

If boyhood questions aren't answered before a certain point in time, they can't ever be raised again. So we returned to being gracious to each other, as the wall suggested that we should be. We also felt that the woods and rivers were gracious to us when we walked together beside them.

-- Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

For an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery.

-- Thoreau, *Walden*

WHEN YOU'RE IN THE FOREST...

- Before hiking, tell someone where you are going and when you will return.
- Stay on marked trails.
- Obey signs and forest ranger instructions.
- Watch out for dead trees and tree limbs.
- Take out what you bring in.
- Let adults handle matches.
- Make sure the campfire is dead before you leave the area.

-- *Junior Forest Ranger field book*

Backcountry

Mike heaved Andy's backpack out of the trunk and pretended to stagger as he tossed it. "Shit, you sure you didn't forget to pack anything?" he said as Andy caught it.

"You won't be complaining when you're eating good tonight. And c'mon, it's not that heavy. Remember our hike in junior year? I must've packed the whole kitchen. But God it was worth it to have burgers for dinner."

Mike grabbed his own pack from the back of his dad's Corolla. He swung it on as Mr. Harffeld came around, leaving the driver's door open. "This is the last time I make the drive way out here, the car was really struggling up some of those hills," Mr. Harffeld said as he walked hunched over, looking at the underside of the car. He was a scouting dad, collared shirt tucked into outdoor pants. "You could really hear it whining on that last one." He stood up and clapped his hands together, "So this is it guys! One more adventure for the books! You know, I'm just so proud of you for staying friends. So many people lose friendships once college starts, they just kind of drift apart. I'm really happy you two aren't doing that."

"Okay, okay, yes Dad, we're very happy too," Mike said with a grin.

"Yea Mr. Harffeld, totally, and of course thank you for driving us out here. Really, thanks," added Andy. They were pulled off to the side of a steep mountain road, the early morning darkness only just beginning to burn away.

Mr. Harffeld waved his hands, "I know, sometimes I get a little mushy, but I can't help it, sue me," he shrugged. "You're all set then? Anything we need to double check? You have your satellite phone Mike? And it's charged?"

"Yes to the good stuff, no to the bad stuff. My sat phone's charged and packed. The trailhead's right there, we're set," Mike answered as he pointed to a small break in the bushes just off of the pullout.

"Okay okay, just wanted to check, you'll understand when you have kids. Alright guys, one last hug, then I'll let you go."

Mr. Harffeld pulled them both in, one arm around each of them. He held them a couple seconds longer than necessary, then took a step back. "I'll see you soon, just three days until we're all at the Fairbow diner eating those fried steaks. Man, I'm getting hungry already," he winked at Andy, grinning.

"You got it Mr. Harffeld, we'll be there," smiled back Andy.

"Yea, don't worry, but we *will* start eating without you if you're late," Mike joked.

Mr. Harffeld made a face of mock fear and crossed himself, head to chest, shoulder to shoulder.

Mike started towards the trailhead with Andy following, they walked up a small incline as they approached. It was clearly marked, a worn wooden postboard declared the start of Deerhoof trail. They heard the car door close behind them. It hadn't rained in a few days, but the air was moist and the ground was wet with dew. They went maybe forty feet onto the loamy trail, then turned around to wave at Mr. Harffeld as they approached the first bend. He waved back as he put the car in reverse. As they turned the corner, they could hear the Corolla faintly whine as it headed back down the mountain.

The trail was steep and Andy pulled out his hiking poles first, despite Mike's teasing. Mike pulled his own out shortly after. They stepped on thick piles of pine needles covering the trail, moving confidently. They knew this part of the hike, having done it last summer after graduating high school. That had been a week-long affair, hiking by day and camping along the trail at night, until they reached Fairbow. Growing up, their boy scout troop had made Fairbow their stomping grounds. It was a cozy town next to Deepdrop river, the kind of place with Black Bear diners and a rock-candy shop. They'd hiked and camped all over the surrounding Appalachian mountains, and gone fishing a few times too. Once high school started many of their troop members had dropped out, trading the tents and sleeping bags for football or tennis. Mike remembered when Jay Fenton told him, "I look a lot better in a helmet and shoulder pads than khakis." Mike

agreed, Jay did look a lot better if his mug was hidden behind a face mask. They stopped nodding to each other in the halls after that.

Mike had dropped back, letting Andy set the pace. Andy was pawing through a bag of trail mix, nuts and chocolates. Andy was taller than Mike, a bit chunky too, one of those guys you could call “Big insert-name-here”, and people did. But he was a gentle giant, and the kids in Peris Elementary had leaned on that, hard. They would leave chocolates and notes taped to his seat and locker, “To Andy”. Andy’s parents would complain and the Andygrams would stop for a few weeks, but would always start back up again.

Mike and Andy became inseparable on the day Sam Tintle went too far. Mike walked into the boys’ bathroom and saw candy wrappers scattered on the dirty tile floor. The last stall door was ajar, and from it he heard whimpering. Mike pushed it open and stood over a shirtless Andy, mucus and blood lightly running from his nose, mixing with smears of chocolate. All over his flabby body were Rolos, Tootsie-Rolls, Skittles. Some were crushed and pressed flat against his skin, others in pristine condition, as if the candy-store clerk had placed them there for display. “What’d they do to you?” Mike asked.

Andy looked up, eyes making contact with Mike’s for just a second before looking down. “They glu- glued it to me, stuck me in here and took my shirt and glu- glued it all on me.” Mike reached down and tried to pick a Skittle off Andy’s shoulder. He couldn’t, the skin stretched as he pulled and the Skittle wouldn’t come off. A squeezed-out bottle of Krazy glue next to the toilet brush caught his eye. Mike didn’t need to ask who had done it, on Andy’s forehead the dumbass had signed his own name, “Love, Sam”. Mike gave Andy his P.E. shirt and walked with him to the office. Sure, Sam Simmons was going to get in big trouble with the school, but that wasn’t enough. That was the wrong kind of punishment for what Sam had done to Andy. That weekend, Sam came limping home with a broken wrist and gummy worms stapled to him through his shirt. He’d never said who did it.

Mike and Andy continued up the trail, sidestepping the scattered rocks and snarling roots. It was still cold in the shadows, but when they stepped into the sun

they could feel its warmth building up on them. Andy glanced at his watch and stopped, stepping to the side to face Mike, “We’ve been going for almost two hours now, I could use a break.”

Mike stopped short, “Sure, I won’t say no. Let’s just get to that spot over there, where it flattens out a bit.” They dropped their packs down on a couple of waist high rocks, sitting in the shade and sweating. Cool breezes of alpine air brushed across their faces. “We’re not too far from the turn-off,” said Mike, “Just keep your eyes open for a red ribbon tied to a tree branch, on the right.”

“Yea, got it,” Andy said, his breathing having eased off. Mike took one of his offered apple slices. They were following one of Mr. Anders’ hikes, their troop’s scoutmaster. He was a real outdoorsman, not content with following established trails and routes, he was always on the lookout for a new hike. He’d go on what he called marriage-breakers, trips of unknown duration and unknown destination to suss out new hikes. At the end of a successful marriage-breaker he’d have a freshly minted Anders’ original. They were always hard, only experienced men, and young men, should attempt them. Mr. Anders had given Mike and Andy his blessing, saying that as long as Andy didn’t eat up the whole forest along the way, they should be fine. Andy had flushed at that.

They stretched their legs, looking up at the bluing sky and listening to the occasional chattering squirrel. After a few minutes Mike got up and hefted his pack on, “Ready to hit it?”

They kept their pace easy, not in any rush. They should have plenty of time to reach Fairbow, Mike thought, and besides, it’s not a big deal if Dad has to wait an extra afternoon or so.

At the bottom of a loose decline Mike spotted the ribbon. Andy had passed it by, looking at his feet as he’d started to trudge back up the accompanying slope. “Here it is, got it,” Mike exhaled between breaths. “Damn, guess I missed it,” said Andy as he came back. They stood together on the trail, looking at a gap in the bushes leading out onto the needle covered forest floor. Pine trees stood with wide gaps between them, shade covering the ground.

“Let me get the book,” said Mike, thumping his pack on the ground and rifling through its pockets.

After a moment Andy glanced down, “You have it right?”

“Yea, it’s just not in the pocket I thought it was, one sec.” After some more zipping and rummaging he straightened up, a laminated palm-sized book in hand. He flipped open to the second page, then pulled out his compass. “All right, here we go,” and stepped off the trail into the shaded woods. “Wai-,” Andy’s words caught in his throat, hand outstretched for the book. He rolled his shoulders, then stepped in after Mike.

Fairbow Rising Dawn

Local Forest Ranger Missing

Elijah Tuft, a veteran Forest Ranger of twelve years, was declared missing as of March 12th, when he was last seen on CCTV at the Plaza Shopping Center, on Bend drive. Tuft was reported missing when he failed to report to work three days in a row, after taking time off for a long weekend. It is suspected that Tuft may have been injured while on a hike, and a search and rescue party was launched three days ago. So far, there have been no leads.

--Abbie Donton, March 19th, 2012

Andy hurried to keep up. He knew Mike didn’t do it on purpose, but after all the hikes they’d done together, and all the times Andy had specifically asked Mike to let him set the pace, he couldn’t help but be annoyed. At least it was flat.

They were almost strolling now, the ground heaped with soft piles of needles and studded with desiccated pinecones. He saw Mike’s walking poles dangling from his pack, his hands occupied with the guidebook and compass. Andy urged himself to ask for it, to double check Mike’s work. He didn’t really have any doubts about where Mike was leading them, Mike was better at following a map than he was, but he didn’t want to keep rolling over. He wasn’t just Mike’s funny pal anymore. Jesus Christ, he’d gotten into a better school than

him. He'd made his own friends, fucked his first girl! But as soon as they'd come together this summer they'd fallen back into the same routine. Mike leading and Andy following. Well, Andy thumbed his pack up higher, that'll change. He'll talk to Mike, he'll show him that Big Andy won't stand for it. He could see Mike's response, "Oh sure man, I didn't realize," and nodded to himself. Mike's not a bad guy, just a little clueless sometimes. He looked up, staring at the back of Mike's neck. *But not now, tonight, Andy thought, tonight, after dinner when we're full and loose.*

Mike had his nose in Mr. Anders' guidebook. It had the standard bearings to follow, and also a list of landmarks to look for. They should be coming out of these trees soon, into a clearing. There was a warning to keep watch for big animals, which was strange. They'd always been taught to look out for dangerous animals, even in places that shouldn't have any. So far he hadn't seen anything, but Mike noted to keep his eyes peeled. Flipping forward, past the clearing, there was a hill marked as the first stopping point for the night. On its top was supposed to be a fallen pine tree that would make for a good campsite.

He closed the book; it was good to be out here again. He and Andy, together and doing one of the most natural things guys could do. He was glad to be back home, out of those fucking dreary classes and shithouse dorms; he'd missed Andy. He glanced behind him, checking that Andy wasn't too far behind. Andy was looking down, maybe thirty feet back. Seeing his puffed out cheeks, Mike stopped and swung around, "Damn, my bad, you're supposed to lead, I forgot."

Andy glanced up at Mike and kept on walking. As they passed, Andy muttered a winded, "Thanks," nothing more.

They kept on for another couple of miles, the ground getting steeper and trees more sparse. Fewer needles on the ground began to reveal the dirt below. They stopped a few times for sandwiches and to pee. Andy took the trowel and pack of wipes behind a tree while Mike waited.

It was Andy, still in the lead, that called out the clearing ahead. They'd been slowly trudging up a long incline when Andy saw it level off. They reached

the top and there was a break in the trees. Coming out of the twilight, the sun-doused clearing gleamed. Bulrushes sprouted up, and far off they could hear water. The ground was wet, their boots sucking as they stepped in the thick mud.

“Does it say where we cross?” Andy asked. Mike had pulled the book out again and was reading. “No, doesn’t say anything other than ‘Small wet clearing, move past towards hill’.” They both looked up, past the clearing. It was hard to separate it from the backing mountainside, but they could make out the shape of a hill rising in front of them.

“I think we should just cross here,” said Andy, “No sense in walking around in this crap looking for someplace better that probably doesn’t exist.”

“No, we should try and find a break in the rushes, it’ll be hard enough walking in this mud without having to push through them too. Let’s see if there’s some creekbed or something to follow.” Mike started off without waiting for Andy.

“Hey!” Andy raised his voice, “Don’t just walk off like that, we haven’t decided anything!” Mike turned around, eyebrows raised, “Whoah, sorry, didn’t mean anything by it. What if we just do a quick walk up and down here first, that okay?”

Andy gripped his walking poles tightly, his face pink, “Yes, totally, sorry, I didn’t mean to shout.”

“Hey, no problem, I shouldn’t have ignored you.”

They looked at each other, then separated. They each walked along the clearing’s perimeter, where the dirt gave way to water-veined mud. About twenty yards up, Mike called out, “Andy! Over here!”

Andy made his way back and stopped next to Mike. They stood looking at a certifiable clear-cut path, complete with guide stones. “The book doesn’t say anything about this? No picture, nothing?” asked Andy.

“Nothing.”

“Maybe there used to be some trail out here, and this was part of it?”

“But look at it, it’s not old, someone’s maintaining it.”

They stood in silence, running water gurgling in the background.

“Should we take it?” asked Mike.

“You’re asking me?”

“Yea, I’m asking.”

Andy paused, “It’s probably just some old forest ranger that keeps it up. Maybe there’s a firewatch nearby that uses it. Whatever it is, it sure beats humping through the bushes.”

Andy nodded to himself. It seemed alright, nothing wrong with a simple path, it was just surprising. Guess Mr. Anders wasn’t the first one out this way.

“Lead on, my friend,” he said to Mike. Mike glanced up to Andy, then started out onto the path.

It was made of small stones embedded in the mud, with larger ones set every few feet to mark the sides. They still padded their boots through water as they walked, but didn’t have to fight against the mud’s suction. The path curved as it went, not cutting directly across the clearing. Rushes leaned in on either side of them, but never grew directly up from the path. They pushed the leaning fronds out of their way as they went deeper. Andy was able to poke his head up high enough to see through the tops of the bulrushes. They were almost to the other side of the clearing, but the path was veering away from the hill. It was taking them somewhere else.

“Let’s ditch it, we’re almost across,” he said, “We don’t have to walk too far it looks like.”

“Okay, this time you lead big man, bulldoze those fucking things.”

Andy grinned, “Me big, me strong!” and stepped off the path, hands outstretched. The reeds bent easily, and Mike stayed close behind in Andy’s wake.

Their boots made a *schlick-schlock, schlick-schlock* noise as they went. Andy took a step forward and almost face planted. He looked down, his boot was stuck in the mud. Mike stopped behind him, “You’re stuck?”

“Yea, but we’re almost out, the other side is close, you can go ahead.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to ditch you.”

“Yea, it’s no problem,” Andy said as he bent down to wiggle his boot, “Just find us a good rock to pass out on.”

Mike patted Andy on the back as he passed by.

Andy tugged at his boot, trying to break the mud's hold. He wrestled with it, and after a few moments could hear the schmeer of air as the seal started to break. A bit more and he could move it, side to side, then up out of the mud. He stood up, breathing heavily, sweating. As he started to move, he heard the sound of bulrushes bending and snapping back into place. He glanced around, but his ears were still pounding from bending over. He took a couple of deep breaths and waited for it to pass. He heard it again, this time for a few seconds, closer. A chill ran down his spine. What the fuck was that? He was scared. He pumped his knees and got out of the bulrushes, fast. He came out looking for Mike.

"Mike! Mike!"

"Over here!" Mike called out, sitting up and waving from a rock a couple yards up the hill. Andy marched up to Mike, glancing behind him.

"I think there's something in there, there's definitely something in there. I heard something moving the reeds, moving towards me."

Mike sat up straight, staring at the spot Andy had come from. Nothing moved. Andy stood next to Mike, hands hooked into his straps, pulling down hard, knees locked. A minute passed. "Probably just some animal," Andy murmured, looking down. Mike kept watch for another few seconds before looking over at Andy, "You're okay?"

"Yea, I'm okay. Just got spooked, but I'm fine now. I'm okay."

Mike stood up, "Well, let's get to the top of this hill then. I'm fucking starving, and you've got some food to make." He squeezed Andy on the shoulder and turned up the hill, and Andy followed.

They set up camp on top of the hill, against the carcass of an old pine tree. It wasn't quite dusk, and the sun gave off a golden glow, approaching orange. They had a shared tent, which Mike unhitched from his pack and began rolling out. Andy was setting up a fire-ring, as well as his propane stove. Beside him was a veritable snack shop aisle, complete with chips, ding-dongs, and the holy grail, a couple of cans of Manwich sloppy joes. Mike got the tent poles slid in and the

stakes hammered down, and strolled to the edge of the hilltop. He looked out at the wavering haze of trees stretched out before him, shadows growing long, reaching out like fingers over the mountain slopes. He glanced down at the patch of bulrushes they'd just crossed. From up here he could see both sides of it easily. He squinted, but couldn't make out the trail they followed, neither where it started nor ended. He stuck his hands in his pockets and shuffled back over to Andy, hovering over him as he jammed his can opener into the sloppy joe mix, and started punching holes in its lid.

“Were you able to get any?” he said over Andy's shoulder.

“Sure did, check the bottom of my small pocket, on the back.”

Mike unzipped it and pulled out two Miller High Lifes. “Buddy of mine, now I remember why we're friends.”

He slunk back over to Andy, doing his best t-rex walk, and gently balanced one of the cans on Andy's shoulder. Andy grabbed it before it fell, and they cracked them open together, warm foam sudsing over. Mike watched Andy heat the sloppy-joe mix up, not saying anything, just sipping. The beer didn't help to quench their thirst, but that's not what it was for. Andy made them both a couple of sandwiches, which they tossed back, burning their fingers and tongues along the way.

Mike squatted and collected the empty cans and paper plates into a bear-proof bag, while Andy broke down his stove and stowed it back into his pack. They sat around their campfire in the evening glow, slow embers rising between them. The trees towered over them, standing tall and growing high into the distance, dark treetops against a deep ocean sky. Mike looked over to the hill's edge and nodded at it, “Let's sit over there, I want to take in the view.” They made their way over and sat down again, legs splayed out in front of them. The sun dipped below the trees, edging into the quiet evening. A silence held between them, a bit of tension linking them to each other. Mike balled his hands together, and looked down at the ground. He cleared his throat, then spoke; “Thanks for doing this, I was really missing it.”

Andy looked over, the surprise plain on his face. “Shit, why wouldn’t I? You know I love being out here.”

Mike hesitated, “Yea of course, but, I don’t know, you’re kind of taking off, leaving me behind.”

“Leaving you behind? I don’t think so.”

“Well, you’re doing good in college, my dad is always telling me about all the clubs you’re in, you’re even dating someone. And I’m, not.”

“You’re in college too you know,” said Andy, mock rolling his eyes.

“Barely, I’m going to the local JC, man. And even there I’m not doing so hot. I don’t know anyone, I’m almost flunking out, I’m like, the loser in all my classes.” He looked up from between his legs, down across the mountain. “But out here, it’s like I’m back. Back to when you and me were together, just hanging out. When things were going good.”

He kept looking out, eyes straight ahead, not daring to look at Andy.

“Yea, sounds like things aren’t going too well for you,” said Andy after a pause. He shifted his numbing legs. “But I’m here, always. I’m your friend, as true as there could be. You know you saved my life growing up, don’t you? If it wasn’t for you I’d still be getting Andygrams. One bad part of your life doesn’t take away the value of you as a person. You may not be acing chem, but you led a scouting trip down old Deepdrop, and carried Bill Holly all the way back when he twisted his ankle. Don’t let what you think you should be good at get in the way of how great you really are. You’re a dumbass, I don’t trust you to make those kinds of decisions.” Andy put his arm across Mike’s shoulders, and squeezed him a moment.

Mike nodded, nodded again. “Thanks man,” he said, and stood up, dusting himself off. Andy took a breath, as if to say something, but stopped himself. He clenched his hands and looked away, “Yea, of course,” he said. Mike looked over, offered a hand to Andy and pulled him up. Together they walked the short distance back to camp, through the deepening shadows to the dull light of their fire.

Andy grabbed a pack of baby wipes and they both started to undress, stripping their jackets, shirts, and shorts, still wearing their boots all the while. They swapped the wipes back and forth, wiping themselves down. Mike pulled an old gray t-shirt over his head, then unzipped their tent. He sat in the entry way, facing out. He unlaced his boots, pulled on a pair of gym shorts, and crawled inside, burrowing into his sleeping bag. Andy came in in his blue and white striped pajamas, zipping up the door behind him. It was going to be a cold night, they slept with their sleeping bags pushed up against each other, back to back. The gentle, dark, sounds of the forest were about them. Their tent rocked back and forth, as if nestled in the needles of a breeze-blown branch. “Where do you think that path was leading?” Andy asked, after a few minutes of silence.

“In the bulrushes? I dunno,” mumbled Mike. His head was heavy, too heavy to be talking he thought. “I tried to see where it went, from the hill, but I couldn’t. Maybe it doesn’t go anywhere. I dunno.”

Andy turned onto his back, starting at the apex of the tent. “Hey Mike?”

“Yea.”

“You meant what you said back there, you think I’m taking off?”

“Yea, I meant it.”

Andy swallowed, “Thanks.” He flipped back on his side. “Good night.”

“Night.”

As they slept, another on the mountain moved. It loped more than walked, but it wasn’t a beast. Animals wouldn’t come near it, its scent was a warning, *stay away!* Its fingers skittered along tree trunks, knuckles imprinted on the dirt, toes gripped and spasmed as they grasped the earth. A sewer grate had been left open, and a morlock had slunk through.

Ranger Elijah Tuft,

You have been found in violation of workplace standards and procedures regarding expected behavior towards your colleagues and

superiors. As per our meeting this afternoon, October 8th, 2010, you are expected to treat others with respect and courtesy. This includes verbally communicating in a calm and professional manner, as well as filing paperwork in a timely fashion. Superiors must be notified of absences from the workplace ahead of time, as according to our standing PTO policy. Any further violations will result in further disciplinary action. Please respond in writing no later than October 15th, 2010, acknowledging the receipt of this formal communication.

It wasn't the morning birdcalls that woke Mike, nor the morning the sun. No, it was Andy's meaty arm whacking him across the mouth. "Mmpah!" Mike gasped, pushing Andy's arm off and sitting up, rubbing his mouth and eyes. Andy was still sleeping, a puddle of drool glistening around the corners of his mouth. Mike grinned, and rocked Andy back and forth, speaking to him in a goo-goo voice, "Uh oh, looks like someone was *droooling*, yep a little drool in the night, wake up Andy, you made a piddle puddle on your piddle pillow." Andy dreamily opened his eyes, he let himself be rocked for a moment more before bolting up. "What are you doing! What the hell!" Mike rocked back with laughter, holding his stomach and falling over onto his side, "Damn I've never *seen* so much drool, why'd we even bring water we could just siphon all we need from you!" Andy was rubbing his mouth with the back of his arm, looking down at his pillow. "Damn, I haven't done that in years, fuck." Mike gripped his shoulder, "Aww, it's okay widdle guy, it's just a *little* puddle." Andy grinned and pushed Mike's hand away, "Shut up, at least it's not as bad as what I woke up to on our outdoor-ed trip. You remember that, huh? I knew you were a perv, but that really locked it in for me. My my, at least I didn't ruin my sleeping bag." Mike didn't get embarrassed at that story any more, not when Andy told it. It wasn't his fault that they'd been assigned to Ms. King's group, what was a 7th-grade boy supposed to do? They'd been to the lake that day for chrissake, she'd been in a bathing suit!

Andy grabbed his socks and unzipped the tent. He pulled his boots over and slipped them on, making his way to his pack to set the stove up again. Mike

put his boots on bareback, no socks, grabbed the trowel, and found a large tree to do his business behind. When he came back Andy had already started boiling some water for coffee and instant oatmeal. “What’s on the agenda for today?” Andy asked. Mike pulled the guidebook out and thumbed through it. “So, today it looks like we’re going to hike along the side of the mountain for a while, until we can see Fairbow. A little after that we start down and make camp. Then it should just be a morning hike down into town, get there around lunch.” Andy nodded, pouring the water into the coffee crystals. “Good, and,” he hesitated for just a brief second, then went on, “are there any other things like the quagmire we got through yesterday? Anything more than just up, down, and around hiking?”

Mike flipped back through the pages, then forward again, “Uhhhhh, no. Doesn’t look like it. The hiking today isn’t going to be super exciting, it actually looks like it’ll kinda suck. We’ll be on rocks for a bit, above the treeline. But that’s about it, just straightforward mile-eating flat-foot hiking.”

He tossed the book back down on his pack and grabbed one of the bowls of oatmeal Andy had made. “Thank you chef.”

“No problem,” Andy shrugged.

They packed their camp away, changing into fresh clothes and securing their backpacks. Andy double checked they hadn’t missed anything while Mike ate a pack of fruit snacks. Andy nodded to Mike, “You ready soldier?”

Mike saluted casually, “Yes suh,” and stuffed the fruit stacks into his pocket, exchanging them for the guidebook and compass. He took a minute to orient himself, then started forward. He stopped himself after a couple steps, “It’s this way,” he said, pointing, “You lead.”

Andy looked up. “Thanks, thank you man,” he said, nodding as he passed Mike.

They kept their formation as they hiked, Mike giving Andy callouts when to change direction or to look for certain landmarks. They continued moving up, but they traveled slantwise along the mountainside, not towards the peak. The dirt and trees began to give way. The soft earth became thin and sandy, and peppered with rocks. Fewer tree roots snagged at their feet, replaced instead with misshapen

stepping stones, more designed to trip than to help. They hadn't needed their sunglasses in the dark of the shade, but as the trees became less towering and more like splintered telephone poles, they pulled them out against the brightness of the mountain sun.

They crossed over the treeline and were now walking on wide granite sheets. They hiked along a notch, formed by a natural angle of the mountainside. The wind here was cold and harsh, unhindered by any foliage or branches. To their right the mountainside rolled away, not in a drop, but a steep slope all the same. According to the guide, they only needed about a third of a mile up here, before they came down to the relatively flat floor of the forest again.

Mike was bunched up behind Andy, hunched against the wind as they walked. Andy paused and pointed with one of his hiking poles, "-it is! I see it!"

Mike looked up and caught the tail end of what Andy said. He looked to where Andy pointed, and whooped out. Down the mountain lay Fairbow, curled up like a dog in a sunpatch. It rested alongside old Deepdrop river; they could just make out a faint glimmer atop its languid waters. Andy looked back at Mike, "Pretty dang good! No mistakes, we did-" His eyes moved past Mike, focusing on something farther back along the notch in the rocks. He froze, his mouth hanging open. His eyes widened and his face paled, like the color of a rotted out tree that'd been sun-bleached years ago. Mike turned around and felt a cold plunge of terror rush down over him. His fingers tingled and feet went numb. He couldn't think, couldn't understand what it was that came slipping over the rocks towards them. His vision began to darken and throb, his hearing became muddled and low.

Some thing was making its way towards them. It bunched and sagged, drooped where it shouldn't and pinched in all the wrong spots. Patches of fur sprouted up out of fields of skin which would have been better to lay fallow. It was covered in reams of skin, but not its own, they couldn't have been. Curtains of it hung from its arms, draped and sagging. Some primeval tunic lay across its chest and belly, drooping down until it touched the tops of its thighs. Tanned sun-dried thighs that had seen the last of civilized clothing years ago.

It picked and slunk its way towards them, sometimes moving as if it were missing joints, sometimes as if it had too many.

Mike jerked back, taking a trembling step into Andy. He reached out and grabbed at Andy's shirt, grasping it as best he could with his numb fingers. He took another step back and stumbled, almost falling over the side. He looked back at the thing coming at them, terrified it would be upon them. But it had stopped, it was staring at them. It coughed, wet and gurgling, like a drain backed up with clogs of hair. A choking voice crawled out to them, "Yew got that buk?"

The voice was as gross as the freak. It oozed over Mike and Andy and slathered them down with its guttural syllables. Each word dripped with milky white drool and held the scent of rotten meat. The freak gibbered after it spoke, bubbles of gumball saliva bursting from its shredded lips. It raised one long finger and scratched its cheek, the nail as brown as dog shit.

He heard Andy retch and felt the warmth of his bile cover his hand, the scent of last night's Manwich wafting through the air. Andy was trembling. Mike dared to take his eyes off the freak long enough to eek past Andy on the notch. When he looked back, the freak had started towards them again, bobbing as it moved in its unnatural gait. Mike released Andy's shirt and grabbed his hand, pulling him forwards. Andy stumbled after Mike, hiking poles dragging along the ground, skittering as they went. Mike fought his urge to look back, to pin the freak in his dimming sight, pin the nightmare that was shambling after them. They had to run, that's what he knew. That thing was terror, it was a vestigial offshoot of humanity that existed out of its time. He kept moving, pulling Andy along, but they were going slow. Andy was barely holding himself upright, they moved at little faster than a trot. He pulled harder, moving quicker along the ditch. Faster, faster, quick before it gets you and pulls you down, under the earth and into itself, its layers of unending folds, its mounds, its reeking years.

He moved from a trot, to a gangling canter, then a run. "Faster Andy! Andy move your ass!" Andy didn't register Mike's words, his eyes were blank; but his body responded. They did move faster. Mike could see the start of the descent off the notch. Maybe they could make it, run, hide from the freak. They

ran along the notch, faster, faster. Mike could feel the start of the descent, just barely, but it was there, the ground beginning to slope downwards. Then Andy tripped. Mike heard the twang of a hiking pole as it bounced against the rockface and Andy went down, pulling Mike with him. They fell over the side of the notch, entangled in each other's packs, straps, and poles. The warmth of Andy's vomit spread across to Mike's shirt as they intertwined. Over and over they went, down the slope, until they slammed into a tree stump jutting out of the ground. Mike's pack cushioned their impact, but his head snapped back and smashed into the stump. His already fading vision cut off entirely, like radio static that's been suddenly yanked.

The world came back into focus for Andy. He'd been in a blur, moving without knowing where he was going, sounds washing over him without meaning. The distant recollection of running, then plunging down, down, over and over. He looked around and found himself on a slope, laying on top of Mike. His palms were gouged with dirt and needles, his knees were scored with gravel. He pulled his arms back out from underneath Mike's and he crawled away, kicking his legs free. He stayed on the ground and looked back up towards the notch they'd been following. The freak was standing there, looking down at him. Its stance was tense, as if it wanted to jump down the mountainside, wanted to get to Andy as fast as possible, no matter the danger to itself. It quivered with restraint, then stepped over the notch's edge and towards Andy. Andy quailed, he could feel the bile rising in his throat again, but he swallowed it and looked back to Mike, who lay still, arms splayed out against the stump. Sweat began running down Andy's face as he crawled, elbows and knees, over to Mike's side. He cupped Mike's head in his arms and rubbed his cheeks. "Mike!" He cried, "Mike! Wake up Mike! For fuck's sake wake the fuck up!"

The stink of terror curled into Andy's nose, he knew it was his own. He looked back up the slope, the freak was closer, sure footed and moving quickly. Andy pushed up onto his bleeding knees and began shaking Mike by the shoulders. "Fuuuuuuuuuuck!" Andy screamed, sweat in his eyes by now. He

heard a tumble of small rocks and snapped his head up to look at the freak. It was closing down on them now, a dark silhouette as it stood against the cold sky. It was close, Andy's chances of survival were slimming with every step it took. He looked down at Mike, his face was motionless and pale. He wasn't moving, he was limp in Andy's hands. Andy dropped Mike back to the ground and sprung to his feet, then turned to run down the slope. He took two leaping steps before the freak grabbed him by the back of his neck. He could feel its nails digging into his skin, they were raggedy and thin. Its strength was unquestionable, iron fingers and steel sinews gripped him and swung him around by the scruff of his neck. The freak threw him down on his back just below Mike's still unmoving body.

"You hav buk, I ceen you havit. Give id," it gurgled.

Andy shook his head, eyes and mouth gaping, breathing in the freak's rancorous odor. He didn't know what this thing wanted, couldn't understand what it was saying. The freak leapt on top of Andy and pulled his hand to its loose teeth and bit down into his palm. Blood spurted up onto the freak's face and down over Andy. He howled out in pain and thrashed back and forth. The freak made a small slurping sound. Andy writhed up, pushing against the freak, but it wriggled and kept atop him. It pinned his hands down and leaned in closer to his face.

"Book, now," it spoke again, this time slower.

"Book?! You said book?!" he screamed out.

"Book, book, book," it repeated, a nod accompanying each butchered word.

"What book! I don't have any fucking book!" But he did, he realized in a searing flash, he did!

"Yes! Book!" he nodded, throwing his head up and down. The freak looked at Andy, and cocked its head, "Buk."

"Yes!" Andy nodded, "Yes! Book!" and pointed at Mike. The freak shifted off of Andy, standing over him, watching. Andy gazed up at it, hypnotized by its congealing aura. He laid there until its leg flashed out and stomped on his belly. He curled up on his side from the shock and pain, and this time when the bile rose he let it spew out. It leaned down into his face, its small squinting eyes looming,

blocking out his vision entirely, like a blood moon eclipse. “Now, book,” it wheezed into Andy’s face.

His eyes watered and nose ran; he nodded, more shaking than intentionally moving. He started backpedaling, pushing himself up the slope while still looking at the freak, kicking dirt and twigs and stones as he pushed, like a backstroke double-amputee. He pushed into Mike’s legs, felt Mike’s boots underneath his shoulders. He held his breath when he turned away from the freak and started unzipping Mike’s pack. He rifled through the pockets, throwing clothing, bandaids, snacks, everything out onto the dirt. The book wasn’t there. Andy grabbed the backpack as Mike still wore it and whipped it back and forth, jostling Mike’s limp body. “It’s here! I know it is! Wait, just wait, I’ll find it!” He froze, head in his hands as he tried to think, where was that *goddamn book*. He spun Mike onto his side and lunged for his jacket pockets. There he found it, in Mike’s front pocket pinned against his body. He ripped it out and held it up like a holy cross, held it up and out to the freak that loomed over him. The freak snatched it and tossed it into a hairy scrotum-like pocket on one of the pelts hanging from its shoulders. From another pouch it pulled out two oblong shapes, powdered with dirt and twigs. It dropped them onto Andy’s chest, they landed with a dull thud, staining his shirt. “Go, leave. Don’t reechurn. No one reechurn. Take him, make shure.”

It kicked Andy out of the way, as a cruel master would a whimpering dog. Andy fell face-first, mouth full of dirt. One of the oblong objects lay in front of his eyes. He could smell it now. It was shit; their shit, he realized. The freak had dug up their turds. It crouched vulture-like over Mike and pulled him out of his backpack, then hoisted him over its shoulder, in a perverted fireman’s carry. It started up towards the notch, its calves rippling and bunching, like maggots squirming under plastic wrap. Andy stared, stared, stared.

It reached the notch and went back the way it came, out of Andy’s sight. Andy sat, alone, looking up the mountainside. He closed his eyes and felt relief flood through him. He was alive. He lived. Then in his mind’s eye he saw the image of Mike flopping over the freak’s shoulder. Of him being carried off up the

mountain, the freak slobbering as it went. Oh, Mike. Mike! He'd abandoned Mike, he'd tried to run, he'd been piss-baby Andy and left his best friend to be killed. Then he'd ransacked his body to save himself. Why the fuck would he save himself, what good was he worth? What person would do what he'd done. He collapsed onto the dirt, face down, sobbing, arms covering his head, pushing himself deeper into the dirt to hide his shame. He cried and wept, twigs and dirt rubbing into his eyes and lips. He lay there, ashamed to be alive.

Andy woke to the freezing wind skating over his skin. The sun had started to fall behind the mountain and shadows were sprouting up through the trees. He'd fallen asleep. Checking his watch, he saw that he'd spent hours there on the slope. He sat back on his haunches and checked himself. He had surface scrapes on his knees and elbows, and his stomach was sore and bruising, but otherwise he was okay. He stood up, feeling the dirt lodged in his knees scratch and itch. Without knowing what else to do, he set his and Mike's packs together. He got out disinfectant swabs and gauze and wrapped his injuries. Once done, he looked back up at the notch, silent and cold in the graying light. *"Go, leave. Don't reechurn. No one reechurn. Take him, make shure,"* the freak's words echoed in his head. Leave, and don't come back. The freak had taken Mike, as a hostage, Andy supposed. But was Mike even alive? Andy hadn't seen him move after their fall. But that didn't matter, he needed to get Mike back, rescue him from that gutterdwelling thing. He had to, he couldn't abandon Mike. Andy had already done that once, he wasn't going to do it again. He was Mike's friend, true as there could be, or so he had said. So now's the time to own it, be that friend, take off and do something about it. But do what? Go after him, now. If he went into town it'd be at least a day before he could find help and get a rescue party back here. Andy suspected he knew where the freak took Mike, down the path in the bulrushes. He shivered as he thought about where the path might have taken them if they'd kept following it yesterday. The freak's den, Andy nodded. Even if he was wrong, it was worth a shot.

Andy pulled his survival knife out and strapped it to his belt-loops. He pulled on a sweatshirt, beanie, and headlamp. As he swung on his pack he slapped his forehead in disbelief, Mike's sat phone! Andy dug through the pile of Mike's gear that he'd assembled until he came up with the phone. He powered it on, waiting for the Garmin login screen to clear. "0/0 credits. Activate before use," flashed on the screen. Andy couldn't believe it. Mike had charged the phone, he'd packed the phone, but he hadn't actually activated it! Useless, it was fucking useless! Andy slammed it down on the ground. Well, that settled it. He'd go after the freak, find its lair, and save Mike. He didn't know how, but he knew he had to. A feeling more than duty, more than friendship, compelled Andy. This was Mike, who'd saved him in childhood and carried him to college. They'd taken swim lessons together, stolen beer together, even jerked off together behind his parents' shed. There wasn't another option, Mike needed him, and so he would go. He squared his shoulders, and started back up towards the notch. He climbed with his head held high, looking up the slope. He climbed quickly and assuredly, he knew where he was going and what he needed to do. He'd show that whining, dog-fucking, miserable piece-of-shit freak what it had coming. He thumbed his straps up higher and climbed.

When Mike opened his eyes the world was upside-down. Blood hummed in his ears and his vision squirmed around the edges. His head was bouncing against the freak's thigh as it cantered. Its skin was dry and rough, his cheek was raw where it'd been continually slapped against it. The freak was huffing and grunting as it went, it was dark but the freak moved quickly between trees and over rocks and roots. The pounding in his head grew louder and his vision darker, until he slipped away, down, down into unconsciousness.

His next awakening wasn't so gentle. With a heavy thud the freak unloaded Mike from its shoulder onto the dirt. The sky was dawning, morning mists still hanging in place as the sun began to stretch. The freak stood up from its hunched stoop, stretching and rolling its shoulders. It seemed to elongate beyond

sense, taller and leaner than Mike could account for based off what he'd seen of it earlier. It glanced down at him over its shoulder, and, still looking at Mike, shifted its tunic and began peeing down the slope. When the stream died off, the freak didn't jiggle the last drops away, it let them drip down onto its legs. Mike grimaced, but the freak didn't seem to care. It squatted and pulled a leg of gristle from one of its folds, chomping and sucking as it ate. Mike looked away, his head pounded less now, but the sight of saliva and the freak's tongue pushing between its gapped teeth was enough to make him nauseous. The freak tossed the bone away and stood up, making a hand waving gesture at Mike as he did so. It gestured again, impatiently. Did the freak want him to get up? It took a step towards Mike, and he shot up as quick as he could, head pulsing in reward for moving so quickly. It pointed, and motioned at Mike to get moving. He did, taking shambling steps in the indicated direction. The freak came on behind him, shadowing his movements close enough that he could feel the freak's breath when it grunted, which it often did. The freak was tired, that much Mike could tell. It wasn't super-human, carrying Mike up and down mountain slopes had taken its toll. Maybe if the right chance came along he'd be able to slip away, away from whatever this thing had planned. True, if he did get away he'd be at the mercy of the mountain wilds, but the devil-you-know.

Andy must've gone out to Fairbow for help, or called in on the sat phone Mike figured. They'd been able to see the town when the freak came upon them, even without the guidebook Andy should be able to make it the last portion of the hike.

They kept on that way, traversing ground that Mike didn't recognize from their trek in. As they walked, the sky lightened, and cool breezes pushed away the rolling fog. The gentle air served to soothe Mike's aching head, he felt more and more revived as they went. The freak seemed to have dropped back a bit, Mike could no longer feel its rancid breath on his neck. He slowly looked over his shoulder, head down, subtle. The freak gave him a slap on the back of his head, making him stumble forwards. The slap was quick, without a windup to justify its strength. Mike touched his temples and tried to focus on the wheeling ground as

he walked. The freak was strong, despite however tired it seemed to be. Mike lowered his hands and clenched them into fists. Well, if this thing was the devil he didn't know, he was the same to it. He wouldn't roll over and let this creature do whatever it pleased with him, he'd make it bleed, eventually.

Back over the mountain they trudged, down slopes and across fields of dirt between brooding pines, the freak pushing its glowering prisoner on ahead.

Andy was on the verge of losing his sense of direction. He'd hiked as far and long as he could through the night, but after falling and almost twisting his ankle for the third time, he conceded that a lame Andy wouldn't be any help to Mike. He'd foregone the tent and lay in his sleeping bag, exposed to the cheerless night sky. He'd stuck a branch into the dirt, pointing the direction that he was traveling before going to sleep. He'd awoken to the cold morning light, rolled his sleeping bag, and unwrapped a fruit bar for his breakfast. Now that he'd been following the stick's direction for the past few hours, he didn't trust it very much. None of this seemed familiar. His confidence was draining quickly; Mike had been the guide, he'd just followed Mike's directions during the hike in. But when in doubt, go with your gut. If he chose another direction now, he'd only lose himself even more. Just keep going, he told himself. It should take another half day or so before hitting the hill that overlooked the bulrushes. Don't turn around yet, give it more time. Give *Mike* more time. Wandering in the forest was nothing compared to what that hellspawn must be doing to him. In his worst thoughts Andy could see Mike's scalp hanging off the freak's back, threaded into its scabrous and insane clothing, nestled between patches of fur. He gripped his poles tighter and moved faster, chasing after Mike and his captor, fighting down dark and sickening imaginings.

He strained his senses for any sound, any movement that seemed out of place. He side-eyed every waving branch, he was suspicious of squirrels scrambling along trees. He jumped and spun around, heart pounding, as a pinecone fell and ricocheted off a rock, scattering its seeds. He kept moving, if he stopped he'd lose his momentum. He had to fight to keep the image of the freak

out of his head, out of his waking sight. If he let his guard down he could see clear as day the freak stepping out from behind a looming pine tree just in front of him. The pressure of his backpack on his shoulders would morph into its ratcheting grip, grabbing him, swinging him around and throwing him to the ground. What could he do against strength like that? He didn't know. His only plan was to find Mike, find out if he was still alive. If he was, Andy would figure out the next part. The freak had to sleep sometime, maybe he could ghost Mike away in the night? But then the freak would just find them again, the same way it'd followed them before. Andy shuddered at the thought of the freak following them, stalking them as they hiked in. Did it listen to their conversations, when they made dinner and went to bed was it hovering just out of sight, like some infernal specter? If he did need to slip away with Mike, they'd have to stop it from following them. What that meant Andy didn't know. There were too many unknowns to come up with any sort of real plan. But there was one thing Andy did know; despite its horrifying appearance, and revolting presence, it hadn't killed them. It could've, Andy knew that for certain. If it'd wanted to it could've killed them both. But instead it'd let Andy go free, and supposedly taken Mike alive. It also hadn't attacked Mr. Anders when he'd come through initially. So what had Mike and Andy done to deserve its attention?

Andy became lost in thought, mulling over the unknowns as he walked. It wasn't until he felt the ground start to rise and rise did he come out of his dark reverie. He glanced around, then up before him at the slope. It was the hill! It looked familiar: these trees, their spacing, the slice of view out over the mountain. He was positive, this was the hill where they'd slept the first night. Which meant he was close to the bulrushes, and the stepstone path they'd followed on the way in. Andy hunkered down and collapsed his hiking poles, then palmed his knife. He began moving up the hill again, slowly, quietly. Each shift of his pack caused sweat to break out on his brow, each shuffling step made him cringe. As he reached the crest he lowered onto his stomach, crawling forward until he could peak his head up to scout the hill top. There was the fallen tree they'd pitched their tent against. He looked about, considering every shadow intently, waiting to

confirm that each gnarled root wasn't a tanned leg or pockmarked forearm. He sweated and breathed into the dirt as he lay, moving only his eyeballs. Grasping his knife with white knuckles, he tossed a stone onto the hill top. Nothing moved. He waited a minute, then two. The mountain lay still, the wind soughing as it went.

He wriggled out of his pack, then began edging around to the side. He stayed on his stomach, rising to his hands and knees only to clamber over bushes and rocks. When he'd inched his way to behind the fallen tree, he rose to his feet, knees and ankles aching with the slowness of his movements. He peered over the withered trunk, again considering all that did, or didn't, move. He soft-stepped around it, moving towards the open hill top. The last few steps were agonizing. He fought against his instincts to stop, turn away, hide! He shook and wiped sweat from his eyes as he came out into the open, stooped over, ready to defend himself, or run. But there was nothing, heavy silence lay all around him. He stood up, stretched his shoulders, and felt a grin crack across his face. Damn! He opened and clenched his fists with nervous energy, then shut his eyes and screwed his face up, tensing his whole body. With a breath, he released himself and put his knife back in its sheath. He grabbed his pack, then looked out, scanning for the field of bulrushes. There it lay, at the base of the hill, just as he remembered. He couldn't see the path, but he knew it was there, like a snake lying in wait.

The sun was overhead, it was around noon. He figured if this was where the freak had taken Mike, they'd already be there. They had a head start, and surely the freak knew how to travel this mountain better than Andy. If Andy were to go charging in now, he'd be walking straight into the lion's den, or worse, the freak's. He needed more information, he needed a plan, and he needed to rest. He had no illusions about matching his strength against the freak's. If it came to a head on fight, he'd lose. Best to rest now, no sense in wasting time. He glanced around at the hill top. But not here, not where it knew they'd been before. He started down the opposite side of the hill from where he'd crawled up, keeping to the seam where the hill jutted out from the backing mountainside. He went about halfway down, such that he could still keep an eye on the bulrushes, then went

about burrowing into the thick piles of needles that layered the ground. He gathered fallen branches and piled needles on either side of himself, placing his back against the seam, so that he could face the bulrushes and lay on his side. The branches and needles were musty, he covered his mouth and nose as the dust in the air settled. He was shaded from the afternoon sun, and could feel his adrenaline draining. He was tired, he was exhausted; he fought against his drooping eyelids. He wanted to rest, yes, but also keep watch on the bulrushes. It was a losing battle. Despite the itchy needles and dirt tickling his nose, his eyelids fell closed, and he passed out in his dusty mountain pocket.

Mike lay in darkness. He was awake, on his side, hands tied together behind his back. His legs were thonged together as well, leather strips wrapping around his thighs down to his ankles. He was in a dirt room, thrown there by the freak.

That morning, after the freak had stopped carrying Mike, they came back upon the bulrush patch he and Andy had crossed on their initial ascent. The freak prodded him towards it, up until its very edge. As Mike was about to push into the reeds, the freak gave him a slight shove, pointing to go along the perimeter, until they came upon the stone path. Mike shivered at the sight of it. He could imagine the freak laying down in the water-soaked mud, watching he and Andy walk past, eyes just above the wallowing surface, close enough to reach out and grab them. The freak pushed him again and he stepped out onto it, following it through the fronds. They came to the bend where he and Andy had left the path, then past it. It led them to the far edge of the rushes, then out of the muddy wallow. No longer stone-lined, its edges were marked with dried branches. Some effort had been put into clearing the path itself of stones and needles. It led up, into gentle slopes of densely packed pines. It weaved between the crowded trees, sometimes even having large stones placed as steps up the hillside. Despite being morning, the forest seemed to grow darker as they pushed inwards; the air became thicker, harder to breathe. It smelled of must, like opening a box of great-grandma's antique clothes in the attic. His legs ached, they'd been moving without stop since

dawn. The freak had kept close to Mike this whole time, close enough it'd sometimes step on the back of Mike's boot if he stumbled, scratching it with its cracked toenails. But the freak didn't seem intent on hurting him. It was rough, definitely rough, but not cruel. Mike needed to get some intel, figure out what kind of thing it was that'd captured him. He clenched his hands into fists, hesitated, and said, "Hey."

The freak didn't respond. It kept its pace, pushing onwards.

"Hey, how much further?"

"Shudup keep mooving," the words streamed out with a flat intonation.

Mike had to concentrate to understand them through the freaks gurgling voice, but he could do it.

"Where are you taking me?"

The freak responded quickly, with a slap to the back of Mike's head. Mike cringed, expecting more abuse, but none came. They kept moving, and Mike kept his questions to himself.

As they walked through the dimness of the shaded path, Mike saw glimpses of sunlight ahead. The path took them closer, and Mike could see there was a clearing. Through the trees he could make out some sort of hovel. Its shape was erratic, jutting and angular, but also mounded in some areas. They came on, until the path ended and deposited them in front of the structure. It was a shelter constructed of sticks and branches, made without design or plan. It had the mounded shape of a hut, with an ugly entrance in front. It backed up to the gentle slope of the mountain, seemingly continuing into it. It was forlorn and miserable, the house of those forgotten by humanity, and who'd forgotten it themselves in return. The freak stepped in front of Mike and grabbed his wrist, pulling him towards the entrance. Mike panicked. If he went in there, he'd never get out. It was the freak's domain, it ruled there, sure as shit. It was like being pulled towards the maw of a bottom-dweller fish, its open mouth waiting, waiting for him to fall inside. He pulled against the freak, dug his feet into the ground and strained, grabbing the arm the freak held and tugging back on it. The freak looked

back, then *yanked* him forward. He fell on his stomach, arm still locked in the freak's grip. It started forward again, dragging him.

"No! Please no! Don't take me in there! Let me go! I'll do anything, I won't say anything! For *fucks-sake* don't take me in there!"

The freak rolled its shoulders and stooped as it stepped inside. Mike's thrashing legs hooked onto the edges of the entrance as the freak pulled him forwards. The freak turned back and grabbed Mike by the crotch, to get a better grip and heave his body forwards. Mike shrieked out in pain and went limp. He was aware of the freak shuffling deeper into the hovel, until the floor of dry branches and needles changed to dirt. The freak rolled him onto his side, he could feel his arms and legs being bound. It finished, then tugged at the restraints before shambling away.

Mike came back to himself. His groin throbbed and he felt nauseous, but his head was clear. He could hear the freak moving about nearby, in an adjacent room. The glow of sunlight illuminated the dirt hallway that led to his chamber. He rolled onto his back and looked around at the walls and ceilings. They were of dark earth, small roots and twigs peeking through, like hair. He felt as if he were in a tarantula nest, waiting to be stuck and devoured. He lay there, silently, not wanting to invite any more pain from the freak, as the day turned and shadows lengthened.

The hallway was black now, same as his cell. He could no longer hear the shuffling sounds of the freak. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness long ago, but there was no light for them to see by. He was on his stomach, he'd shifted from side to back to front to side again, to keep his limbs from falling asleep. He rolled back to his side, and inched his way up, towards where he thought a wall was. His legs were bound together, so that instead of separate legs he had just one long gangling appendage below the waist. He inched forwards, not wanting to attract the freak's attention. He'd been ignored ever since he was deposited in the dirt room, which was fine by him; he didn't want to change that now. His head pushed into soft dirt, and he pulled back. One wall found. He began to follow it, gauging

the perimeter of the room, not sure what he was looking for or trying to find out. He ran into a second wall. He stretched his body along the wall he'd already found. With his head against one wall, his feet couldn't touch an opposite facing one. Mike was a bit less than six feet tall, so the room was larger than that in at least one dimension. Mike wondered at that. That's a lot of dirt to move, why? Was the room for its captured prisoners, to preserve them until it was ready to chop them up and eat them? Was it a storeroom it'd emptied out? Or was it always empty, and the freak just wanted a two-bed condo to its name? He turned and started worming his way down the wall he'd just found. This time he ran into the next corner quickly. There wasn't enough space for him to stretch out, he instead could only wedge his head and somewhere a bit past his knees. He turned again and moved down what he expected to be the second long-wall. As he shifted his way forward, the wall suddenly fell away from him. There was nothing to his right, he'd found the room's entrance. He felt caresses of air tumbling over him. He shrank back, terrified of the unknown. Was the freak standing there, looking at him? He rolled away, over and over until he hit the opposite wall, then cowered there. Dear god, don't let it be there, don't let it come into this room, leave me alone please yes, leave me *alone!* He kicked forwards to the adjoining wall, then lay still, comforted by the security of the corner. He closed his eyes and tensed his legs, waiting for the fear to pass.

After some minutes it did, he relaxed as he felt it ebb out of his body. He opened his eyes and began feeling his way along the wall again. He turned one corner, then another, until he came to the entrance. He turned to look through it, and could make out a spot of color that wasn't totally black. He stared at the spot, trying to understand what he was looking at. It was like standing inside a train tunnel, squinting through to the other side. The spot seemed to float in the blackness, the one thing Mike could focus on. He strained his ears, listening for the freak. He heard nothing but the forest nightscape, the wind in the trees and the ever-present hum of insects and birds. He steeled himself, then began wriggling into the opening, towards the hovering not-black spot. He moved as silently as he could, shuffling forwards on his stomach, reaching with one shoulder, then the

other. His collar funnelled dirt down his shirt, it was cold on his chest and stomach. The spot was growing larger and more fixed in Mike's sight. It was the entrance to the freak's house, he realized. He was looking down the hallway, through the entrance out to the night-shrouded forest. And he was getting closer, closer to the entrance with every kick of his feet. He moved forward, and his face was no longer over a dirt floor. Instead, he was making his way onto the stick and pine-needle flooring of the front room of the shack. The branches shifted with him as he crawled over them, rolling and scraping against each other. The shifting wood was little more than a whisper, but to Mike it was like the screech of sheet metal. He winced with every shift, but kept inching forwards. He could feel his hips shift off the dirt, then his knees. The doorway loomed over Mike now, it filled his vision, he'd almost made it through the train tunnel, just another few feet. Then he felt the gentle touch of a hand on his back.

He flinched and flipped onto his back, shouting out in terror and rage, "Aaaah!" The fear that had abated earlier came rushing back over him, as if it'd only been held back by a sluice gate that now was rent open. He kicked as well as he could with his bound legs, pushing towards the doorway, away from the invisible freak in the darkness. The hand came again, this time around his throat. Hot, dirty, fingers gripped him and held him in place. He thrashed back and forth, but couldn't shake free. The hand tightened, and Mike suddenly was struggling for breath. He fought and raged, but he could feel his head pounding now. He tried to breathe in deeply, but only managed to steal a thin stream of air. He kept fighting, but knew he was moving slower, weaker. Then he couldn't breathe at all. His ears pounded and he could see sparkling blots of colors in the dark. In his ear the freak hissed, "You, stay, you, live."

It released its grip on his neck, and Mike could breathe again. He inhaled a huge breath, and hacked it all back out. He took another breath, then another, and the drumming in his head dulled. He realized he was moving, the freak was dragging him back down the hallway by his ankle. It pulled him back into his cell, and he felt a piece of leather being pulled down over his face. He tossed his head as the freak pushed it down around his neck. He felt it tighten, not enough to stop

his breathing, but enough that he couldn't slip out of it. He heard the pounding of a stick into the dirt floor, near his head. It sounded like a rock was being used as a hammer, pushing the stick deeper and deeper.

"Stay," said the freak. Mike heard it step out of the room, back down the hallway.

He swallowed, feeling the leather bob around his Adam's apple. He lifted his head up from the dirt, and pulled back slightly. He felt the tug of the leather around his neck. It was a leash. He'd been fucking leashed, like a dog. He let his head fall down to the dirt. Holy God, he was going to die here. Die in the back room of a mud-fucker's hut, in the woods, with a leash around his neck. He let his tears fall freely, streaking dirty trails down his cheeks.

Andy opened his dirt-crusted eyes to the mountain nightscape. His burrow of needles was cold, and his body ached. He stifled a yawn and resisted the urge to stand and stretch. He oriented himself, looking around the slope of the hill. He counted to thirty; everything was still. He glanced up at the night sky, and cursed himself for wasting so much time. He rose and twisted, cracking his back. He pulled his pack on and looked down at the bulrushes. The moon was dark, he could see the barest glint of reflection from the water. He began shuffling down the hill, prodding with his hiking poles as he went. He went doubly slow, once to avoid tripping in the dark, and twice to avoid the freak's attention. Prod, step one, step two, prod, prod, then step one again. His thighs burned with his controlled movements. Step one, step two. His pace was too slow, he'd never make any progress. He clenched his jaw and pressed his lips together, he set his pack down before him. He rummaged through the smaller of its pockets until he found his headlamp. Holding the lamp facedown in the backpack, he turned it on. It shined bright white light around its edges. He jabbed at the mode button until the light swapped to red, and lowered the brightness. He swung on his pack and crept forward, holding the lamp low, pointed at his feet. He was taking a risk, but he had to. He could move just as quietly, but much faster now that he could see.

He came to the perimeter of the bulrushes. Somewhere along this side he and Mike had cut through, leaving the freak's path behind. There was no way he'd find that spot again. He turned and followed the edge of the rushes, the path must come out somewhere, and he'd find it when it did.

The perimeter of the rushes was a mire of mud and dirt. Andy did his best to stay back and walk on the firm soil that surrounded the bulrushes, but the boundary was muddled and he sometimes stepped off into it. When he lifted his boots they made a sucking noise that made his palms sweaty. In the red light the bulrushes swayed ominously, leering at Andy as he snuck past them. He began to feel that if he was too loud they'd wake up and pull him in and down, down into the grasping mud.

The rushes fell away from him as he came to a corner. He rounded it and in the weak light he saw the path, just as he was about to step onto it. It came out of the shadow-soaked bulrushes and led up, into the sloping hills of the forest.

Andy's heart was pounding, he could feel sweat dripping down his back despite the night's chill. He was standing along the freak's trail. Visions of the freak standing there in the darkness beyond Andy's light flashed in his mind. The dripping ghoulish face he'd seen on the notch was terrifying enough in daylight, but at night, Andy's own subconscious turned on him. He stood, fighting his urge to turn back, run back to town and get help there, let the professionals handle this. But he couldn't. Mike was somewhere in this forest, and Andy could help him. He grasped his hands together to stop their shaking, and looked down at the path. The cords in his neck stood taut; he shut off the light. He took a first step, then another, flinching against the freak in the dark. He followed the path up into the dark, gentle hills, away from the trickling water of the bulrushes.

I'm taking the kids and going. I won't say where, you can take that up with the court. I told you over and over, but you didn't listen, so I'm going now. I've made my efforts, for too long I did, which is more than you can say. Happy new years, 2006 is already looking up.

The forest was in grayscale; black trunks hung with clumping needles against a coal-works sky. The freak stood in every shadow, watching as Andy came. He felt like a fly walking along a spider's web, every step taking him closer to the center, where it sat, waiting. He stooped to keep the path in his sight, just barely able to make it out. When he overshot, he'd step into a graveyard of dead leaves and branches, which cracked and groaned in the silence. He kept on, one hand up in front of him, one hand behind grasping his pocket knife, like a murderous point guard. He crept deeper, hoping with every step to find some sign of Mike. His breath curled out in front of him, then fell back over his face as he stepped through it.

He looked up from the ground to stretch his neck, and saw flickering light through the trees. He stopped dead. It was a fire, in the distance. He couldn't see it directly, only the dancing light playing on the black-iron tree trunks. He shifted his head, trying to catch a glimpse, but couldn't. He turned around and went back down the trail, quick as he dared, checking over his shoulder as he went. When he could just barely still see the light, he stepped off the trail, and circled back towards it. He used his hiking poles to brush branches to the side before stepping forward. One step at a time he made his way to the side of the light. He could see now the fire was in a clearing, just ahead. He came closer, until he could peek around a tree into the clearing directly.

As he looked, he clenched his jaw and pressed his fists into the trunk, pushing its bark deep into his cracked and bleeding knuckles. In the clearing was a dead-branch shack, with a bonfire in front of it. The freak was sitting on the ground, staring into the fire. Crackling embers shot past its head without notice. It sat motionless, unblinking. Its legs were splayed apart, elbows on its knees, like a child at story-time. The freak was holding something, rubbing it with its stubby thumbs. The light revealed the freak's folds and wrinkles, casting cresting shadows over scabby troughs. Andy wandered his eyes over the freak, soaking it in. This would be his chance to immunize himself. Look at it, don't flinch. Wallow in it.

It was old, used-up. Its lean, tan, limbs were covered in liver spots. Its underarms sagged, at odds with the strength Andy knew it had. With the freak's legs splayed Andy could see it was a man, but just barely. If there was baseball on Noah's ark, it would be swinging little league. He looked at its face as it matched eyes with the heart of the fire. It was blank, fish eyed. Was it in some sort of trance? Maybe it had a psychotic condition, and this was his chance to jump it when it couldn't defend itself. But then the freak sprung up and held the item in its hands over the fire, arms outstretched as if performing a sacrifice. Andy could make it out now; it was a shirt, a tan canvas button down. Andy inventoried Mike's clothing. That wasn't Mike's, he was positive. Was it some other hiker's that the freak had killed? It stood like that for a minute, then two, its arms tensed and legs flexed. Then it jerked back and threw the shirt on the ground, stomping and twisting it. With a final look at the shirt, it padded into the shack.

Andy breathed out, leaning against the tree. So, this was the freak's hidey-hole. That meant Mike was almost certainly inside. He was close, so fucking close. But that freak was still there, and Andy knew he couldn't match it in a straight fight. He had to take it out, or injure it somehow. He butted his head against the tree trunk. Think! Think! What could he do, what did he know? Andy stepped through the information he had.

The freak had made a path through the bulrushes. It'd followed them through the mountains, waiting until they were in sight of Fairbow to attack. It'd specifically taken their guidebook, and told Andy to leave, and not come back. For no one to come back. It didn't kill Mike, maybe, but instead took him hostage. And then that display at the fire he'd just seen. So what? His breathing slowed, he held his head pressed against the tree bark. Did it just, just want to be alone? He frowned. Did that make sense? It was an absolute monstrosity of a human, it was a walking gargoyle, yes. But it could have killed them, and didn't. Yes. It left him alive on purpose. With Andy alive, Andy could lie, come up with some story about what'd happened to Mike. But with both of them dead, the mountain would be crawling with search and rescue. But then why do anything at all, why not just leave them alone? He paused, thinking. Then he knew; he hung

his head. The book. The fucking book. It must've seen it, and knew that meant others would be following. First Mr. Anders, then them. It wanted to nip the train of daytime hikers in the bud, stop others from coming through its home, walking on its path, shitting in its woods. Jesus Christ. Mike was in that shulking crone's lair because it wasn't a people-person.

He needed to act now. He'd already left Mike with that thing for a whole day. Maybe it wasn't a mindless killer, and wasn't going to gobble Mike up for an after-tv snack, but he didn't want to bank on it, not with Mike's life at stake. He peered back at the shack. From what he could see it had just the entrance in front, the back butted up against, maybe into, the hill itself. His eyes flicked from the fire, to the shirt, to the shack. He munched on them, mulling them over. There was something there, he was sure of it. A web of connections began to form, and he'd got it. It wasn't a good plan, it left a lot up to chance, but he'd do it, for Mike. He shrugged his pack off and sat down on it, settling in for a long wait.

The freak stood over him, Mike could see its outline against the fire. He could see its fingers twitch and rock without pattern. He strained his neck to look up at the freak from his stomach. What did it want? Was it gloating, proud to have him tied up and helpless? It squatted and reached out. He shied away, but its hand went past his face to finger his shirt. It rubbed and tugged at it, then let it drop. It chuffed, and plodded down the hallway. He heard as it flopped down onto the wooden floor. Bedtime for bozo. What had the freak meant by touching his shirt? It was almost affectionate. Mike shuddered, he didn't want to think about what might happen to him if the freak began to like him a little too much. His head dropped to the hard dirt. Mike closed his eyes and groped towards sleep, looking for escape in any form it would come.

The fire was low now, more smoke than flames. Andy had been shivering from the cold, but as he pulled himself up his arms began to jitter with adrenaline. He used his hiking pole to wipe clean a patch of dirt, and stepped forwards. As he made his way into the clearing, he felt like a blind man with his pole extended out

in front of him, except he could see exactly where he was going. It was like a blind man hearing the oncoming rush of traffic and deciding, “Fuck it, I’ll cross anyways.”

He crept towards the dying fire. He kept his eyes locked on the shack’s entrance as he brush-stepped across the clearing. It was totally black, he couldn’t see anything inside. He was vulnerable, he knew that. If the freak was looking out, it’d be able to see him under the night sky. His only hope was that it was asleep. A day of kidnapping and backwoods hiking would tire out most people, even inbreds, he imagined. But he wasn’t sure, and he knew if it leapt out from its looming shack at him he’d be done for, no two ways about it.

The fire was just one step away now, a final brush of the ground took him there. He fished a smoldering log from the edge and stretched to grab the shirt the freak had flung down. He slipped it on over his own. This was the most farfetched part of his plan, but it didn’t hurt anything to try.

He retraced his steps, and swung around to come at the shack from the back. He approached the abutting hill. His palms grew clammy with sweat as he gripped the log and his knife. He reflexively moved to wipe them, but caught himself. With each step he held his breath. He could imagine the creaks and groans inside the shack, the freak looking up and tracking his progress, licking its lips. Maybe it’d thrust its sodden claws up through the dirt, and pull him down screaming into its den. He wiped the sweat from his brow.

He angled to where the shack’s roof met the hill, exhaled, and set the log against it. It smoldered and sputtered, but didn’t catch. He steadied himself, then sprinkled handfuls of needles on top. They curled into flame, and he pushed them deep into the roof’s wooden shingles. The twigs and accumulated needles embedded in the roof flared up, and the fire had taken hold. He stepped back from the flames to clear his vision, and waited. The flames grew, spreading out from the initial burn. They cracked and spluttered, curling their way across the roof. He waited for the freak. Almost half the roof was on fire now, but still no movement from inside the shack. Was it not in there? Had he messed up? Then he saw it! It sprung out of the entrance and scrambled to the side of the shack, where the

flames were thickest. It held a blanket of sagging skin and beat at them, once, twice. It was perfect. Andy screamed and launched himself at the freak, every pound of Candy Andy landing dead on. The freak crumpled to the ground, Andy heard its breath whoosh as it fell. He stabbed down and felt his knife bite into something soft, malleable. He stabbed again, and again; his blood raged with an anger he'd never felt before. An anger to get even, to dominate, fuck the little guy. A claw came out of the darkness at his face and gouged his eye. He reared back and flung his hand over his weeping socket, he could feel warm blood seeping down his face. Then he was pushed up and *off* the freak, landing on his back. He swung his knife blindly in front of him. He felt the freak grab his arm, then his neck; then he was being lifted up. The freak slammed his back into the shack, his toes just barely touching the ground. He could feel the heat of the fire burning above his head. The smoke stung his good eye as he opened it. The freak's face was awash in the blazing-red firelight. Its black eyes stared in fury at Andy, burning like coals embedded in its rotten leather face. He struggled against the freak's grip, but it was useless. His head felt faint, under the roar of the fire was the building sound of blood drumming in his ears.

“Andy! Andy! I'm in here!”

Andy could just barely hear Mike call his name. So could the freak; it shifted its gaze for a moment towards the shack's wall. As it did, it noticed Andy's shirt. Its eyes widened and grip slackened, it crawled its eyes over the shirt, then up to Andy's. As their eyes met, just for a moment, Andy saw past the freak's horrific outward appearance. Its eyes carried loss, and pain. There was a vulnerability there carried by the world's outcasts. Not fit to live in society, but still altogether too human for what'd befallen the freak.

Andy plunged his knife into its chest, just under the collarbone. It howled and fell back, writhing on the ground. Andy collapsed to his knees, panting against the burning sensation in his lungs. As his vision cleared, he scrambled up, looking for the freak. It was just feet away from him. He stumbled to its side. It was lost in its own pain, howling and rolling, unaware of him. He planted himself and kicked the freak's head with all his strength, a real kickball slugger. It

snapped forward, then rebounded. The freak stopped writhing and lay still, its body flickering in the blazing shadows.

“Andy! Help!”

Andy turned away from the freak to the shack’s entrance. “Mike! Where are you!?” he tried to shout, but let out a hoarse wheeze instead. He stooped and entered the shack. From the burning roof he could see a pile of skins on the floor and crude furniture lashed together. Against the far wall lay a pair of tattered hiking boots, torn at the seams, next to a hallway leading back into the hill. Mike’s voice had come from that direction. He thundered down it into the backroom, nearly tripping on Mike laying on the ground. “Mike! Mike! I’m here now, oh Mike I’ve got you, I’m here now,” he said, as he bent down and cradled him. “Andy!” wept Mike, his words hot and wet, “Oh my god Andy, you didn’t leave me, thank you, thank you.” They lay there, resting in each other’s presence for a moment. Mike was alive, Andy had come back for him; they were together. They released their fear into each other, their terror, each absorbing and wiping the others away. “Okay,” Mike said, sniffing, “Now get me outta here. It tied me to that stick there,” nodding at it. Andy placed Mike’s head on the ground and stood over the stick. He gripped it, rocking it back and forth, loosening it, then full-body heaving it out of the ground. “Okay, let’s go now,” said Andy. “I can’t, I’m all tied up too, hands to feet,” Mike replied.

“Jesus, that fuck. Damn, I don’t have my knife, I’ll have to drag you out, before this shithole collapses on us.”

Andy grabbed Mike’s ankles and dragged him down the hallway. The front of the shack was burning, but the floor was intact, the fire having just started to spread from the roof down to the walls. Andy dragged Mike out, out of the shack into the open air, into the clearing.

“You okay?” he asked Mike.

“Yea, I’m fine, just get me out of these things,” he said, struggling against his bindings.

Andy bent down, looking at them with his good eye. They were knotted, and strong. “I’m gonna have to cut them. Fuck, I have to get my knife; I’ll be back.”

He rose and went to the shack’s corner, peering around its edge. The freak was gone. It wasn’t where he’d left it, it wasn’t anywhere. In the dancing light he saw a glint of metal. He found his knife, bloodied, lying on the dirt. His fear, so recently dissolved, began to mount. Fuck, it was still out there. Jesus fucking Christ the freak was out there in the dark, pissed off, probably looking at him right now. Gooseflesh broke out across his body. He trembled as he picked up the knife and came back to Mike. He knelt to cut his bindings and said, “Mike, we’ve got to get the fuck out of here. I don’t know where the freak is. It’s hurt, but it’s out there somewhere. We’ve got to leave.”

Mike’s face turned ashen. He rubbed his freed wrists and brought his knees to his chest. “It’s out there? What do you mean? Where is it?”

“I don’t know, I knocked it out, I stabbed it, I thought it was done for. But it’s not where I left it. I’m telling you Mike, we have got to move, now.” Andy stared at Mike, emphasizing his final words. Mike blinked, clenched his jaw.

“Okay. Let’s go then.”

Andy pulled Mike up. They moved together, Andy leading, Mike keeping one hand on Andy’s back. Away from the burning shack, onto the path leading down the rolling hills. The darkness swelled, but not to the same blackness as before. Andy glanced up at the sky between the tops of the enveloping trees. Streaks of gray arced across it. The depths of night had passed, it was now bleeding into dawn.

He felt Mike’s grip bunching the back of the freak’s shirt that he still wore. Mike. His hand on Andy’s back radiated comfort. The freak was out there, yes, but it was hurt. Andy was afraid, yes, but not terrified. He’d hurt it, he’d kicked it on the ground; he’d beat it once, and with Mike, he’d do it again.

They stumbled out of the trees, stopping just short of the bulrushes. With the clear sky overhead the dark of night was shoved aside, replaced with dim morning light.

“I don’t know the way back,” said Andy. “But I can lead us forward, to Fairbow.”

“Fuck, I don’t either. Without the guide I’m lost.”

“Okay, let’s go then. Just follow me.”

Andy led Mike to the side of the bulrushes, glancing behind them as they went. Mike was weak, Andy had to pause to allow for his pace. They started up the hill, towards the fallen tree where they’d made camp the first night. Andy let Mike take the lead, while he watched behind them. Nothing so far. Andy tried to stifle his hopes, but maybe the freak was gone, scared off. They’d made it past halfway when the freak stepped out into the open. It was at the base of the hill, staring up at them. Andy’s heart seized.

“Mike, it’s here.”

Mike turned around, stiffened. The freak began walking up at them, it clutched its chest where Andy stabbed it. Its tumorous brows were furrowed and bleeding lips were pressed thin. Its eyes were murderous, its face a palette of hatred and pain.

Andy held his arm and knife up, shouting, “Hey asshole! One more step and I’ll tear this shirt to shreds!” He held the knife to the shirt, as if it were a hostage’s throat. The freak kept walking. “Are you sure!?” Andy yelled out. No response. Andy swept his knife across the shirt, cutting a long gash. The freak kept coming, though now its fist was clenched.

Andy could hear the now familiar pulse of blood in his ears. So, this was it. Fight here and win. That was their only choice. “Mike, you ready for this?”

“Yea, let’s kill the fucker.”

They stood waiting, waiting as the freak came closer. The pounding in Andy’s ears grew louder and louder.

“Do you hear that?” asked Mike.

Andy blinked, and realized what he was hearing wasn’t in his head. The air was humming, throbbing, practically. Air currents curled through his hair, and the gash in the shirt. The freak stopped, it cocked its head, listening. Then it

yelped, and loped back down the hill. At the base it gave a parting look of hatred to Andy, and disappeared into the forest.

At that instant a search and rescue helicopter crested into view. It beat the air and broke the mountain stillness. It flew past them, towards the column of smoke that was climbing into the sky. Then it slowed and circled back, hovering over them. The trees bent back and bulrushes swayed as it began to lower.

Mr. Harffeld stood on the crowded blacktop of Fairblow's Plaza outlets. EMTs, firemen, forest rangers, even some county deputies milled about while the helicopter landed in the parking lot. Weeds and trash were sent skittering as it made its final touchdown. The whine of the blades lowered as the engine was cut, and two EMTs jogged gurneys to the helicopter's side. Mike and Andy waved them off as they stepped out. At the sight of them, Mr. Harffeld bulled through the crowd and bear hugged them both. "Mike! Mike! You're okay! Thank God you're both okay!"

Mike and Andy held the hug as long as Mr. Harffeld did, longer. "Yea Dad, we're okay," said Mike, in a husky voice, "I guess we ended up being a little late."

"Your mother is worried sick, both of your mothers," said Mr. Harffeld, crying openly, ignoring Mike's joke, "They're back home though, you'll see them tonight."

"Actually Mr. Harffeld," said Andy, looking at Mike, "I don't think we'll be going home just yet. There's something we need to tell you." He fingered the freak's shirt, looking at the rangers across the parking lot in their tan canvas button downs. He had some questions he wanted to ask.

Mike stepped around Mr. Harffeld and put his hand on Andy's shoulder, pulling him close, "We can be done with it all right now, we can tell everyone what happened, then get outta here, back to school and the real world and all of that."

Andy looked at Mike. There was no fear in his eyes, no taugth features or furrowed brow.

Andy shook his head, “No, I want to see this through. You ready to hit it?”
Mike grinned at Andy, then said, “Sure am.”

The End