doing here? This doesn’t seem like a happy place.”

Thunder sounded and sky grew dark.

“No. These woods are clearly not happy.”

Thunder and rain pounded the earth all afternoon.

That night at camp, Applejack was relieved to spy a gap in the clouds. Even though the inside of the tent was as slimy as sewage, and even though his fifty-pound pack was soaked through, and even though he and Futureman had never gotten their absurd food bag to stay up in the trees, and even though his feet hurt half as much as his thighs and his thighs hurt half as much as his shoulders, he was relieved to see a gap in the clouds.

Futureman lay beside him, drifting off to sleep, muttering, “Flies can’t catch me anymore. Little African children pulled their wings off and boiled them on the fire. And now they’re going going going to eat them...”

Approximately 2,150 miles lay ahead of them, but Applejack was relieved for now—to see a gap in the clouds.

## Day 2

New rain spilled violently into the marshlands and ancient steaming swamps. This constant presence of dank moisture increased the chances for wet rot and testicle chafing. Futureman’s blister had become infected and was issuing a white puss. A twin had formed on his other heel. When it wasn’t raining, every inch of the forest air swirled with some sort of insect or other floating menace: spores, deadwood particles, mosquitoes, black flies, deer flies, etc.

“I’ve never heard of bugs biting through bandanas!” Futureman said

“Where did all the birds go?” Applejack asked.

Futureman looked into the empty sky. “They combusted in the sun.”

“I’m serious.”

“I don’t know. How could I know where all the birds went?”

Futureman hobbled and torqued his ankles to protect his heels. The path ahead seemed to be forcing them into another long thigh-high bog walk. He tried to stay atop a log, but his foot slipped and disappeared into the decay. Mud-sop gristle filled his shoe and ground against his raw skin. He grimaced.

“Applejack, I have this cousin. When he was little, he was the spawn of the devil. One time he put his cat into a trash heap because he wanted to see it get squished in the compactor.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because that’s what we are right now—helpless cats in a gigantic trash compactor. I’m one hundred percent sure I hate everything about this. I just went for a poop in the woods, and the flies...they...”

“I know.” Applejack looked around at the slow decay. Stultified by water. “I’d say plenty of cats have died in here.”

Applejack was the first to make the clearing through seven miles of bitter swamp. He had heroin eyes. His stomach growled angrily, yet he couldn’t discern hunger, necessarily. His pack gripped him like an angry raccoon digging claws into his shoulders. His body was one swollen, shapeless mass of flesh, bone, sinew and organ straining against gravity. He begged for a soft landing, but he was too brittle and nothing would bend. He crashed to the ground like a mangled seesaw. His insides slid forward and smashed into his brain like an out-of-step cattle car on a ghost train.

Behind, Futureman lurched on through the swamp, trying to imagine an island to take his mind off of the pain—a beautiful island with sunshine and waterfalls and hidden bays and nurse sharks—but all he could think about was that *the sun is the devil!*

When Futureman came to the broken seesaw, he bent down to examine it.

“Applejack, that you?”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeee.”

“What’s wrong with you? What do you need?” Futureman asked.

“Fooooooooooooo.”

“That’s out of the question in this heat. You’ll explode and blow us all up. How about salvation from your sins?”

“Here. Put this powder in his water. The electrolytes will do him some good.” It was Fred Baby, as cooked as the rest, but he was a doctor first and foremost.

Little Moose sat in the shade. Head hung low, her magnificent coloring faded and pale, she forced a question through labored breath.

“Where...how are your feet, Future...are you keeping bandages changed?”

“How far is it to camp?”

“We’re getting there, buddy. Eight miles now.”

*Eight miles? Might as well be eight thousand.*

### Day 3

A stream cut through the woods. The sound of it drew them to its shore where a tall boy with a shaved head and bright blue eyes was fishing.

“Shhhh,” the boy motioned to them. “Watch. He’s about to take it.”

A large brookie was drifting in the current, eyeing a bait above the rapids. The trout struck. Masterful. Yet it found itself dangling, drowning in the air.

“Anyone hungry for brookie?” the boy said, holding it by the gill.

His name was *Colonel*.

Colonel was an honest Mormon. He had always said the first thing he would do after graduating high school would be to hike the AT, and here he was. A popular guy. He carried a staff with him that had his entire senior class roster etched into it.

The Colonel’s enthusiasm refreshed them, but his eighteen-year old legs were too fleet for Applejack and Futureman. He was long gone by the time they finally reached the top of Whitetop Mountain.

“I feel like a cleaved, salted steak,” Applejack said, dropping his fifty-pound pack on the ground.

“That was me five hours ago. Now I feel like one that’s been passed into the toilet,” Futureman added.

Looking to the west, Applejack noticed another pack propped up against a rock, owner missing.

“Hey, that’s Mike’s pack. Haven’t seen him all morning. Wander where he is.”

Futureman eyed the tiny thing with jealousy, only twenty-five pounds inside.

“How does he get away with carrying thirty pounds less than us?” Futureman asked.

“He’s a Ranger,” Applejack said.

“Yeah, but I tried, and I’m not sure I could have gotten rid of anything else.”

“Perhaps we should find out how,” Applejack said.

Loud singing came from some nearby bushes. They turned in time to see Mike emerge wearing nothing but a straw hat, boots and a tube sock.

“Mornin’ boys,” Mike said, arms out, sun burning his shoulders.

“Mike, why are you na...”

“You boys forget? It’s *International Hike Naked Day*.” The nude man grabbed his things and loped over the crest of the hill and let out a special-ops coyote call.

“Do you think he knows Hike Naked Day was a week ago?” Futureman asked.

“I think he’s got a fever. Keep an eye on him.”

The end of day 4, or is it still day 3?

As they pitched their tent, the clear sound of a flute floated up from Rainbow Stream. A wild, shoeless man wielded it. He lifted his knees as he played. He told them it was a song he had composed for the stream. His dinner was mostly comprised of Indian cucumbers and wild mushrooms he had found in the forest. He was an unbridled earth-worshiper. An extraordinary heathen. A *Tom Bombadil* sort of fellow.

He shared his supper with them and told them a story.

Back in his college days (last year), he and some friends had fashioned a pantheon of little idols and placed it in the middle of campus on account of “we’re bored.” The next day at dawn, they bowed before the idols as the student body passed by. It didn’t take long for the worship circle to grow, causing no small amount of concern among the staunchly irreligious faculty. Some were repulsed. Others were secretly thrilled. Regardless, the issue was “tagged” by the administration, and a missive was sent to the custodial staff: “Please remove PHENOMENOLOGICAL DISTURBANCE from middle of campus.” A misstep on their part. Once the holy place was desecrated, protests ensued. The campus was overrun with freethinkers of every size, shape and color. Several days of Bill-of-Rights quoting and psycho-tropic sojourning followed. Class was cancelled.

*I like him, this Tom Bombadil fellow. What is he talking about?*

Day 4, is this day 4, who is this day for?

At 103°, the wooden planks were cooking Applejack’s cheeks. Candied apples. He didn’t care. He was prostrate on a boat dock on Pemadumcook Lake, forty-five miles into the Wilderness. Mike was beside him, feet in the water, leaning against a post with an air horn and a note attached to it: *Blow the horn. Will come get you.* Opposite the dock sat Whitehouse Landing, a fortress in the middle of the Wilderness, a hidden refuge of bunkhouses and cabins with steaks and one pound hamburgers, drinks and cold showers.

Futureman made his way along the shore, stumbling over the uneven rocks. He watched uncomprehendingly as the boat approached. A mile back, he’d made the decision to armor himself in full rain gear, preferring to smother in plastic rather than surrender his flesh to the thousands of blood-sucking black flies that lay in wait along the shore. *Cunning assassins with their anesthetizing fangs and anti-coagulant venom. No, there will be no more bloodshed today.* But somewhere his vision had blurred. *I don’t think I can make it after all. I have to make it.*

Through his salty eyes, Whitehouse Landing looked like a glittering Xanadu sinking into the Pemadumcook depths. *A metaphor of the Self. My self is sinking. This is my lesson. Whitehouse Landing will be my coffin.*

Mike grabbed his arm. “C’mon, the man is here to take us across.”

“To the other side? Alright, I’m ready. Be sure to put the coins on my eyes.”

Futureman dropped into the boat.

Day 5, or 6, or maybe both

Futureman’s feet (now wrapped completely in duct tape) are two lumps of throbbing pulp, full of raspberry Jell-o. With every step, they are in danger of bursting under the force of his fat body.

Before they started the Trail, Applejack had given him the advice: *Put on some pounds before you begin. You're going to lose a lot of weight from walking so much, so a little extra will help you in the long run.*

Futureman had used it as an excuse to get as fat as he could in as little time as possible. So while other people were running three or four miles a day, he had eaten bacon and Belgian waffles. While they rode bikes and worked out their legs at the gym, Futureman sampled cake and ice cream between meals. While they ran stairs and took backcountry hikes, he inhaled extra-large tubs of buttered popcorn at the local movie theater. In two months time, he had gone from 161 to 201 pounds.

"Damn my fat body, and damn Applejack for letting me get it so fat," Futureman said to himself, collapsed on the side of a sweeping rock scramble below the peak of Nesuntabunt Mountain. He had been unsuccessful at moving any part of his body for quite some time now. He needed water in a bad way. Dark green clouds roiled above him. Static charges buzzed inside. He didn't know what to say, what to do. He screamed.

These were the words that came out, "God, do you exist?" "I need a miracle!" "Fill my bladder magically" "You did it for Moses in the desert?" "If you don't, I will die!" "I think."

Applejack couldn't hear his friend. He was on top of the mountain face down in a hollowed-out place that fit the contours of his frame perfectly.

Behind his buried head, a blue-green mist spread out across the great space between the Nesuntabunt and a long black line of thunderheads that had stacked themselves above the northern peaks. If he had turned for even a second, he would have seen the purple form of Mt. Katahdin pushing out from underneath a heap of burnt orange clouds. He would have seen that the distance he had come was so great a beauty that it could not be measured in miles, existing in an almost untouched manner in Maine's northern forests.

#### Day 1, 3, 5 (the prime ones have meaning), 7 and so on

"Mike's gone. Went ahead. Note says...something about...spider bite."

Applejack knelt in the mud. The scrap of paper fell from his hand. His chest rose weakly with air.

Futureman couldn't hear the talk. His shirt was spread across the rock beside him. It hung in the current of the mountain stream, swaying back and forth irhythmically. He stared at it, unconcerned about time or Mike's spider poison. The sun had been in that one spot for days. One by one, butterflies collected on the warm fabric. There were five of them now, slowly spreading their wings apart and pulling them back together. In this, he became entranced. *Such vivid color*, he thought. *Each wing is like a painted canvas. So beautiful. Why does the Creator care about such tiny details? Strange. I'm breathing as they flap their wings but I'm not trying to. Is this meditation? Am I praying? What comes tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...*

#### A yellowish day with a hint of black

Seventy-eight miles into the Wilderness, food running low, they ran into Colonel in a brown bog, liquefying in the hot sun, not so young anymore. He had flown too fast and too close to the sun.

"You need water. We all need water," Applejack said. "We all need water now."

The one and only source was a dirty swamp pool nearby.

“The only thing going on in there are the happy movements of an unadulterated insect orgy,” Futureman peered in, remembering the Giardia bug he had caught four years prior from a bush puddle in the Zimbabwean Gwandavale desert. Never having quite recovered, his intestines jiggled, resisting. *Please, not again!*

“Colonel, you got a pump?” Applejack asked.

“Yes.”

“This’ll do fine.”

A mile later, still chewing on grit and particles, they came upon a group of eight French-Canadian teenage girls, planted in the dirt, stewing in their anger, crying in frustration, swatting weakly at the insects. Headed north with seventy-eight miles to go, with nothing left to give the wilderness, they’d handed themselves over to the fantasy that a man, valiant and brave, would come to rescue them. That’s when the Colonel—Arian of Arians, blonde and blue eyed, brown and tall—came over the rise. The girls shuddered as he helped them off the forest floor, whimpered sexually under his palms, buzzed to life, giggled, squeezed every last drop of flirtatiousness out of their stinky, nasty skin.

Then they panicked, convincing one another that he was only a mirage, an unreal man-oasis in this, their direst of days. So the young virgins rejected the Colonel as a cruel temptation, and plunged hopelessly back into the throes of despair. Thus, they left the golden young Mormon in a new torment all his own, as though he were only a man made of cellophane.

### A Day in July

In the heat of the day, Applejack began to sing a yuletide song to himself, somewhere on the side of a nameless mountain.

“Why are you singing *White Christmas*?” Futureman asked.

Applejack didn’t answer. His thoughts were bending inward.

*I love the smell of fall, the breeze and the turning of the leaves. It reminds me of my sisters. They were born in the fall. The World Series is played in the fall, and Thanksgiving is in the fall. My family eats the turkey and the dressing, and then we throw the pigskin that arches across the sky toward December. Christmas is in December. The lights cover the houses during Christmas. The cars swerve in and out of the traffic. The people swerve in and out of the stores. They’re wearing jackets, because it’s cold in December. It’s not like July. Your socks don’t soak through your shoes and stick in between your toes and make rashes on the bottoms of your shins. July is dreadful and hot. Christmas will be here again. I’ll sing until it comes.*

### Days and Nights

By the time night had come, they weren’t sure whether it was the moon they saw or a sun shaded by a thousand cloud faces looming down on them. The day, like every other day, had confounded their bodies and confused their wits. So they weren’t surprised in the least to find Tom Bombadil sitting beside a well-built fire, but no fire. He had been crouched here in the lotus position for a full hour, claiming that any second now he would light it by pyro-kinesis.

“It’s a little bit harder than telekinesis,” Tom said, “but not quite as difficult as astral projection.” Finally, he resorted to a primitive method—the match. His downcast expression signified yet another grievance against an ever changing list of false gods.

Futureman retreated to the tent and lay on his back for an hour. His favorite part of the day. The bugs could not get to him. His infirmities were airing out. His blisters could breathe. The wet-rot lines on the bottoms of his feet were smoothening out. He watched as a mosquito bumped against the no-see-um netting of the tent. He laughed childishly and pointed his finger at this rare triumph over evil. Then suddenly Applejack unzipped the tent to crawl in.

“No! What are you doing? No!” Futureman yanked him inside, scrambling to get it closed.

“What?!”

“You’ll let it in, you idiot! Where is it? Where did it go?” He searched frantically for the intruder, all the while it quietly sucking blood from his forehead.

Still Day 1, but it’s now 10, because the last are first

“Mike will be there, if he’s still alive,” Applejack said to himself.

He had not seen his friend in several days. Mike had shifted into ghost rider overdrive after discovering the brown poison of a recluse spider a couple days after “International Hike Naked Day.” His shoulder was beginning to rot when he finally mentioned it to them.

Applejack’s throat was almost completely constricted, parched and throbbing. “Mike will bring Keith, and Keith will bring the truck. Gotta be close now,” he muttered. “It can’t all be like this, can it? It’s going to get easier, right?”

He came upon Futureman collapsed in a small mud puddle, smearing mud all over his legs and arms.

“Man, what are you doing?”

“I jussss’ don’t care anymore. I juss...juss...”

Applejack pitied his friend. *What have I done to him? This is my fault.*

He searched for words that would snap his friend out of this pathetic state, but even as he began to speak them, he found himself asking instead, “Does it feel good?”

“Oh yes. It’s so cool...so cool on the skin,” Futureman said.

So Applejack dropped his pack and rubbed the mud on his body too.

An hour later, another hiker named *Speedo* walked by. He kept his distance and tossed some beef jerky over to them. “Here, eat this, looks like you could use the sodium. Just a few more miles now is all. You can do it.”

Mike had been in Monson for two days, full-bellied and recovering. Now he was standing at the edge of the Hundred Mile Wilderness, waiting nervously for his friends. The sun was setting.

“They’ve got to be close now.”

The last three miles skirted one of Maine’s pristine lakes. The wind was strong. It pushed the leatherleaf over and made great ripples on the surface of the water.

There was nothing left in them. Vile paste streaked their faces and arms. Air was in their veins. As they looked at the sun’s reflection on the choppy water, the two lost

boys realized how much like the surface they had become, driven lamely by another force, unable to dream anymore, thinking only in steps and moments.

“At last.” Mike held his arms open to embrace them. “This is it, where I end and you begin.”

“Begin what, Mike?”

## V

Life is not predictable. The universe is far too complex to be corralled or cornered. We do not know what is going to happen next. We cannot know what to expect. From another person. From a harmless situation. From a wild animal. From the weather. From a relationship, conversation or ball game. From our mouths, brains or intestines. We never know what is going to come out. We can only make an educated guess. Sure, sure, we try to sound intelligent. We want to be prophetic, clairvoyant. Wise. But alas, we are not. So, we make lists and equations and formulate theories and hypotheses. We graph out our expectations, write them down in diaries, on maps, flow charts and NCAA tournament bracket sheets. When we are right we feign assuredness. Perhaps, it's that we want to be like God. We want to have Knowledge, be in Control. But invariably we wake up and find ourselves wandering around in fig leaves, wondering what the hell just happened and why we didn't see it coming.

So the merry band of Hundred Mile Wilderness survivors (about twelve in all) gathered in Shaw's front yard. They had eaten, slept, cleaned their filthy bodies and were milling around in proud silence.

*Out of the Pit. We made it.*

And yet, after all the preparation, sacrifice and struggle, only a handful of them were leaving by foot. Sure that the Trail was not what they'd thought it would be, the rest were taking cars, buses and planes back home. Applejack and Futureman were among those who would remain, busting up the odds—a pathetic ideal proving that the fittest do not always survive and the dumbest sometimes do.

Later that afternoon, around the globe, regimes were being overthrown, marriages annulled, books read, bottles quaffed. In Monson at Shaw's, in the old crooked beamed house, Futureman sat in the den falling asleep to an article about the last untouched people groups of the world. Applejack was upstairs in room 13. As he lay on the bed listening to the hum of the fan, watching the last of the daylight drip down the wall, his thoughts swirled together, mixing past and present.

*Monson would be a good place to live for a few months a year. It's just the right distance from cities, from noise, from doubt, from the jungle gym where Downtown Carla Brown nearly scratched my eyes out for hitting her with that milk carton full of rocks in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. And right over there beyond the woodpile is where Mike Croom kicked me in the gut with his big brother's cowboy boots. Three days in a row. I wanted to kill him, and my dad might have let me, but God kept me from it. And in the parking lot if I had said what I wanted to, it would have ruined her. I can smell her still. It's resting on the inside of the red sweater she left in my car, right around the neck where she wore her silver necklace, maybe I should have said goodbye earlier and then maybe that picture of the Grand Canyon wouldn't be so blurred because my grandfather thought it would be*

*better to get to Monterey a day earlier than it would to see the Painted Desert or to stop and talk to Charles Bronson in the Burger King on the edge of the Mojave Desert. Don't they run a marathon through there in July or August or something? Personally, I would rather run the bulls at Pamplona than see the world's largest porcelain doll collection here in a town like...*

Memories, polished and stained, half-thoughts and scents of days that had been lived by someone not yet reborn, sorrow, color, hope, regret, music, anxiety, stillness, art, spilled over to be acknowledged, sorted, validated.

His body fell into dormancy. Muscles regenerating. Ligaments, tendons and bones being re-aligned, re-stocked and re-assimilated. His body knew what lay ahead.

The sun rose high above Monson, burning the world. From Shaw's yard, Applejack and Futureman watched Mike drive away, back to Tennessee. Their blood and sweat stained brother. What would take him a day was going to take them half a year. *Clues to the mystery of Maine, the beginning.*

By noon, Applejack and Futureman were deep into the woods. With the Wilderness behind them and a hint of confidence before them, the rest of the Trail now unfurled, 2,050 miles. Five million from steps home. They began again, one foot in front of the other.

“Here goes something.”

## VI

“To those who would see the Maine wilderness, tramp day by day through a succession of ever delightful forest, past lake and stream, and over mountains, we would say: Follow the Appalachian Trail across Maine. It cannot be followed on horse or a wheel. Remote for detachment, narrow for chosen company, winding for leisure, lonely for contemplation, it beckons not merely north and south but upward to the body, mind and soul of man.”

-Myron H. Avery, *In the Maine Woods* (1934)

Bombadil broke free from an understory of Indian pipe and rhodora and climbed halfway up a tilted old red oak, gaining a view of the Piscataquis River, four miles out from Monson.

“This is where we cross,” Bombadil called to Applejack and Futureman below (who didn't know he was there).

Futureman looked along the bole of the tree. “Tom, that you? How'd you get up there?”

“Hands. Legs.” Tom swung from a tall branch down onto a clump of moss.

“You'll have to show us how to climb like that sometime,” Futureman said.

“Okay.” Bombadil started back up the tree. “C'mon up.”

Once again, from the top, Bombadil sang out one of his songs.

*Flow, flow, Old River, life giver,  
Indian friend, teacher of men.  
Would you allow us through your water?  
Should we run from shore to ask the father?*

“I like how wild Maine is,” Applejack said, coming out of the water on the other side of the Piscataquis. “I think it’s the only place on the Trail that makes you ford across streams and rivers. Everybody else builds bridges.”

“Yeah, except that I have to change these heel bandages every time we cross one,” Futureman said, ringing out his socks and smacking them against a rock.

“Well, do not fret my bulbous friend. Your rubber tire waist will be gone and your heels calloused over before you know it,” Applejack said.

“I hope so.”

When they looked back for Bombadil, he was gone. They called for him. No answer.

“That Bombadil’s one heck of an interesting guy,” Applejack said. “I’m starting to think he’s made of dirt.”

“Aren’t we all?” Futureman said.

After a day of heaving up and down Maine’s mountains, the two found camp on the shores of Bald Mountain Pond, one of Maine’s secret swimming holes at the base of Moxie Bald. On this bald they witnessed what the locals called *rock sheep*, granite and white feldspar outcroppings molded into a massive figurine of a flock of sheep meandering over the peak. Once 12,000 feet high above the Hudson, the old ice cover slowly moved north and eroded away the rough parts, sculpting it all these years. Time’s razor.

Applejack and Futureman ate dinner in silence, their bodies spent, their wills needing the fuel of sleep.

As it was, Applejack and Futureman happened to be moving into the tent at precisely the same moment, shoulder to shoulder, and it was always weird whenever this occurred. Mutual appreciation for weirdness was the glue of their friendship. Celebration of the gauche and awkward side of human relationships, those unseen yet undeniable truths that undulate through the world, these were their bread and butter.

Yet, something about this particular moment at the end of the day when they met one another, side by side, on their hands and knees at the door of their little kiwi green tent; it was weird...and they didn’t like it.

“You first.”

“No, you.”

“I insist. Please.”

“Okay...thank...you.”

In the darkness.

“Good night.”

“Yep.”

For days, they meandered through Maine’s pristine countryside, up and over and down and up her rugged mountains. Pain shot through Futureman’s heels, white knuckles clutching his trekking poles. Applejack plodded along, dehydrated, echoing the mockery songs of tiny pinball birds. *Tee-hee-hee, tee-hee-hee*. Calling back, they corrected his mispronunciations. *Nice try, scarecrow man*.

Little by little, Maine's irreverent beauty overtook the day after day drudgery of twelve-hour hikes. Dehydration became an accepted norm, pain an amiable ally. When they came to a peak, seeking comfort, they looked back at the distance they had come and congratulated each other. Against the feral landscape, it seemed such a crowning achievement. But upon turning and noting how far they still had to go, they scoffed at these silly platitudes and put their heads down and trudged onward. They had walked a mere third of the way out of their first state of thirteen.

It was in this state that Applejack following Futureman came to the top of a peak, surprised. Surprised that he had climbed a huge mountain without stopping to rest. Surprised he hadn't groped for his water bottle in almost three miles now. He grinned. It was the first small sign of trail legs.

That is, legs that don't get tired or sore. Robotic, hypnotic, iron man legs that can handle fifteen, twenty, even thirty miles a day, everyday.

Just yesterday, Futureman had asked him, "When will they come?"

"Northbounders say three weeks, almost to the day," Applejack had assured.

"Did we just get our Trail Legs?" Futureman now asked excitedly.

"No, but I should like to think this is an early sign."

"You know, I'm really starting to love the AT."

The descent was steep. Tired of prudence and a little overconfident with his "almost new legs," Futureman was midway through a new joke—*You know what the locals call those piles of moose droppings everywhere*—when he tripped and slid facedown down along a rocky shelf.

Applejack peered over the edge. There his friend lay, ten feet below, folded between a sharp rock and fierce looking root.

"You really oughta watch where you're going. You okay?"

"Niiibbllllll," Futureman said, grinding his teeth together.

"Nibble?"

Futureman lifted his shirt and revealed a bloody spot where his right nipple once was.

"Hoa, nipple! That's gotta sting."

"Mmmm."

Applejack offered a hand.

"So—what do they call it?"

"What do who call what?"

"You were saying, the moose droppings, Mainers call it..."

Futureman winced. "Yes. Moosletoe. Mainers call it Moosletoe. Isn't that funny? I hate the AT."

The path led them down into a grove beside Pleasant Pond, pleasant in every respect, except one. A gruff and familiar voice had already arrived and made camp.

"Wull whaddyuh know. The little bitches made it. And here I didn't think you'd get past Monson."

"Reed." Applejack said. "How pleasant to hear your soothing voice again."

"You tryin' to make a pun, kid?"

"What? Oh, pleasant pond, right."

“And what’s with fatty over tea? He get one of his breasts lopped off?”

Futureman had shoved a sock under his shirt. His wound happened to be right where his pack strap rubbed.

“Naw, he fell and ripped his nipple off,” Applejack said.

This pleased Reed immensely. His laughter cast across the Pond.

“That’s too wonderful. And by the way, if youse wanna camp here—forget it. This is my favorite spot, and I don’t wanna be disturbed. So take a breather, change your friend’s padding and then get the hell on down the yellowbrick road.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, Reed. We were planning on sleeping in the shelter anyway.”

“Figuh. That’s why they put those goblin boxes up anyway. So every ten miles, weanies like youse can have a place to hide from scary things like dirt and rain.”

“We’ll see ya around then, Reed,” Applejack said over his shoulder.

Futureman swung his legs over the edge of the shelter (a rustic, three sided box cabin built for Trail hikers). He clicked his headlamp on. Couldn’t sleep. He pulled out some paper to write his parents a letter. Pen on words on ideas floating above his body and brain, between the lightning bugs and up toward Alpha Centauri—not dense enough to make it past earth’s atmosphere, they fell back down onto the page. Perhaps for the first time since he left home, he’d caught his breath. He realized that he and Applejack were really doing something—finally—something deranged and fertile and solid, all of it galvanized by the white fire of beauty.

*I ripped my nipple off today, he began. And tomorrow I’ll be paddling the Kennebec River to cross over into the rest of Maine, like going over the fortress wall. I haven’t found the beast yet. Maybe I will in the morning or maybe a thousand miles from now, who knows...*

His parents never understood his letters, but they read them lovingly anyway. At last, night engulfed him. He put away pen and paper and slept. Reed’s inebriated snoring carried across Pleasant Pond.

## VII

*Life with your query,  
Death rowing your ferry,  
Across the wide black sea,  
I see you’re coming for me.*

In the gray light of early morning, miles ahead of Applejack and Futureman, Bombadil stood on the shore of the Kennebec, judging, gauging the smooth current. Long ago, the Abenaki had given this river its name: “long level water without rapids.” They taught their children how to swim in the Kennebec. That was then.

Here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at any moment the hydroelectric authorities down in Boston can push a button and open a dam up in northern Maine, causing a lethal torrent that raises the water level in seconds. When this happens, the river can’t be crossed fast enough. For this reason, the MATC (Maine Appalachian Trail Club) provides safe transport for hikers by canoe.

Even so, longhaired Bombadil waits for dawn to break. Out-of-sight, waist-deep in the water, arms and legs ready, head cocked—listening for the release of the floodwaters.

Futureman's pack strap proved less of threat to his now duct-taped nipple. Applejack was twenty feet ahead, watching his toes kick the path loose (soft for a change). The forest had turned from a hemlock tangle into a labyrinth of columned birches as far as the eye could see. One of the wonders of the AT: these sudden changes of forest environments.

A peculiarity marked this particular forest. Strips of birch bark everywhere, fluttering in the wind. Pale light descending. The trees all seemed to be whispering with one another. Quite beautiful, but not quite right. It demanded their silence. A riddle beyond what senses could solve.

Applejack stopped.

"What is it?" Futureman asked.

"Shhh. You hear that?"

"Yeah, it's the birches...."

"No, no. That?" Applejack's nose turned upward, his eyes big.

Distinctly, ever so slightly, yes. Just above the earthworm struggles of the ancient dirt but far below the shrill arc of the birds of prey—somewhere in between—plain as the hair under their noses, they heard little feet drumming, flicking across the forest floor, beating down the mole's tunnel—fairy wind laced with the whispers and giggling of little children, *stolen children* W.B. Yeats would have called them.

They didn't stay to solve the riddle. They quickly walked on toward the Kennebec, where the Ferryman waited.

He was expecting them somehow, standing there on the bank as they emerged from the sylphish forest. They knew he would not charge them—no coinage for this boatman. Unlike Charon on the Cocytus, he was the servant of any who wished to cross over to the other side. He made no demands. His skillful steady hands were his pride. Trust his fare, safe passage his payment. Abenaki waters flowed under the oars as the Ferryman guided them through the strong current.

When the bow ran aground, the Ferryman tossed their packs onto the bank. It was just as well. They were glad to press on and leave for good this first, most troubled leg of their journey. The Ferryman silently watched them go, then turned to rejoin his boat to its berth across the water. There, where he has spent his entire life, jealously guarding the anxious and haunted struggles of northern Maine. There, he waits until another comes. Always there, at his lonely outpost, forgotten as the far shore of the River Lethe.

Wet Bombadil sifted through the lincoln sparrows and labrador-tea, sang songs with fluted thrushes, found a forgotten field of Indian cucumbers and stood on the tip-topmost top of a pin cherry tree. Detail and shadow ran together. On he went, spinning his world...

Applejack and Futureman found him five miles from the Kennebec in a forest of white pine and spruce on Bates Ridge.

"Hey fellas, you gotta see this. C'mon."

Had they known Bombadil wanted to show them something eight miles away, they might not have tried to keep up with his pace. But the intrigue of where he meant to go carried them, and they thought very little about how unable they were to be moving as fast as they were.

Bombadil was headed toward Flagstaff Lake, at the base of the 4,200-foot bald Bigelow range. It was not the lake that interested him, but what was below the lake. In 1949, the Central Maine Power Company closed the locks of Long Falls Dam, flooding two small farming towns named Flagstaff and Dead River. Bombadil had heard at low water, some of the bridges and roofs of the houses appear. What eeriness awaited them, under tonight's full moon! Bombadil picked up his pace, already at a jog.

Sometimes things stretch and bend well beyond their limits. Einstein said so. There in the basin of Flagstaff, where the rocks and roots twist like spiny fingers and swollen knuckles from the ground, through the blue-green-black tunnels, following Bombadil, Applejack and Futureman ran. With their packs on, for minutes, maybe an hour, they ran. Toward Flagstaff. Toward midnight. Toward bed. Toward home. Toward Georgia.

Tomorrow was going to be a special day. Like tadpoles, they could tell.

## VIII

A day for becoming. They packed up camp, ate and headed toward the double arch of Avery Mountain of the Bigelow Range.

Halfway up, Applejack and Futureman paused on the scaffolding of the twin beasts. Neither reached for his water. Neither bent down to rest and breathe. It had been three weeks to the day since they left Katahdin.

"What did the Nobos say again?" Futureman said.

Applejack smiled. "Over this hump is Tennessee, you know."

Reaching the top was a moot point. It was the first peak they had regaled with breath to spare. The muscles in Applejack's calves whirred like generators. Futureman could feel his gut synching by the minute. Maine looked different all of a sudden. The wind stronger. Black flies unconcerned with human flesh.

"Futureman, I do believe we are finally hiking the Appalachian Trail."

"I believe so too," Futureman said, looking southward with his friend.

The hardest stretch of Trail waited there—fifty thousand feet of ascension alone. They smiled about the prospect of so much beauty.

Avery Peak was named after Myron H. Avery, chairman of the Appalachian Trail Conference from 1931 to 1952. The first (unofficial) '2000 Miler,' Avery's wide knowledge and love for the woods helped build the Trail. It was his vision that had carried the AT north through the Hundred Mile Wilderness toward Katahdin.

Patches of stoncrop lichen pulled Avery's peak together, a quilt under their feet. Wind blew hard on Futureman's face. Dry tears streamed into his beard. His father's parting words came to mind:

"Just take one step at a time, son, and you'll get there."

They had seemed trite then. Now they had flesh and bone.

"These are Trail legs, and this is a mountain," Applejack exclaimed.

"Yeah. That cruddy brittle bone feeling is completely gone."

As they picked their way down Avery, Futureman was quick to turn his newfound power into a boast.

“I’ve subdued my belly, yes, yes! Fat gone, a thruhiker is here!” That’s when it happened. His trekking pole wedged itself into a crevice and his wrist gave like a hinge. Momentum snapped the pole in two, slicing his shin and throwing him down (chest open and broken winged) onto the sharp rocks, like a boy over the handlebars.

“Aww’ll!” His ribs folded around a rock. “Gaaah. I hate this Trail. I hate it!” Futureman threw the remainder of his useless pole over the edge of the mountain.

Applejack cackled.

“Don’t say it, man. I don’t want to hear it,” Futureman said.

“Hey, lest we forget, Maine has a way of…”

“Yeah, yeah, Maine is mighty, Maine is wild, I should respect Maine, blah-blah-blah.”

“You hurt?”

*Twisted wrists. Flayed knees. Bloody shins. Bruised ribs. And a re-torn nipple.*

“Naw. Well, maybe my pride.”

## IX

An eight-foot wolf sat on top of the marquis, howling above the aptly named: *White Wolf Inn*. After the challenges of the Bigelow Range, they were in need of a re-supply. Stratton (population 700) had been a short hitch away. Besides, Fred Baby and Little Moose were there. A note taped to the trailhead sign said so,

Hey! All ya’ll prancy foots that call yourselves hikers, Fred Baby and I are in Stratton for the night. So come laugh and dance and sing with us. It’s a reunion party. We’re family!  
Heart with Wings,

Little Moose

“Let’s at least check it out,” Applejack said as they crossed the street toward the motel.

“Sure. I could go either way,” Futureman said.

Applejack pointed toward the mountains, “Tell you the truth, I’m just as comfortable out there as I am indoors.”

A bell clanged as the door swung back. “Hey there, fellas. I’m guessing you two wanna get off the Trail for the night,” a round-faced woman said from behind the counter.

“We’re thinking about it? How much?”

“Twenty-five, not counting tax.”

“Do you have no smoking?”

“None available.”

“Air conditioning?”

“This is New England, honey. Course not.”

“Cable TV?”

“Much as you can stand.”

“We’ll take it,” they said in unison.

Self-realization often follows trauma. In the diner across the street from the White Wolf, Applejack and Futureman began to see the outlines of a new gift forming. A power for good or for ill, one (as yet) uncommitted, untapped, growing with every swallow. Down went the cheese sticks, the fried mushrooms, the salad. Down went the chicken tenderloin, steak and baked potato, the beans, the Texas toast. Down went the apple pies with double whipped cream. Next came the hamburger at the convenience store, then an entire bag of chips, finally topped off by a box of Swiss Cake rolls back at the room.

There was no end to their hunger.

They'd been burning ten thousand calories a day, up and down mountains, in constant aerobic motion. *Before long*, the Nobos had said, *you'll have an appetite you can't fathom*. At Shaw's, Applejack and Futureman had witnessed a 120-pound blonde named *Sunsweep* put away several of the Old Man's giant-sized breakfast plates.

"She was right. I can actually feel my body metabolizing food, sending energy to my extremities," Applejack said as he gulped down a pint of Ben and Jerry's. Second dessert. "Yep, there goes that Swiss Roll, down my leg. Amazing."

"Remember before we started, when you told me to gain all that weight?" Futureman said, trying to unstick a Reese's chunk from the bottom of his carton.

"Now, I didn't exactly..."

"And I got real fat, remember? Made my life a living hell for the past three weeks."

"No, you misinterpreted..."

"I didn't tell you this, but I got stuck on the side of Chairback in the Wilderness while you were cavorting around on top."

"Cavorting!"

"I called for you, but you weren't there. My fat got stuck in the cliffs, and I couldn't move. I thought I was going to die. A thundercloud was moving in over me, my blubbery fingers losing grip, hundreds of feet of freefall behind me. I asked God for a miracle that day."

Applejack was laughing.

"He didn't answer me. Now what do you make of that?"

"Well you're here, aren't you?"

A shaggy man in a baby-blue shirt waved from across the parking lot, smiling doll of a girl at his side.

"Lookee there," Futureman said.

"Ya'll made it!" Little Moose beamed at Futureman. Fred Baby raised a can in congratulation.

"So, everyone's meeting across the street later," Little Moose said. "Some local band's playing, *Trigger Effect* or *Hand* or something or other. Ya'll be there!"

A command. "Yes, ma'am."

The band was *Triggerfinger*. One word. Two men.

They were taking a smoke break when Applejack and Futureman showed up. One played an electric base. The other rocked it acoustic-style. Both wore sunglasses. Firing off watery renditions of some of the most explosive songs in rock history was *Triggerfinger's* modus operandi. They manhandled the best of Jimmy Hendrix and CCR and slayed some of Zeppelin's most epic material, before plummeting into the dark

corners of their own original music. A songwriter's graveyard. But no one seemed to care what they did. It wasn't about the music. It was about the release.

Applejack and Futureman were greeted by a hiker who was lining up shot glasses along the bar. "Name's Nico," he said, quickly dropping two shots down the hatch, one after the other. High five.

A New Yorker through and through, Italian, flattop, cut from marble.

"Buncha hotties hea tonight." Nico said, taking another shot. "So. Guess how much."

"How much what?" Applejack asked.

"Just guess, guy."

"Uh."

"C'mon. Youse won't believe it."

"T-t-two-fifty?"

Nico slammed down the glass and laughed. "Ha! Two-fifty he says, now dat's some funny stuff. No. Pack weight. Guess how much."

"Oh, I see. Probably...thir..."

"Fifteen pounds! You believe dat? And when I build the new stove this guy told me about, I'm gettin it down to thirteen."

"Wait a second," Futureman said, suddenly very interested. "You said thirteen pounds? For everything?"

"Dat's right! Unbelievable, huh?"

"Yes, that is unbelievable."

"Yeah, I'm fascinated with how little you can carry out hea and still survive. I used to be in the Army. Those clowns pile on the pounds. It's like, *ya gotta be kiddin' me*. So, I broke my back skydivin' a few years ago and gotta carry as few pounds as possible, know what I'm sayin'?" Nico spoke with the rapid-fire certainty of crowded city streets.

"What? You mean your chute didn't..."

"But it nevu stopped me from doin what I love, though. I sez 'I wanna hike the Trail' so here I am. My friends all sez 'Yo Nico, yuh crazy, wiv ya broken back.' But I sez 'All youse can go to hell. I can do whatevuh I put my mind to.' Girlfriend's freakin out, whole Twin Towers thing screwin with her head, so I dumped her ass. Whatcha gonna do? Plus, there's always more where that came from, right? Youse know what I'm talkin about." Nico elbowed Applejack, checked his hair in the bar mirror and scanned the room again. "Yeah, buncha hotties hea tonight."

Nico ordered some more shots. "Foxes all ova the place out hea on the Trail. Who needs conjugals?" Shot. Slam. "You guys gotten any yet?"

A fair question. Yet, having been raised in conservative homes where open conversation about promiscuous sex was not going to get you extra dessert, Applejack and Futureman were reluctant to comment.

"C'mon, be honest with Nico. How much sex you had since you been out hea?"

"Nico, I can't say that I've had any, really," Applejack said.

"O man, sorry bro." Nico put a hand on Applejack's shoulder. "Just be patient. It'll happen for ya." He looked at Futureman. "How 'bout you?"

"Well Nico, I'm still trying to figure out the whole hiking thing, you know. That's where my head is."

“Man, I hear dat!” Shot five. Shot six. “Bet you can’t wait till you figure it out so’s you can get down to business, ah?!” Punch on the shoulder.

Futureman shot Applejack a self-conscious glance.

“Oh, man.” Nico said and backed away. “O yeah okay, I see how it is. That’s cool, bros. I can respect dat, dis bein’ the 21<sup>st</sup> century and all.”

He gave them *The Look*.

“Wait a sec, Nico,” Futureman said. “We’re not—I think you’ve misunderstood—are you under the impression that we’re—that Applejack and I are...”

The crowd erupted. Triggerfinger were back on stage. The dancers coalesced again, three beers looser than before.

Nico checked the mirror one last time. “Got some work to do before closin’ time.” He strutted off into the smoke like Travolta on a steamy New York night.

Other hikers—Jasper, George, Snot, Ogre, Colonel and Buttercup—had all followed the invitation into town as well. Family. They had taken over a section of the parquet dance floor.

There was Colonel, standing tall in the neon haze. There was Jasper, tying ribbons in the air with the tips of her fingers. Nico had found a local ready to lose her innocence for the first time in days. Snot wanted to mosh. Ogre and Buttercup in the corner were trying a slow dance to *Proud Mary*. Dreadlocked George dawned the dance of the hippy, toes kicking air, pants slipping down his bony, briefless buttocks. Some of the meatier local women whistled.

Along the wall, Applejack and Futureman pulled up chairs beside Fred Baby. He was admiring his wife out on the dance floor. Little Moose had lost it completely. She was single-handedly redeeming Triggerfinger’s litany of musical heresies. Her hair sprang in all directions, a three-year-old riding the teacups. She whipped her hips back and forth without rhythm, effortlessly fusing multiple forms of dance—salsa, tango, hip-hop, ballroom, shag, jazz, ballet, tap, clog, African tribal, folk, polka, and old school—into what could only be described as *The Little Moose*. She danced everywhere. Everyone wanted to dance with her. But she only had eyes for the man sitting contentedly next to Applejack.

“How’d you manage, Fred?” Futureman asked.

“I got lucky,” he said, blinking slowly in the smoky air.

Mercifully, Triggerfinger ran out of steam at long last, and everyone filed out into the parking lot to joke and flirt under the broad Maine sky.

## X

Refueled and resupplied, the hikers dispersed in the morning, each to his and her own hike. Some hitched out early, some late. Others not at all, taking a zero (off-days, no hiking necessary).

Applejack and Futureman were on the Trail by late morning. The going was slow—vertical labor up the side of Crocker Mountain along a five-mile 4,200-foot towrope of stones and roots. The crest of the mountain rose like the back of a camel, a north and south peak, both offering unguarded vistas of Maine’s hinterland. Their hardy new legs had passed the test. Unfazed, they craved more. Down into the shadows of Caribou Valley and straight up Spaulding Mountain, onward towards glacier-borne

Sugarloaf (Maine's second tallest summit). Over to Spaulding Mountain knob, a pinprick spike in the sky, a perfect spot to sit for hours under the changing colors of evening. *No watch, no checking time. Go to bed with the sun, and why not?* The lean-to was close by. They descended to it in the dark.

Futureman woke up late. Applejack was still sleeping. The sun was at a great height. It spilt into the valley. Snug in his bag, arms pressed against the inner lining, Futureman's mind began to quicken—ruminating in the quiet. In the quiet.

Black cedars stretched toward the billows. An eagle turned against the wind and hovered in place. *I wonder how high that eagle can go? How deep into the ground can the roots of that great oak burrow? God, you say your Spirit is with me always, right? And you say that I can't hide from you? If I could climb to heaven, you'd be there, and if I could swim down to the bottom of the ocean, even there, you'd find me. You say you cradle your children in your hand like a moth in a cocoon...so I don't understand... why are you so silent?*

It had been a while since Futureman had prayed. Earnestly. In large part, that was why he had chosen to come out here—to seek the Divine One. To find a connection not easily grasped in the busy fray, a world of quick answers and static noise.

Here, now, as he sat in the late morning light below Spaulding Mountain pondering the silence of God, he felt his chest open a bit and his heart begin to grow soft. His reverie was broken by the crash of heavy feet in the woods.

A bear? Hardly.

“You two bastuds still lazin’ around in sheltuhs, I see.”

Reed.

“So nice to see you. Again. Already.” Futureman said.

“Kind of glad I ran into you actually. I been meanin’ to pay you a compliment,”

Reed said.

What? Futureman brightened. The prospect of kindness coming out of Reed was startling, and he kind of smiled.

“Yeah, I noticed you been losin’ some weight.”

“I have. Yes, a bit,” Futureman said proudly.

“Yep, your lookin more like a human and less like a Tennessee sow every time I see ya.”

Futureman's smile turned into a glare.

“Wake up Applejack. Tell him it's time faw his medicine.” Reed dumped his monstrous pack out on the ground. A gallon jug of Old Crow whiskey fell out.

Futureman poked Applejack with his trekking pole. “Applejack, Reed's here. He was wondering if you wanted to get drunk with him at ten o'clock in the morning.”

“That's another thing,” Reed said. “Why do you two wusses prance around out here with those ladies' poles. You look like a couple a fruity skiers.” The big man spun the top off his gallon of whiskey.

Applejack rubbed his eyes. “Hey there, Reed. How did you get here? I mean, how are you doing?”

“Whenever you two clowns get ya act together you outta head up to the top of Mt. Abraham. It's a castle up there.”

“What do you mean, there's a castle up there? Like a medieval castle?”

“I didn’t say it was a medieval castle, ya dumb prick. It’s a mountain. I *call* it a castle. That okay with you? It’s like a giant fortress. My favorite place in all of Maine.” Reed started with a gulp.

“Are you goin’ up there?” Applejack rolled off the bed board and walked around the corner of the shelter to water the wildflowers.

“It’s my favorite spot in Maine. Of course I’m goin up there.”

“Reed, have you ever wondered what it’s like to live inside of a cocoon?” Futureman asked.

Reed took another swig and closed it up. “I swear, I’ve about lost my patience with you two shelta sluts.” He slipped headphones over his ears and disappeared down a side path toward the castle, the subtle tones of Frederic Chopin soothing his addled spirit.

That afternoon, Applejack and Futureman set foot over the valley across the light bridge to Poplar Ridge, then on over to the Saddlebacks. Trail legs roving.

Leather-horned Saddleback is aptly named, raw granite above tree line, seat of the giant bull rider. Here, fierce storms nearly scrape the rock clean of all living tissue. Nearly. An unusual smattering of survivor species clings to the stone, leaving a scrub forest on the edge of life. Gnarled balsam and eastern larch hunker down in dwarf meadows. The Saddleback summit makes you wonder if the moon wouldn’t be a friendlier place to live.

As Applejack and Futureman crossed the open mountaintop, an ominous storm like a team of gray horses rose in the distance, turning southeast. Hooves thundering over the ground, bolts like stirrups against the static.

“We gotta get down off this mountain,” Futureman said, leery of electrocution.

“Little Swift River Pond is just a few miles away,” Applejack said. “Believe there’s a campground there. Thunder’s a ways off yet. We might make it.”

They pulled hard into a spot on the north side of the pond. They threw the tent up in that shroud of silence that lingers just before downpour and slid in on their bellies as the sky opened. Rain hammered the forest floor. Words drifted, dribbled, drafted through the mind with ease. Letup raindrops found them tacit at supertime. They reemerged to cook dinner.

At midmeal, a dark stocky figure emerged from the woods and threw his wet pouch on the ground. He had a thick, pitch-black Hayduke sort of beard.

“Helluva storm,” he said.

“Yep. Where’d you come from, friend?” Applejack asked.

“Resupply in Rangely, few miles back. I had to walk the entire way into town and back out. Hitchhiking can be a real pain sometimes. It’s like they know I’m a New Yorker or something.”

“You from the city, then?”

“No, Hamptons.”

“As in *the* Hamptons?” Applejack leaned toward the fire.

“Yeah, I know. But trust me, I’m not a famous millionaire. My family was out there long before the hype.” Blackbeard seated himself on a wet log and set to untaping his feet. The outline of a tortoise was etched in black ink on his calf.

“Seems like I just saw a piece on *Headline Tonight* about the Hamptons,” Applejack said.

“You did. All about how it’s the epitome of American excess, right? That show made us all look like a bunch of pretentious jerks. But isn’t that what good journalism is? You see what they want you to see.”

“So it’s not really like that up there?” Applejack asked.

“Yes and no. Used to be mostly local families like mine, just a beautiful spot to live. But like most things beautiful, people have to buy it and build something on it. Own it. Now, the weekends are insane, Manhattan richies everywhere. My family doesn’t belong anymore.”

“Why don’t you sell it? You could probably get millions.” Futureman said.

“Because to hell with the yacht club, that’s why.” Blackbeard smiled into the fire. “You should see some of the bull I live with everyday.”

“Like what?”

“My family has our little twenty-year-old skiff docked right between Puff Daddy and Steven Spielberg. We’re talkin’ multi-million dollar yachts. See, I’m a house painter, so I meet a lot of people. I get invited to all these parties with celebrities and directors and brokers and stuff. It’s a real riot. Everyone just assumes I’m famous. When I say I’m a painter, these Hollywood and Manhattan socialites immediately think hyper-realism or whatever.”

“Of course.”

“Yeah. It’s a perfect setup. I get to hob-nob with some of the most famous people in all of America and they kiss my shiny white behind, because for all they know, I’m the next Jackson Pollock. Like a fly on the wall, I get to witness the unadulterated American dream in all its glory—the money, the groping and self-congratulation.”

“So, you don’t care for the Hamptons anymore,” Applejack said.

“I’ll always love it. It’s my home. I still wake up in my shack every morning and go to the coffee shop where I do my writing. I mean, where else can you see Monica Lewinsky getting her cocoa-mocha-frapa-whatever? And when she sees me she comes over and says, ‘Hey, Will. Killer party last night, huh?’ Man, you can’t ask for better material. I love the Hamptons.”

“Why’d you come out here?”

“One can only take so much. It’s nice to get a little perspective. I have a tendency to be negative sometimes.” The man showed a sly grin from behind his brooding tangle of beard.

## **XI**

At first light, Blackbeard packed up and set out, a loner in the revelation of morning. He nodded slightly as he passed. Something told Applejack they would see him again soon.

After breakfast, they made for Bemis Mountain. Applejack walked briskly ahead. Futureman plodded behind, mundane and slow enough to notice a moose.

*A moose? A moose!* Futureman crawled to the edge of the pond quietly and settled into some bushes.

There, right across the pond, stood the giant, knee-deep in three foot of water. A momma with two calves. Her massive antlers divided the meadow. With her long snout she gently nudged her young into the bath. At first, they bawled and squealed in

trepidation, but soon began to play, wrestling and running beneath mother. Futureman was wonderstruck. He had seen moose before, two of them in the Wilderness—in flight, frightened by the hairy zombie marching toward them. But this was different. She didn't realize he was there. Or did she? She raised her head toward him, eyeing, and dropped low again to gulp from the bog, huge and unafraid. Wholly returned to the problem of how to one day set her children.

Sun was getting hot again. Cool at night. Pleasant in the morning. Intolerable in the afternoon. This is Maine, annoying like a lover. The hiking took Applejack and Futureman up Bates Ledge, down and up Spruce Mountain, down and up First then Second Bemis and countless other spikes and hills and outcroppings.

Against such work, day after day, finding a good water source remains priority one. So the stagnated trickle at the top of Bemis Mountain was a disappointment to say the least. Its only movement was a track meet of microbial fauna. Pieces of what appeared to be snakeskin floated on the surface.

“Can you believe it?” Futureman said.

“This is worse than that hole we drank from with the Colonel in the Wilderness.”

Sudden and distinct whistling diverted their attention, someone else coming to collect water. A tall man, very thin. He had a shaved head covered by a white bandana. He carried a stainless steel bowl, a small hand towel and a bar of peppermint soap.

“Hello boys. Mind if I take a bath?” The slightest lisp attended his speech.

“Uh, go right ahead,” Applejack said, a bit awkward with the greeting.

“Thanks. I just hate being dirty. I know—then what the *h* am I doing out here, right—well I also love to hike, so shoot me! And O my Lord, that is the dirtiest water I've seen in like, forever. There has got to be another source!”

“If there was, we'd be there,” Applejack said.

“Well...then this will have to do, won't it? I'm 10% by the way.” He offered a matter-of-fact smile and abruptly disrobed, filled his basin, threw his clothes on a tree branch and stood unashamedly tall and nude before them, lathering in their drinking water.

On their way back to the tent site (peppermint soap water in their bottles), Applejack and Futureman dealt with the issue head-on. Sort of.

“Perhaps...”

“Maybe...”

“I wonder if...”

“Is 10%...you know...”

With rosemary steam seeping from his titanium cooking set, 10% insisted on preparing supper for his new friends.

It was a lavish affair, indeed. The dehydrated mussels with jasmine rice, the array of other spices (cayenne, thyme, basil) mounded on a silk towelette beside the stove, and the mousse whip dessert did little to dispel their questions. That 10% was a generous soul and extraordinary cook was not in dispute, however.

After the main course, they settled around the hissing Whisperlite stove (10% insisted they all have hot chocolate before bed).

“So! I have something I want to tell you guys.” 10% said, leaning close to the blue flame. “The secret’s out...”

Applejack and Futureman leaned in as well. Could it be he’s coming out, right here, around the hot chocolate fire?

“...I’m a Quaker,” 10% whispered.

A rather silent pause.

“Heck of a way to start a conversation, I know, but I’ve never been one for small talk. So, tell me, do you guys think that’s weird?”

“No...not...really,” Applejack said.

“Yeah, I mean, how can honesty be weird?” Futureman said and then realized how dreadfully wrong that was.

“Have you always been...a Quaker?” Applejack asked.

“My goodness no. I grew up a Baptist and a Presbyterian and a non-denominational and a Pentecostal and a Methodist.”

“Why’d you switch? Again.”

“Well, I guess it’s because I realized that some of what the evangelical church was after had nothing to do with Jesus.”

“Mm. Interesting.”

“And I love Jesus,” 10 % said proudly.

“Well, I agree, you’ve grabbed our interest,” Applejack said. “We kind of love Jesus too. So what kind of stuff are you referring to?”

“Gosh, it seems so obvious now, but it confused me for a long time. Stuff like, *principles*.”

“Principles?” Applejack inquired.

“Like, putting God in a box. Telling people the way you follow Jesus is to become a member and go to church on Sunday. Following steps one through five. Singing some songs. Going to Sunday School. Joining a small group that meets two hours a week for snacks and prayer requests. Tithing ten percent. You know, none of that has anything to do with Christianity, or with Jesus, or with what the Bible says about the church. That’s just stuff we made up to make us feel good about our selfishness. It’s not why Jesus came.”

“Why did he come?” Futureman asked.

“Sin, dear friend. He came to help out all us sinners, set us free. Real love.” The tall man leaned back and stirred his hot chocolate.

“So why Quakerism?” Applejack asked.

“Their ideas may be a little quirky, but their faith is simple. Not simplistic, but simple. Simple enough to give you a good ass woopin’ then love you back to health.”

10% took a sip and chuckled. “Real love. You know, I’ve been looking for that one thing in all the wrong places. And there is only one who can give it.” His smile was pure and clear like the Maine air. “And you know, it’s about us loving Him in return. That is worship. That’s what real love demands. It’s not about me at all. It’s about the Creator of the universe loving me so I can understand that the core reason I exist is to worship Him. I mean, he’s God, right?”

At once shamed by their own petty suspicions and inspired by the power of this man’s raw honesty, Applejack and Futureman sat quietly in the settling dusk.

“So, what brought you two unsavory characters out here?”

“That’s easy for me,” Applejack laughed. “I’ve wanted to do the AT my whole life. But I’m not even sure I know why this guy is out here.” He pointed at Futureman.

“Mine’s a little complicated. I’ve been confused about things for a while. I have lots of questions.”

“Like what?” 10% asked.

“Like what is faith? What is peace? Who is God? And I feel kind of the same way you did, 10%, about the American church. Like it’s a big rat race. And so when Applejack asked me if I wanted to come with him on the Trail...”

“Wait a second.” Applejack shot a wry grin. “I never asked you. You invited yourself.”

“Whatever. Anyway, I decided immediately that the wilderness would be a good place to ask questions. So I came.”

10% nodded. “I think Jesus felt the same way about the wilderness. I hope you find what you’re searching for. But just remember, questions reveal a man’s devotion to God. Answers reveal devotion to himself. I’ve kind of learned that the hard way.” The tall man rose to his feet. “Well, you’ll probably be gone when I wake up—I’m a late sleeper—but I wish you well on your journey. Night-night.” He turned toward his tent.

A strange man. Then again, how does one define strange? Things we have difficulty in explaining, right? In that case, love, the one thing we all want, is strange, which makes us all, more or less, the same. We’re strange.

Applejack and Futureman lingered, listening to the final strains of night’s symphony before bed.

“I like 10%,” Futureman said. “Maybe we ought to check out Quakerism.”

“Quakers are weird,” Applejack said, smiling.

“Hey! I almost forgot about tomorrow.” Futureman said.

“What about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s your birthday, isn’t it?”

“By Jove, you’re right,” Applejack said. “You start to lose track of things out here.”

“What do you say we head into Andover? So I can buy you everything you always ever wanted. Or at least a hamburger and some chips.”

“Thanks, Futureman. What a nice thing for you to do for me on my birthday.”

## **XII**

When Applejack came to South Arm Road leading into Andover, there was a big red truck waiting. Beside the truck stood a man, smiling as though he knew him.

“I’m Earle Towne,” he said. “But folks around here call me Bear. Beautiful day isn’t it?”

“Yes sir, it is,” Applejack said, hesitantly. “My name is Appl...”

“I know who you are, son.” Bear clapped his hands together. “When will Futureman be along?” His foamy tangle of salt-and-pepper beard bounced as he spoke.

“How do you...have we?”

“It’s OK, my lad. I think I see him coming now.”

Applejack turned. The spruces seemed to be bending toward the wind. He couldn’t even hear Futureman, much less see him.

“Let’s get your things into the back of Big Red here. Yep, yep. You two are coming with us. It won’t be long before my wife, Honey, will be stuffing your insides with a good meal. In you go, now.” Applejack climbed in, as Futureman emerged from the woods.

Anywhere else, this sort of amiable coercion would indeed arouse suspicion but something was different with this Bear fellow. His melodic voice held a certain irresistible quality. His arms revolved through the air with the best of intentions.

A blanket of pebbles lay over South Arm Road, popping onto the mud flaps and the undersides of the truck. Bear was content as he drove through the dust toward the tiny town, saying little. Perhaps it was his custom to allow things to speak for themselves. The people of Andover smiled and waved at the sight of Big Red.

“How about we take a trip to the Andover Mall. Would you like that?” Bear raised his bushy white eyebrows. “I expect you need to pick up some things, eh?”

“Sure, sir, if that’s what—” *A mall? Is this guy serious? We’re in rural Maine. There are barely roads and telephones. There can’t be any malls.*

“You two will enjoy a trip there, I expect. Just the thing to lift your spirits.” He winked and turned Big Red toward the outskirts of town.

Maine’s good roads are bad enough, ravaged by the brutality of long winters. Things certainly weren’t getting better as they moved further into the countryside. Pebbles became mailbox-sized rocks. Bumps turned into knee-deep trenches, brimming with high-mountain run-off. Town dirt became country mud. Big Red rolled on.

“Um. Mr. Towne, you did say that we were going to a mall,” Futureman said.

“Mister is for men in suits, my boy. You call me Earle or Bear.”

“But Earle, this place really doesn’t look...”

Bear smiled and breathed pine through his beard. “Almost there, my boy.”

Passing quickly between the chunky hills, Applejack and Futureman settled into their seats. Here and there, wildflowers sprang up between the rocks. Unused to the speed of a vehicle, the low country passed in front of their eyes like a midnight schoolbook. The hum of the road reminded them of their exhaustion.

“Ah, here she is. The Andover Mall.” Bear spun the truck left onto a gravel road through a chain link gate and down a path into the epicenter of a junkyard. “Need anything?” His eyes sparkled.

Bear lived on the edge of town in a large log cabin. The quiet pride on his face suggested that he had built it with his own hands. A twelve-foot tall leather tepee framed the driveway.

“Home is where I live, and this is home. You can stay inside if you like, sleep under the stars if you choose, or build a fire in the tepee and howl at the moon. It’s up to you. You tell me. There will be quite a group—fine folks joining us tonight for the feast.” Earle trotted up the stairs through the open door.

Before entering, Applejack and Futureman unloaded an old chair they had picked up at the mall and rested it beside the cabin. Futureman was gathering a sense about this place, a crackle at the tips of his ears, felt like home. *Broken things are mended here.*

Inside, work was being done, people filling glasses with ice and carrying heaping bowls into a long dining room. Hikers, vagrants and world travelers had collected for

supper. Some were staying the night. Some had been here for a month. Blackbeard and Colonel were among them.

“Good to see you again,” Blackbeard said warmly, his brusque manner at bay for now.

“So Earle found you. I knew he would,” Colonel smiled. He seemed pleased but the usual spark was missing somehow. He was hiding something.

Before there was a chance to investigate, a merry woman of grandmotherly years interrupted. *Honey* was stitched across her apron. “Not now, boys. Be plenty of time to catch up when the meal begins. Now, take these beans to the table,” she said as she handed Applejack a dish of steamed broccoli and Futureman a basket of garlic bread. “And welcome to the family.”

“That’s my sweetie,” Earle winked. “She’s the light around here. Saves an awful lot on electricity.”

Earle Towne had built the great hall for the sole purpose of hosting feasts. It was a simple room with a vaulted ceiling crisscrossed by reddish beams. Stained glass shone from each end. Letters and photographs from grateful travelers adorned the walls. In the center of the banquet room stood a long oak slab with enough table space to seat fifteen comfortably. It was covered with golden chicken and blackened ribeyes, three-cheese casserole, olives, brie, grapes, snap peas, okra, beans, biscuits and berries, potatoes and wild rice, lemonade, tea and wine.

A table flowing with milk and honey.

Bear sat at the head, quietly admiring the spread. Here, everything seemed to come into the light. Faces, fears, worries, lies, hopes, all part of the event.

Two English chaps, doing the North American tour, sat on the far end, salivating, heads swiveling. “Ya don’ see ‘is much ‘n Englan.”

“Unbelievable ‘is is. Bes food we evuh seen er smelt.”

“Excuse me, everyone. If I may say something, please,” a woman named *Walking Prayer* said. She was a self-proclaimed Buddhist monkess. “Everyone, please. If I may.”

The room grew silent. (For a number of reasons, when a Buddhist monkess is about to speak, you should listen).

Walking Prayer placed her hands in an ellipsis in front of her, roughly resembling the shape of her gray flattop. “While I was sitting here, preparing to enjoy this wonderful meal, an awareness grew within me—of PEACE and UNITY. I think we forget sometimes that what we truly feast on, more than food—is—PEACE and UNITY. Without these, we starve. Yes. It can. The soul can starve. But tonight we shall not starve. We. Are a prayer.”

A brief. Eternal. Pause. The kind of benign moment of reflection Americans prefer before the rotation of bowls and baskets begins.

Here-here! True, so true! Souls can starve. Now pass the beans!

After dinner, Bear gave Applejack and Futureman the tour of hostel quarters—a basement bunkhouse, kitchen and a hiker den with couches. “These blankets and pillows have heard many conversations, many stories,” Bear said. “Maybe the guitars will come out later. Who knows? Maybe some songs.”

Behind the cabin stood a barn, dilapidated yet dignified. Here Bear did his woodworking. “I needn’t show you all the details. I’ll leave it for you to explore. If you

have an itch to carve or whittle or build, have at it. If you just want to dig through the fridge in the early morning, feel free. Now come, let me show you the field.”

They passed corn and tomatoes and day lilies. Bear walked barefoot. He didn't wear shoes unless there was snow enough to freeze them. “Whenever you put shoes on your feet, you miss the ground beneath you,” he explained.

Steady moonlight fell onto the soft landscape, again calling forth the silence they were coming to love. An awe emerged from the shadows, moving no more quickly than the moon's crescent. Coyote calls found their way down into the valley. Or were they wolves?

The corners of Bear's mouth turned up. *They're back.*

“Earle, when you sit back at the table and watch everybody, you get this...this look,” Futureman said.

Bear put his hand on Futureman's shoulder, “My boy, I'm afraid you're not able to understand that.”

“Try me.”

“No, no. It's mine. Not meant for you.” Bear smiled.

“This is a good birthday,” Applejack said to no one.

“A good day to be sure,” Bear said. “Each day has enough worry and joy of its own. I've never seen much sense in keeping track of years.”

“Thank you for picking us up and bringing us here,” Applejack said.

“Thank you for finally deciding to drop by. And I want you to know that I expect you to stay a while, both of you. Maine has worn you out, I can see. You need to rest up for the Whites. Yes, yes, a little rest will do you fine.”

“What are they like, the Whites?” Futureman asked.

Earl turned as if he could see them through the trees. “They're mountains. Your friend, Bombadil, claims it's where one goes to disappear.” An eyebrow flickered.

“You know Bombadil?” Futureman said. “We've been wondering where he got off too. When did you last see him?”

“Oh, I see him now and then in the woods,” Bear said. “Who knows where he is these days. I imagine he's somewhere on Old Speck but there's no telling. Seems unconcerned with the directions of north and south, that boy.” The old man stroked his silvery chin. “He might be able to tell you more about those Whites. Seems his childhood is still lost somewhere in there. No, my place is here. The Mahoosucs are my mountains. I leave the rest for you to discover for yourselves.” With that, Bear left them in the field, whistling softly down the road he had helped build.

Futureman's eyelids uncurled. Everyone was still sleeping, bunks filled, couches taken, floors covered. He opened the door to let in the day. Bugs flew in the golden air, trampolining off the light tubes. The screen door clanged behind him. Bear was in the garden on his hands and knees.

“I see the rest is helping already,” Bear looked over his shoulder. “A few more days of Honey's cooking will finish the job.”

“So what do normal people do around here, Bear?”

“Normal? Not sure I'm familiar with that breed but some folks enjoy a day hike. You boys can trot across Wyman Mountain and then come home for some more food and rest this evening.”

*Home. He called it home.*

“Tomorrow, you’ll go over big Baldpate. Then the Notch on the next day.”

“The Mahoosuc Notch. People talk all kinds of things about the Notch.” *Beware of the Notch! People lose their minds in there! Hikers have died in there!* Hearsay, rumors, exaggerations and legends. Funny, the evolution of fear.

“The Notch is where God keeps his favorite stones,” is all Bear had to say about it.

*Purist* thru-hiking was like any other nonsense to Bear. His logic was rooted in the dangerous side of beauty, *where it gets a little weird, where things change*. Going by the book isn’t what’s important. *You don’t have to carry a full pack to be a hiker. Leave your things here. Be free to run and roam. It’s our playground*. The way of the slackpacker is an unthinkable faux pas to the purist, but in Bear’s book, it’s simply the smart way of doing things.

In the mornings he took Blackbeard, Colonel, Applejack and Futureman to the Trail. Late in the afternoon, he returned for them. For several days, through the mountains of Bear’s grand kingdom, free from the old monkey-on-the-back, they leapt off roots and swung on branches like little children, losing track of time altogether. Tallying miles became to them as pointless as counting stars.

The Mahoosuc Notch is one of the true wonderlands of the earth. It was just as Bear had said. For one mile, in the fold of two magnificent peaks, God’s favorite stones were piled everywhere, as big as houses. Water had been flowing there for millennia, fashioning a maze of sunlit tunnels and caves.

The four of them stretched the mile through the morning hours, laughing at themselves, how weak and whiny they had been. Now, they were so light they barely existed. They drank water from the subterranean river and climbed magnificent boulders like mountain goats. They were indeed boys at the playground, scooping ice from 30 degree caverns below, lounging on the sun-warmed rocks above. And at the end of it all, they went *home* for supper.

Finally, the Colonel had made his decision. He would be going back to Winchester, Virginia, where his family was. Some kind of bug had been ravaging his insides for two weeks now. He stopped often with bouts of diarrhea, his fluid levels depleting more and more with each passing day. Besides, a beautiful 17-year-old brunette was waiting at home. Over the phone, she had helped him see clearly the gravity of his plight, with her cuddling pheromone-laced whimpers. Once strong, the man-child warrior’s desire to remain on the field of battle began to waver, ultimately relenting to his more gentle urges. He longed for a celestial Mormon lover.

Applejack tried as hard as he could. “If you go home, I will never forgive you.”

“I just can’t seem to get over this,” Colonel replied.

“Maybe you should take some medicine. Maybe you shouldn’t think about it all the time. Maybe you should wipe the drool off your face and break up with your teeny-bop girlfriend.”

The Colonel bristled.

“All I’m saying is that I really want you to stay out here. Come on, give it a few more days.” He slapped the Colonel on the back and went inside.

But the Colonel didn’t give it a few more days. He caught a ride to Bangor that evening, got on a bus and went home to Virginia to kiss his girl and poop on his own pot.

He’d been a good friend to them. They would miss him. But in the end, a man has to follow his gut.

When he finally allowed Applejack, Futureman and Blackbeard to pack up and leave, Bear took them down a hidden road to a spot a few miles below the Maahoosuc Notch.

Earle Towne stood on the approach trail, belly poking out. “This is as far as I go. We part ways here.” His look was stern yet tender. “I have no doubt about it. Yes, sir, I can see it on all of you. You’re going to make it.”

After a silence, Bear nodded. “My friends.” And as men in the world, they did not wish to walk away from him in that place.

Bear watched them go. He had been there his whole life, standing there, watching, barefoot in that spot, in his red suspenders, each day his beard growing grayer, whiter. His children always growing up and leaving him. But he would hear others stirring the dust around the mountain bends on their way North and South, and his face would be the first thing they would see.

*Don’t you get sick of that road? Those same trees and same worthless, shiftless people that come through your cabin?* The voices nag him, hanging in the hollow knots of the fallen wood, but Bear can’t hear them anymore. Once they were important questions to him, but now they rot beside the stumps in the forest.