

GROWN ASS MAN

Caleb came to the mountain for Glass Joe. He first encountered the man in an online documentary – *Walden in the Smokies*. He was so intrigued that, on a sticky summer morning, he drove three hours west to Haywood County. He did this instead of the job interview his father had arranged for him, not even calling to cancel.

He arrived in Cataloochee, North Carolina in late morning. He had no cell service here, which was fine with him. He'd ignored several calls from his father already, who had by now surely heard about his no-show. From the documentary, he knew Glass Joe lived near a peak called Half Acre Ridge, but finding the exact location would be a challenge. He stopped at an ancient filling station. The ceilings inside were low, the surfaces yellowed. A spray bottle of Clorox in the restroom might have been decades old, with a graphic design that looked more at home in the 90's. He bought a candy bar and twenty dollars of fuel. A wizened old woman worked behind the counter, wearing a faded App State baseball cap, spitting tobacco juice into a soda bottle. Next to the register was a missing person flier, featuring a slender, buzz-cut man with the words *Have you seen me?* printed across the top.

While the woman made change, Caleb asked if she knew where to find Glass Joe. She eyed Caleb warily.

"You'uns keep showing up, ever since that movie come out. You know he lives on that mountain cause he wants peace and quiet, right?"

Unsure how to respond, Caleb shrugged.

"You with the media?" the woman said.

"Yes," Caleb responded, deciding to go with that. "I'm doing a profile for the *News and Observer*."

The woman's suspicion didn't seem to drop and Caleb reflected that journalists likely didn't poll well in these parts. But to his surprise, he got directions.

"You're not far," she said. "Go left on Cove Creek, and follow it all the way into the mountain, past Enchanted Forest, past the Bigfoot statue. Road turns into Cataloochee Turnpike and then there will be a dirt road on your right. That'll get you halfway up the mountain. Then you'll have to park and walk the rest."

“So he’s on top?”

“Not right on top, but nearby. That’s as close as I can get you. But you’re a reporter. Use your investigative skills.”

This last sentence came out with a hint of mockery and, an hour later, Caleb replayed these words as he trudged uphill, wondering if he’d been sent on a snipe hunt. He’d followed the directions and the dirt road had appeared as promised, winding him halfway up the mountain before ending in a small gravel lot. There were no other cars. He got out and explored, looking for a trail, and found a sign that read, in all caps: TWO MILES TO THE PEAK, 1,600 FOOT GAIN. It was nothing official, just hand-painted words on a weathered piece of plywood.

He entered the woods where the sign indicated, but as he proceeded upward, he struggled to know if he was staying on the trail. There were no signs, no blazes of paint on trees. An inexperienced hiker, he found this troubling. But then he reflected on the character that had drawn him here. If Glass Joe could survive in these woods for years, surely he could spend a day exploring. Just a day. His pack had plenty of food and water.

Another thing he hadn’t expected was the difficulty of the climb. Of the two measurements on the sign, he focused more on TWO MILES than 1,600 FEET, but he soon found that amount of elevation gain to be no trifle. The first half-mile of the hike was straight up a narrow, root-choked path. When he came around a bend, expecting relief and only finding more climb, he plopped down to rest.

He sat on the ground, leaning against a log. His thighs burned. He thought again of the gas station woman’s smirk. *Use your investigative skills.* It was certainly possible he’d been tricked. But the sign had been there. That was what kept him going. That, and a feeling that he was already lost. He had been for the past year. Were he to turn back and go home, he had just his childhood bedroom waiting for him, his gig delivering pizza.

The only way out was up. Find Glass Joe. Talk to him.

Caleb had graduated college four months earlier and was still tooling around Clemmons, living in his childhood bedroom. His friends were gone, either to grad school or to jobs in big cities. His father had asked,

on multiple occasions, “Caleb, what the hell are you doing?” His mother was more tight-lipped in her disapproval. She was clearly as bewildered as his father by his stagnation, but she also felt obligated, for reasons Caleb couldn’t grasp, to do chores for him. Earlier in the week he’d found her in his room, collecting dirty laundry to wash.

“Jesus, Mom. You don’t need to do that,” he said. “I’m a grown ass man.”

She’d dropped the laundry and walked past him without a word. His sixteen-year-old sister, who overheard this from the hall, called out, “Grown ass men don’t live with their moms.”

Caleb had first seen *Walden in the Smokies* back in the spring, as his college career ground to a close. Glass Joe, of course, wasn’t the man’s given name; it was a moniker he’d acquired while hiking the Appalachian Trail. Upon graduating college in the late 70’s, Glass Joe took stock of American culture and decided it wasn’t for him. He sold all his possessions, took Neil Young’s suggestion to burn his credit cards for fuel, and commenced exploring the Appalachian Trail. He through-hiked it a staggering four times, at which point he’d thoroughly scratched that itch. He then relocated to a small patch of land on Half Acre Ridge, where he’d been ever since. The documentary showed him stalking deer with his bow, collecting wild mushrooms, tending to his garden, hauling stones to construct a root cellar. Over six feet tall, with lank hair hanging to his shoulders, he cut an imposing figure. His face was craggy and gnarled, reminiscent of tree bark, as if years of living in the forest were slowly making him become one with it. The filmmaker peppered him with questions, to which he gave terse responses.

“What’s it like here in the winter?”

“Cold.”

“Are you ever concerned that you’ll run out of game to hunt?”

“There’s always roadkill.”

Some of his statements were as cryptic as Zen koans. When asked what should be done to protect the environment, he shrugged and said, “The mountain knows what it needs.”

He was either brilliant or insane. Caleb thought brilliant. He’d watched and re-watched that documentary. Sitting in the library, cramming for his final exams, he kept putting his work aside, slipping on

headphones, and pulling up the video on his computer. It was man at his most elemental, cultivating crops and hauling rocks. The interview was conducted in the winter and every word Glass Joe spoke was accompanied by a puff of steam. By comparison, the things that occupied Caleb felt unbelievably trivial. An essay on Hayek's influence on American tax policy? Who cared?

Even beyond academics, Caleb found little about which to care. He was a finance major and his job interviews were with the standard array of management consulting firms – Deloitte, McKinsey, et al. He had friends a couple years older who'd told him what to expect – loads of travel. He'd be making six figures, but in exchange he could expect to spend the greater part of his twenties on the road, eating takeout in an array of soulless hotel rooms.

This led to a crisis of conscience in which he put in an application with a non-profit in Philadelphia, an after-school program for inner-city kids. However, he'd flaked on that, too. When it came time for the phone interview, he blew them off. He at least had the good sense to formally cancel his interview with McKinsey. No need to burn bridges there, just in case he changed his mind.

The interview he'd ditched today had been less important, just one of his father's church friends who ran an insurance company in Winston Salem, not Caleb's idea of a career. The only cost to missing that was hurt feelings. But still, that question of his father's lingered.

What the hell are you doing?

Caleb couldn't say. He didn't know much, but yesterday he'd been hit by an epiphany, the first thing he'd been sure about in months. It was late morning and he lay in his childhood bed, sunlight shooting through cracks in his blinds. He'd delivered pizza until well past midnight, then come home to a dark house where he nursed a six-pack in front of the TV. He woke up with a roiling stomach, a headache, and the bleak realization that he was slipping into a Groundhog Day-like purgatory. How many times had he done this? How easy was it to pick up a six-pack on the way home? It was the path of least resistance, a well-oiled groove into which he could slide if he didn't make a concerted effort in the other direction.

That was when it occurred to him to visit Glass Joe. That would snap him out of his torpor. Really, he was amazed he hadn't thought of it sooner. The man only lived a few hours away. What did he have to lose?

He hadn't drunk a drop that night. He felt his resolve strengthening already.

He made it to the top, climbing all 1,600 feet. He didn't see Glass Joe, but did have a nice view of the Smokies, the summer greenery spread out below him like a carpet. He sat on a rock and took in this view while gnawing on a piece of beef jerky. Once rested, he continued his search. The woman at the gas station had said, "Not right on top, but nearby."

His strategy was to descend a few hundred yards, then walk a circle around the entire peak. As he did this, he tore off bits of napkin and stuck them on tree branches. This would both help him find his way back, and alert him if he began to walk in circles. To his untrained eye, it all looked the same – just woods. He was encouraged to see at least one sign of life, a tree where several branches had been sawed off, the cuts still looking fresh.

And then, after an hour of trudging through undergrowth, he came across a real, honest-to-God trail. It wasn't labeled as such, but the ground was well-worn, as if regularly used. He followed this, knowing he was onto something, nerves jittery with anticipation. Sure enough, he turned a corner and stumbled upon Glass Joe's camp. It was exactly as he'd seen it in the documentary. The center piece was a one-room cabin, no more than 15 feet on a side. An assortment of lumber had been used in its construction, giving it a piebald appearance. Raggedy, moss-covered shingles sat atop its slanted roof. A substantial amount of firewood was stacked beside the cabin, and next to the firewood was a stump with an axe embedded in it, as if he had just stepped away from splitting wood.

The entire area was busy with the detritus of a life lived among the elements. Laundry lines crisscrossed from tree to tree. Some held laundry, others held tarps which created a privacy barrier, others held skinned rabbit carcasses. Garbage cans dotted the ground, at least a dozen of them, all used for storage,

as Glass Joe had explained in the documentary. Tools leaned against trees, some rusty, others in surprisingly good shape. Caleb noticed one shiny new shovel with a price tag still on it.

He called out a greeting and heard a rustling behind one of the tarps, then out stepped the man himself – Glass Joe, in all his grubby, pre-industrial glory. He was shirtless, wearing only cargo shorts and sandals, his torso lean and tanned. He stared at Caleb, as if unsure how to register the presence of a guest.

“Glass Joe?”

“That’s me.”

“I wanted to pay a visit.”

These words sounded idiotic as they came out, and Caleb clenched his buttocks, embarrassed, waiting to be swiftly dismissed. Instead, Glass Joe just said, “OK.”

An uncomfortable silence following, which Caleb ended by saying, “I saw your documentary.”

Joe blinked twice, as if there was a bug in his eye.

“I figured. You’re not the first.”

He left off here and it wasn’t clear to Caleb how he felt about visitors, if he welcomed them or viewed them as an imposition. He looked Caleb up and down, his eyes resting on the grey New Balances he’d used to hike up.

“Funny. The last guy wore those same shoes.”

Caleb wasn’t sure what he meant by this, wondering if it was a slight to his outdoors preparedness, that he didn’t have real hiking shoes.

“Is it alright if I ask you a few questions?”

Joe shrugged. “Sure.”

Then, without explanation, he disappeared behind the tarp. A full minute passed, Caleb standing there awkwardly, until Joe reappeared with a beer in one hand and a rabbit carcass in the other. He took a seat in a folding chair next to the fire pit. There was only one chair, so Caleb stood a log on one end and used it as a stool.

“So, you hiked the Appalachian Trail four times?”

Joe nodded. The rabbit lay slumped over his knee.

“Was that after you graduated college?”

“Right.”

“What prompted you do that?”

“I didn’t like my options.”

Joe pulled a hunting knife from his belt. He pinched a tuft of the rabbit’s fur and made a notch with the blade. Then, in a smooth motion, he peeled the skin back, like taking off a sock, revealing a glistening carcass. The body was now hairless, but there were still tufts of fur on the feet. Using his knife for leverage, he cracked the ankle bones, then sliced the feet off, tossing them into a scrap bucket next to the fire pit, along with the pelt. He did this seemingly without thought, like tying his shoes. Caleb tried to hide his revulsion.

“What options did you have? What did you major in?”

“Accounting.”

“See, I’m in kind of the same situation,” Caleb said. “I was a finance major. But the job opportunities are shit. Well-paying, but miserable.”

“You can always hike the Appalachian Trail.”

Caleb nodded, though this option didn’t appeal to him at all. He may have gone to great lengths to find Glass Joe, he didn’t want to emulate the man’s lifestyle. He just wanted advice, whatever that might look like, to glean wisdom from someone who seemed to have much to offer. Over the past year, such people had been in short supply. One by one, they fell from their pedestals. Professors had steered him towards the cattle-chute of white-collar misery and preachers sold tales of supernatural events that he could no longer pretend to believe. Closer to home, his father – a well-regarded high school principal – spent increasing amounts of time on message boards, muttering about Zionist conspiracies and Q-Anon. Caleb was beginning to realize that wisdom didn’t automatically accrue with age, that a person could be around for long time and not know a goddamn thing.

What conferred wisdom, he had come to realize, was experience. In particular, tactile contact with the real world. Not the world of ideas only, which led to ivory-tower detachment, but a world, a life,

grounded in physical contact with the elements. Glass Joe represented a source of wisdom that hadn't been corrupted. He was the last archetype: a wise man on a mountain. For all of recorded history, wanderers had sought out people like him. Not to copy their lifestyle – monasticism would always be for the few – but to be in touch with whatever hard-won, ancient wisdom they possessed.

“Was there one awful thing in particular that drove you here?” Caleb said. “Out of society?”

Joe pulled a stump in front of him and sat the rabbit carcass on it. Hair hung in his face and he produced a rubber band from his pocket and tied it back in a ponytail.

“Who said society's bad?”

“Come on. Obviously, there's something fucked up about modernity, about our current moment in history.”

Joe raised his glance and considered Caleb for a moment. A mocking smile crept across his rough features.

“You're expecting me to agree with you, right?”

Caleb felt his face flush red.

“I don't know. Maybe.”

“Nothing wrong with society, son. It works for most people. If you want to romanticize the old days, before antibiotics and polio vaccines, you are welcome to your delusions.”

He proceeded to saw the rabbit's head off. He then made an incision from chest to pelvis, stuck his hand inside, and pulled out the guts. All these spare parts – head, intestines, heart – went in the scrap bucket. When done, his hands were bloody, but hygiene concerns didn't stop him from cracking open his beer and taking a sip. After several hours of hiking, a beer looked to Caleb like sweet nectar, but Glass Joe wasn't offering and he didn't want to ask.

“Didn't civilization drive you out here?”

“I live in the woods because I like living in the woods. Other people like living in houses. Everyone should live where they want.”

Caleb thought on this for a moment, the same sort of cryptic answer the man had given to the filmmaker. It wasn't helpful. But as much as Caleb wanted to hear it, Joe didn't seem the type to make sweeping pronouncements about the American zeitgeist. Maybe he wasn't able to, a life in the woods having so constricted his worldview that he couldn't bother with anything beyond his immediate surroundings. But then again, wasn't that his appeal?

"You didn't do this to make any type of statement?"

Caleb knew this wasn't the best question, but he felt the burden of conversation. Glass Joe was in the process of sectioning the rabbit. He had popped one of the hind legs out of joint and sliced it off. He paused before doing the other leg, considering Caleb's question, but then went back to work, as if deciding it unworthy of response. After both legs were removed, he began carving up the shoulders. Caleb watched him work for a while, then tried another angle.

"What would you say is the most important lesson you've learned in your time here?"

Again, Joe didn't answer. Once he finished sectioning the rabbit, he arranged the parts on the stump in front of him. He sat back in his chair and took a swig of beer. Only then did he look at Caleb.

"Most important lesson, you said?" He seemed to consider this for a second. "Most important thing I've learned is half the folks who live around here are only in town on the weekends."

He chuckled, as if he'd just made a private joke to himself. Caleb had no idea what he was talking about. Maybe it would make sense later, upon further reflection. Joe stood, taking the rabbit with him. He pinned it on a clothesline next to other glistening carcasses, then turned to Caleb.

"Since you're here, might as well give me a hand."

He walked across the campsite without further explanation. Caleb followed. When he passed a decrepit wheelbarrow filled with tools, Joe grabbed a hammer and a plastic Tupperware container full of nails. They walked up an incline, past a planting box filled with tomatoes and zucchini. Halfway up the hill, a pile of boards lay on the ground.

What caught Caleb's eye, however, was the root cellar. He was familiar with it, as the documentary had focused on its construction. It was dug into the hill on which they stood, like some hobbit hole straight

out of Middle Earth. The camera had followed Joe as he laboriously dug it out by hand, then hauled stones to build it up. He was selective about the rock he used, and at one point in the film he'd lugged a manhole-cover-sized piece of granite over miles of trail to bring it back to his campsite. The filmmakers hadn't stuck around long enough for him to complete it, and now that Caleb saw the finished cellar in person, he was in awe. It was a sight to behold, like he was at Easter Island or Stonehenge, in proximity to something ancient and deep. A wooden door leaned against the stone archway, half open. Caleb tried to see inside, but it was too dark.

"Grab that board and put it on the chalk line."

Joe pointed at a two-by-six that lay on the ground. Caleb picked it up and, seeing a stripe of blue chalk on the tree at eye level, lined the board up. Joe put his end on another tree and pounded in three nails. While he did this, Caleb tried to think of a way to restart their conversation. He wanted to express his admiration for the root cellar, but he was learning that less was more with this guy. He'd come here eager to engage, probably too eager, and it seemed that the more he talked, the less Joe wanted to. Maybe pulling back was a better approach.

They collaborated silently, Caleb continuing to hold boards while Joe nailed. They were constructing a frame, a lopsided trapezoid that made use of four trees standing in close proximity. Caleb guessed it would be a platform of some sort. While they worked, he did his best to be helpful, but couldn't help being distracted by a foul odor. He lifted his head a few times, sniffing, trying to locate the source. Joe noticed this.

"That's my compost heap," he said. "Tossed a raccoon on there the other day."

Once they finished the frame, they got to work on the support beams spanning the inside. They stood closer to each other now, Caleb holding joists while Joe secured them with 16-penny nails. Caleb had become bored and was staring at his shoes, beginning to wonder if he was wasting his time. Then he looked up and saw Joe studying him. The man's eyes were on his face and he made no attempt to hide his gaze. His expression was curiously blank. Unreadable. This made Caleb uncomfortable and he averted his own eyes. He could feel Joe's stare linger for another moment, then he returned to nailing. It was unsettling,

but Caleb chalked it up to isolation. Live on a mountain for thirty years and you're bound to get rusty in the subtle art of human interaction.

They got a few joists nailed in, but then ran out of boards that fit. The rest would need to be measured and cut.

"Going to get a saw," Joe said, dropping his hammer and walking back the way they'd come. He walked past the main campsite, where they'd sat, and disappeared down a slope.

With him gone, Caleb's attention turned to the root cellar. He wanted to see inside, what the finished product looked like. It was only a few yards away. He checked to ensure that Joe wasn't returning, then stepped over to the door. It was small, four feet tall and crudely constructed from decking boards. It wasn't connected, just leaning against the stone frame, and Caleb moved it to the side. Daylight flooded inside.

He expected to see provisions – vegetables, shelves of preserved food in Mason jars, animal hides tacked to the wall. What he saw instead looked like the storage room at a department store. There were boxes of chips and candy bars. Lots of batteries, unopened in their plastic casings. Along one wall were several pairs of boots, lined up with the tags still on them. In a plastic container near the door were several handheld video games.

It was obvious that Joe had stolen in all. Caleb thought back to man's puzzling comment about nearby houses being empty during the week. There was no gem of hidden wisdom there. He was saying that he supported himself by stealing. His hero wasn't an enlightened philosopher-cowboy, he was a burglar, and an anti-social one at that. He was a blank slate onto which a naïve person could project his own ideas. Caleb felt that familiar sting of disappointment. He had again looked outside himself for guidance and was again disappointed by what he found.

He had a sudden urge to get back to his car. He didn't want to do free labor for this clown, nail up boards that he'd likely stolen, watch him drink beer he didn't share.

He knew he needed to get his head out of the root cellar, he didn't want to get caught snooping, but just then something caught his eye. It was in the corner, next to the stacks of batteries. A pair of shoes that

weren't lined up neatly with the rest – grey New Balances, identical to the ones he was wearing. What had Joe said, right when he showed up?

Funny. The last guy wore those exact same shoes.

And then he was able to place the smell that had bothered him. A chill ran through his body. Not a compost heap. A dead body.

He flashed back to something he'd seen earlier in that time-capsule of a gas station. It was a missing person notice taped next to the cash register, the ink still bright, like it had just come out of somebody's home printer, probably an anxiety-ridden mother. It featured a picture of a buzz-cut kid that looked about Caleb's age, giving a lopsided grin for the camera. He even remembered the guy's name: Louis. This stuck with him because he'd wondered about it as he stood in line. Did you pronounce the *S*, or was it said like *Louie*?

He hadn't given the flyer much thought, just something to read while he checked out, not realizing then that it was a dark puzzle piece, something that would click into place much later than he would have preferred.

He stood and looked back towards camp. Still no sign of Joe, but he wouldn't be gone long. An almost paralyzing terror gripped Caleb, animal-like in its intensity, the way a rabbit must feel right before the fox's jaws clamp down. He'd left his cell phone in the car, a fact that he'd been stupid enough to celebrate only an hour before, thinking of himself as a modern-day Thoreau, cut off from distraction. Right now, he would trade his left arm for the damn thing, plus a few bars of service.

He had to get out. He considered the best way to do it. Maybe wait for the man to come back, thank him for his words of wisdom, and tell him he had somewhere to be? He discarded this as soon as he thought of it. That put him at Joe's mercy. What if he refused? He'd clearly had no problem detaining his last visitor. Caleb's only answer was to get out now, before he came back.

His heart was pumping so hard he could feel the pulse in his neck. He started walking up a hill, away from camp. He wanted to find a good hiding place, somewhere to hunker down for a while, to wait and see how Joe responded. He was almost out of sight when he heard a voice from behind.

“Where are you going?”

He turned to see Joe standing twenty yards away, holding a 2x6. The tone of his voice was unmistakable. He’d asked a question, but it had really been a command.

You’re not going anywhere.

Thinking quickly, Caleb said, “Taking a piss.”

He stepped behind a tree and waited for a minute. In that time, he contemplated running, scanning the forest, looking for an escape route. It was hopeless, of course. He didn’t know this mountain and Joe had lived here for decades. The man would easily track him down. Really, it wouldn’t even come to that because the guy would *run* him down first. He was bigger and stronger than Caleb, and probably faster, too. As tall and rangy as Joe was, Caleb couldn’t imagine that he’d get very far before being overtaken.

So he stepped out from behind the tree, fiddling with his zipper as if he’d just peed. Joe was standing in the same place, watching. Caleb’s palms sweated and he felt a pit in his stomach, but he tried to project nonchalance. He walked over to the worksite and picked up a board, eying it to see if it was straight.

“Want to use this one next?”

Joe eyed him for a long, uncomfortable moment, then shook his head.

“I’m picking the boards, not you.” He pointed to the opposite side of the structure. “Over there.”

Caleb did as instructed and they picked back up where they left off, with him holding boards while Joe nailed. He could see why Joe wanted his help. This work would have been difficult with only one pair of hands, which made him wonder what would happen when it was over. They were already more than halfway done and with every joist Caleb helped hang, he felt one step closer to being expendable.

Joe had switched from beer to liquor. As they worked, he sipped from a bottle of Jim Beam. If he felt the effects of the alcohol, he didn’t show it, knocking in nails with alarming efficiency. Each was the same – a tap to get it started, then two solid blows to fully sink it. It was frightening, how powerfully he wielded that hammer.

Caleb said little, his mind racing, looking for a way out. He couldn’t run, couldn’t overpower him, and couldn’t ask to leave. And the odor of that corpse lingered in his nose, heavy and rank, pressing upon

him the urgency of his situation. He wondered if he had stumbled into a truly lethal predicament, one from which there was no escape. His life so far had been full of soft-edges and second chances, but maybe up here on the mountain, away from everything that kept him safe, his luck had truly run out.

Then inspiration came from an unexpected place.

Joe picked up a towel to wipe his forehead, and underneath it, lying on top of a cooler, was a copy of the novel *The Fountainhead*. Caleb knew this book, not because he'd read it but because his junior year roommate had been obsessed with it. It was a book that inspired cult-like devotion, espousing a philosophy of extreme individualism that certain readers – usually men – found intoxicating. The tenets of the philosophy mattered little to Caleb, either then or now. What he remembered was that his roommate, named Wes, never shut up about it, and that he couldn't let an argument go. One night, loosened up after some THC gummies, the two got into it over the Wes' claim that altruism was the root of all society's evils. Caleb disagreed and they debated well into the night. By the time they were done, Caleb's buzz was long gone. He eventually conceded that Wes "might have a point," not because he really felt that way, but just so he could get some sleep.

It was this unpleasant conversation Caleb thought of when he pointed to Glass Joe's paperback and said, "Man, I hate that fucking book."

Joe was lining up a nail and he stopped. He looked at the book, then at Caleb.

"You've read it?"

"Yes," Caleb lied.

"And you didn't like it?"

"The only thing worse than the plot is her bullshit philosophy."

Joe emitted a snort of contempt and shook his head.

"Kid, you don't know what you're talking about."

This was the most engaged Caleb had yet seen him. He felt he was onto something.

"It's not even a philosophy," he said. "It's just an excuse for being selfish."

"Maybe that's what it sounds like to a snot-nosed kid who hasn't experienced anything in life."

Joe pointed the hammer when saying this, but Caleb didn't feel threatened. He knew he'd just bought himself some time. This guy wouldn't kill him until he'd first convinced Caleb of his own stupidity.

They continued to debate as they installed the last joists, Joe incredulous that someone could read this book and not be floored by its brilliance. Caleb didn't have to say much. The words flowed freely from Joe. The man who minutes before had been a silent cipher was now seemingly unable to shut up. All Caleb had to do was disagree. When Joe went on a long rant about how no person on Earth had a right to one second of his time, that he was actually serving the common good by ignoring the needs of others, Caleb rolled his eyes.

“Like a said – a justification for selfishness.”

And that's all it took. He didn't even have the opportunity to elaborate. Joe's eyes widened and the diatribe continued. When they had finished the platform – or at least, the frame and supporting boards – Joe cleaned up the worksite, talking all the while, gathering scrap lumber and bent nails as he let Caleb know just how much of a coddled, suburban idiot he was. He dumped the trash in a plastic garbage can and walked down the hill back to the main campsite.

They spent the next half-hour debating, Joe doing chores all the while, taking laundry off the line and harvesting water from a rain barrel. He talked with such intensity, as if his words couldn't keep up with his thoughts, that it occurred to Caleb this might be the first time he'd ever debated these ideas. He'd clearly had them simmering in his head for years, but with no living person to bounce them off of.

Until now.

And most importantly, as they talked, he kept sipping from that bottle. Caleb wanted him drunk.

Caleb felt himself getting more comfortable. He even, against his better judgment, antagonized Joe. He couldn't help himself, finding the guy to be such an unbearable hypocrite. So when Joe made the claim that “There are no true individuals left, I'm the last one” Caleb had to respond.

“You think you rely on no one?”

“Of course.”

Caleb threw up his hands in disbelief, then started pointing at items all around them.

“Who made that cooler? And those chairs? And that bourbon? Our consumerist culture, which you hate so much, produced these items. And the fact that we’re sitting in a national park means the government, which you probably also hate, is protecting your land. You benefit from these things, then conveniently forget it and act like you’re Robinson fucking Crusoe.”

Joe was pouring water over a filter of activated charcoal and stopped what he was doing to glare at Caleb. For an uncomfortable moment he didn’t say anything and Caleb wondered if he’d gone too far.

“You’re a spoiled little prick,” Joe said. “And you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He resumed filtering and Caleb’s pulse slowed. After this, he made sure to only criticize ideas, not the man himself. It had felt good to call out the guy’s bullshit, he didn’t want to push his luck.

As they continued debating, Caleb noticed that Joe had developed a drunkard’s lisp. It had taken nearly an entire fifth of bourbon, but he was finally showing the effects. When he filled an empty milk jug from his rain barrel, he struggled to put the cap on, his movements less coordinated than they’d been earlier when displaying such dexterity with the hammer.

After Joe had finished filtering his water, he went and sat down in a camp chair. He was on the last dregs of his bottle. He tasted it, then fixed Caleb with a glassy-eyed stare. He blinked hard, as if adjusting his view. Caleb had hoped he’d be a tired drunk, but right now he looked more like a belligerent one.

“What’d you say brought you up here?”

They were back on dangerous ground. For the first time, it occurred to Caleb that Joe might think there was a connection between his two young visitors – the one he’d killed and the one standing before him. Surely, anyone with a fresh body on his property would be suspicious when a stranger came poking around.

“Your documentary.”

“What about it?”

“Nothing more than what I already said. Just looking for answers.”

As soon as he said this, he regretted it, knowing that *looking for answers* sounded accusatory. He quickly elaborated.

“About life, career, whatever. I just graduated. I’m at a crossroads.”

Joe had no response to this. He belched, then rolled his head around in a circle, his neck audibly popping. Caleb sat down in a camp chair opposite him, on the other side of the fire pit. He pretended to stare at the blackened husks of burnt wood, but in fact he was watching Joe out of the corner of his eye. Until he got out of here, if he ever did, he wouldn't take his eyes off the guy.

Behind Joe were the skinned rabbits he had so expertly prepared earlier, swaying on the line in a gentle breeze. Above them, the blue sky was visible through gaps in the leaves. The only cloud was a plane's white vapor trail.

Caleb idly stuck his hand into the chair's mesh cupholder and felt a hard object. Without thinking, he closed his fingers around it and pulled it out. It was a brightly colored keychain, a glittery rainbow seahorse. He considered it with bemusement, something so at odds with every other part of Joe's life here.

"That belongs to a lady I know," Joe said, as if feeling the need to explain this frilly trinket. "Lives down in town."

"Probably hard to get a woman to come up on this mountain, huh?"

Joe's head snapped up when he heard this.

"I get plenty of girls."

Realizing he had stumbled across another topic of interest to Joe, Caleb said, "For real? How's that work? They hike up for a date?"

"Sometimes."

Caleb raised his eyebrows, not convinced, and Joe stood up suddenly, toppling his canvas chair.

"You don't believe me?"

Then before there was time for an answer, he stormed off in a huff. Several blue tarps were strung between the trees, and he flung one back and walked behind it. Caleb heard him rustling around and wondered what on Earth the man could be getting that would prove his success with the ladies. A pair of panties? A lock of hair? Something worse?

Joe was gone for several long minutes, then finally re-emerged holding what looked like index cards. He walked right up to Caleb, a little too close for comfort, and handed him the cards. When Caleb took them, he realized they were actually Polaroid pictures.

“This is just the tip of the iceberg,” Joe said. “You’ve spent the past few years on a college campus, surrounded by girls, but I bet I get more action than you.”

Judging by the thickness of the stack he held, Caleb thought this might be true. He glanced at the picture on top. It featured a woman in black underwear, sitting on what appeared to be a hotel bed. She had stringy red hair and her hand, resting on her lap, held a lit cigarette. She looked directly into the camera with a look of undisguised boredom, like a kid forced to sit for a family picture. The next Polaroid was similar – another hotel room, another woman on a bed, this one topless. Her torso was gaunt, ribs showing under pale, tattooed skin. After flipping through several more and finding them all the same, it seemed obvious to Caleb these were prostitutes.

He wanted to point out to Joe that, while his own list of partners might be shorter, he’d at least never had to pay for their company. Instead, he pretended to be impressed.

“A lot of women.”

Joe nodded, emitting a grunt of smug affirmation.

“You gotta hike down to town to meet them?” Caleb said, casting about for something, anything, to get the man talking.

“Not all the time.”

Joe snatched the stack of pictures and began thumbing through them. When he found what he was looking for, he handed the stack back to Caleb. On top was a picture of a woman in a folding camp chair, right in the very spot Caleb was standing. She was the least scantily-clad of all the women he’d seen so far, wrapped in a thick coat.

“Looks cold,” Caleb said. “She hiked up here in the winter?”

“Back in February. But I got her out of those clothes pretty quick.”

The leering way he said this – plus the booze on his breath – made Caleb’s stomach turn. He kept going through the pictures, feigning interest. Clearly, Joe wanted him to see them all. There had to be at least forty. Most were depressingly similar, bored women in dissolute hotel rooms, but there was one that caught his interest. It featured a woman sprawled across the backseat of a car, wearing only underwear. She appeared to be unconscious, her body crumpled as if she’d been unceremoniously dumped there. Something about this image seemed different, more sinister than the others.

He wondered if Joe knew this particular picture was in the stack. He quickly shuffled it to the bottom. When he got through them all, he handed the pictures back to Joe and said, “I stand corrected. You clearly have a few lady friends.”

Joe snorted and said, “More than a few.”

He returned to his seat on the other side of the fire, where he took another hit from the bottle.

“Is it hard to keep them all straight?” Caleb said. “I mean, I had two girlfriends once and it was more trouble than it was worth, trying to keep them from finding out about each other.”

This wasn’t true. Caleb had only ever had one girlfriend at a time, but he thought it was the type of story Joe would like. He was correct, and Joe ran with it, treating Caleb to a sleazy, probably apocryphal story about hooking up with two women at once in a shelter on the Appalachian Trail. As he rambled, Caleb marveled at the fact that he ever found this guy impressive. He attributed it to skillful editing on the part of the filmmaker.

Joe soliloquized about sex and women for a while, sounding nothing like a wise man on a mountain, just a lonely, self-absorbed drunk. The bottle got emptier, his speech more slurred. And then, after a meandering story about a time he almost got married, the talking stopped. His chin drifted down to his chest and his breathing slowed. Caleb sat for several minutes, watching, making sure he was indeed passed out. Once Joe started snoring, he felt convinced it was safe.

He stood, grabbed his backpack, and walked out of camp.

* * *

Five hours later, it was dark and he was lost. He'd followed the same path down – he thought – and yet had not come across the gravel lot where he'd parked. It was disorienting to walk so far and yet have no feeling of progress. Every hill he descended, every corner he turned, revealed more of the same – hills and trees, trees and hills. The summertime leaves were thick and kept him from seeing farther than a few hundred yards. As vast as the forest was, it had begun to feel claustrophobic, like a fun-house mirror.

And once it turned dark, he'd stopped walking, realizing that he could be making things worse. He needed to be absolutely sure he was headed east, and he couldn't tell without the sun to orient him. East took him back towards civilization, towards the road he drove in on and, a few miles past that, Interstate 40. But to the west – nothing. Just mile upon mile of the vast Great Smoky Mountains National Park. He had no cell phone and had told no one where he was going. If he got lost in there, nobody would be coming to find him.

He would wait it out until tomorrow morning, until the sun came up, then keep plodding east.

The only food in his pack was a pack of plastic-wrapped cheese crackers. He allowed himself half of these, then washed that down with a gulp of water. His liter water bottle was down to one-third capacity. He'd crossed a stream earlier, but didn't trust it, deciding he'd rather be thirsty than doubled over with giardia.

Now that he'd stopped moving, he felt a chill in the air, cooler than he'd have expected for summer time. He was wearing only shorts and a t-shirt and he pulled his arms inside, hugging them against his body. He craved sleep, a way to pass those lonely, uncomfortable hours, but this proved difficult. He lay curled up for a long time, shivering, using his backpack as a pillow.

He wondered what his parents were thinking. They had to be worried. By now they'd surely tried calling. It would have gone straight to voicemail, to a cell phone hidden under the driver's seat of his car. His supervisor at the pizza parlor, Travis, would also be wondering where he was. Travis, who raged gloriously when people no-showed. Caleb was on the shift tonight. Assuming he made it out of the woods in one piece, he would be treated to an indignant redneck scolding in his voicemail, something to the effect of, "You get your lazy ass to work, son. Ain't nobody got time to cover for you."

In spite of his circumstances, he almost smiled at this thought. He was surprised by his presence of mind. No doubt he was in a bad spot, easily the worst of his life. And yet he wasn't panicking, just as he had not panicked earlier when he realized the gravity of his situation at Joe's campsite. He had thought clearly then and managed to finagle his way out of a bad spot.

Looking back on the day, he felt that he'd acted rationally throughout, doing the best he could with the information available to him. He would continue to do that. The night might be long but he'd get through it, unkilld by cold and thirst, and in the morning he'd have more choices to make. A sense of calm overtook him, acceptance of his circumstances. Sleep didn't come quickly or easily, but eventually it came.

He surprised himself by sleeping until sunrise. He sat up gingerly, his back aching from the ground. His mouth was parched and he took a sip of water. With the sun up, he now had his bearings and felt comfortable walking.

There was no trail to follow. He picked his way through the woods, side-stepping downed trees and pushing branches out of the way. After a half-hour, he ran across a road. Paved, not gravel. This felt like a route that would actually have traffic.

He continued walking on the shoulder, headed in the same easterly direction. When he heard the rumble of an engine behind him, he looked back and saw a pick-up truck. He stuck his thumb out, not expecting the first vehicle he flagged down to actually stop. But it did, slowing down and pulling onto the shoulder.

Caleb felt a sudden surge of irrational panic, that it would turn out to be Glass Joe behind the wheel, leering at him triumphantly. But what he saw instead was a young man, not much older than himself. Caleb stepped around to the passenger's side and the driver gestured for him to open the door.

The driver wore paint-spattered coveralls and had a wispy mustache. His forearm rested on the open windowsill, cigarette in hand. The passenger's seat was covered with fast food wrappers and he waved at the debris.

"You can push that stuff on the floor."

Caleb did this gently, feeling like he was littering in this stranger's truck, then took his seat and shut the door. The A/C vents rattled, pushing out lukewarm air.

"Thanks for the ride."

"No problem," the driver said, an Appalachian lilt in his voice. "I've bummed plenty myself. Where to?"

"Is there a police station near here?"

The driver did a double-take.

"Everything alright?"

Caleb was ready for this. The truth obviously was too bizarre to explain, so he had a story prepared.

"I was hiking and my car got stolen."

"Oh shit," the guy said, as he put the truck into gear and eased back on the road. "People think it's safe out here in the country, but you'd be surprised."

Caleb was struck by the accuracy of this statement.

"I was definitely surprised."

The nearest police station was Waynesville and the driver took him all the way there, a twenty-minute drive, then refused the ten dollars that Caleb pulled out of his wallet for gas money. While his benefactor's truck rumbled away, Caleb shouldered his backpack and walked into the police station.

What followed happened quickly. When Caleb said he had info on the missing hiker, he got the immediate attention of the sheriff and two deputies. They knew Glass Joe and didn't like him, suspecting him in a number of break-ins. Though this was the first tip they had received connecting him to Louis' disappearance, they took it seriously.

Within an hour, he was riding back up the mountain, this time in the front seat of a squad car driven by the sheriff, with a park ranger following behind. He summited the mountain for the second time in two days. It was harder the second time, exhausted as he was. He also hadn't eaten much, aside from a candy bar at the police station vending machine. On several occasions he asked for a break and flopped down on the side of the trail to recover. The sheriff's deputy who accompanied them didn't seem prepared for the hike

either. His black shoes, once shiny, were now filthy with trail dirt and sweat ringed the armpits of his starched shirt.

When they made it, finally, Joe seemed to be expecting them. He sauntered out from behind his tarp in a manner that struck Caleb as rehearsed casualness. He welcomed the group into camp and, unlike the day before, acted hospitable, offering all three of them beers. When the sheriff declined and explained the reason for their visit, Joe affected shock. He acknowledged that Caleb had visited yesterday and claimed to have no idea why he would lie about him.

“To be honest with you, Officer,” Joe said, as if Caleb wasn’t there. “He seemed a little needy. Like he wanted a friend. I talked with him some, let him work on a project with me. I guess that wasn’t enough. Maybe he’s bitter.”

Joe’s tone was one of pained misunderstanding, as if the accusations hurt him emotionally. But when the officer wasn’t looking, Joe shot Caleb a private glare that indicated he’d like nothing more than to gut him like one of those rabbits.

Joe showed them around camp, including the stone cellar, now empty of any ill-gotten items, including the grey New Balances. The odor was no longer there. Not even replaced by something antiseptic, as if he’d been desperately cleaning. Just gone. He had thoroughly prepared for their visit.

“This turned out nice,” the ranger said, indicating the cellar. “In the documentary, they never show it completed.”

“He wasn’t patient enough to stick around,” Joe said. “He was trying to get the editing done in time for some film festival.”

The ranger ran his hand over one of the stones. It was darker than the others, and sitting directly over the doorway, the most prominent piece in the whole structure.

“This is a nice piece of basalt. Where’d you get it from?”

“Found it at Waterville Lake.”

The ranger raised his eyebrows.

“That’s a long hike with a boulder. At least two miles.”

“Wasn’t easy.”

The sheriff stepped over, then crouched down to get a closer look.

“You see many more like this by the lake? I’m putting in a stone patio. My wife likes these dark pieces.”

“I saw a few. Look near the boat ramp.”

Caleb couldn’t believe what he was witnessing. He’d brought the authorities to a murder scene and they were chatting the guy up like an old friend.

They left soon after, the sheriff and ranger thanking Joe for his time.

“Sure thing, gentlemen,” Joe, shaking their hands like he’d just interviewed for a job. “Good luck with your search.”

Caleb didn’t shake his hand. He just glared. Joe looked back serenely, a slight grin tugging at his lips, the satisfaction of a man who’d dodged a bullet.

For a while they walked in silence, trudging back down the mountain. Caleb had so far said little to bolster his case, hoping to let the evidence speak for itself. Unfortunately, there hadn’t been much to see. He wondered if the officer and ranger felt this had been a waste of time.

“I know what I smelled yesterday,” he said, as they descended a craggy hill strewn with loose shale. “And what I saw in that root cellar. Ask Louis’ family what kind of shoes he wore.”

The sheriff was walking in front. He inclined his head backwards, towards the park ranger.

“Mike, what was your impression of our friend up there?”

“Didn’t believe a word he said.”

“Me neither.” The sheriff turned to Caleb. “First I thing I do when I get back is apply for a search warrant.”

Two weeks later, Caleb sees Glass Joe on television. He has been monitoring the headlines and seeing nothing, and he’s starting to wonder if the sheriff was just blowing smoke. But then one evening his

father is watching the 6:00 pm local news and Caleb, in another room, hears the anchor say, “A Haywood County man has been charged in the death of missing hiker Louis Beasley.” He hurries into the living room.

Joe, it turns out, was undone by forensic evidence. A thorough search of his campsite – here the newsreel shows an image of the root cellar – revealed Louis’ DNA. Soon after, his body was discovered less than a mile away in a shallow grave. Joe is also being questioned in the case of a missing woman, Caleb having told police about the disturbing Polaroid he saw.

When the clip is over, his father turns to him.

“Isn’t that the fellow you’re so ate up with? The one in the documentary?”

Caleb nods, not wanting to reveal too much. Except for law enforcement, he hasn’t told anyone where he went two weeks ago. He aims for a neutral response.

“That’s nuts.”

After this, he needs to get out. He slips his sandals on and steps out the door for a walk. It’s a mild evening and he heads out the back of his parents’ neighborhood, into the pastures behind. He is supposed to work tonight, but he’s not going to show. He turns his phone off, not wanting to hear about it. He’s had enough pizza delivery. Time to move on. He walks beside a barbed wire fence, a lone cow on the other side, its soft, liquid eyes following him.

He hasn’t kept Glass Joe a secret from his parents because he worries how they would respond. He just doesn’t want to talk about it, with them or anyone. It was a powerful experience, something he knew would indelibly stamp him, and yet he felt that trying to explain it would dilute its potency, the memory made more powerful by being his alone.

He walks until well past dark, out beyond the pastures into another neighborhood that’s under construction. The half-built houses look skeletal with their studs visible, the earth-moving construction equipment casting shadows in the moonlight.

Everything about him feels liminal, transitional.

He doesn’t know what will happen next. He just knows that he feels full of potential, bursting at the seams.