

After Katahdin

Chris "Cleanshave" Miller



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by

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This book describes the author's experience while hiking the Appalachian Trail and reflects his opinion relating to those experiences. Some names, trail names, and identifying details of individuals mentioned in the book have been changed to protect their privacy. Many of the characters have been combined from a variety of people to simplify the overall narrative.

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*“The place where you lose the trail is
not necessarily where it ends.”*

- Tom Brown Jr. -

The End of My Hike

“And what are your plans for leaving the park?” the ranger asked, making it clear that I shouldn't linger.

There was a one day limit on staying in the Birches, a tent site with two lean-tos next to the rangers office and near the Katahdin Stream Campground. Most people had friends or family meeting them to share in the triumph, the culmination of their months-long odyssey hiking the Appalachian Trail. And others, like myself, preferred to go it alone, meaning that we didn't have a clear and identifiable ride out of the park.

This trip hasn't been about planning it has been about experience.

“Uh, the shuttle?” I said, not really sure what or who that was. I was an undocumented guest in the park whom they hoped had specific plans and an agenda for finishing your thru hike and leaving, not setting up camp in Baxter State Park.

“OK, I'll write AT Dave on the slip,” she says.

“OK,” Sounds better than homeless, without any specific plans. After all, if the weather stays nice I saw a few stealth spots...

But I don't mention that.

For most thru hikers their summit of Katahdin is the end all, be all portion of their hike. What they have been both figuratively, and in most cases literally, bleeding for the last five to six months is to climb this one last peak.

For me, the hike had been over in the Gulf Hagas. After walking away from nearly being struck by lightning my perspective had changed. As cheesy as it sounds I had been filled with inner peace and for a moment I had glimpsed a purpose and meaning for my life.

Summiting Katahdin didn't seem all that important at the time.

But there I was, waking up early in the morning to make the climb.

Once I was on the top, sitting at the sign with the entire summit to myself, I realized that I had nowhere to go. There was an old movie where the main character stood on the sidewalk and couldn't decide which direction to walk in, there was no reason for him to go in any specific direction. That's how I felt sitting there next to the sign.

In the movie, he stood there until a couple of police officers asked him what he was doing. When he explained that he had nowhere to go, no reason to go anywhere they told him that if he stayed there he would be arrested. As good as it felt to sit there I knew I couldn't stay, I would have to go somewhere.

The hike down from Katahdin didn't want to end.

All I wanted was to take off my wet socks and sneakers and sit quietly.

Maybe eat something.

Back at the Baxter Stream Campground the sun is out and tourists are driving in, I take the opportunity to hang a few wet things out to dry. My sleeping bag, sweatshirt and rain jacket. My shoes and socks. Hopefully, the clothes I am wearing will dry on my back.

Standing there, the sense of Deja vu is overwhelming.

Picnic tables and stream.

I have done all of this before.

But I can't stay, there is no rest here, no time for reflection if I want to follow the rules.

“You don't have to go home but you can't stay here.”

Where I end up going is to the hostel in Millinocket.

The first order of business is to track down a cheeseburger. Second-order of business is a shower where I notice a bulge in my stomach. The double cheeseburgers that I ingested have stretched out the left side of my body in a noticeable bulge.

God, when did I get so skinny?

Welcome to the Apocalypse

The first night at the hostel in Millinocket I can't sleep.

When I finally do dream I'm back at work.

All dressed up and ready to go.

It is the beginning of my shift and I have to go back into the kitchen, except there is a rock wall pressing the hallway tight. I have to squeeze by, or try to, only it's not that important that I get anything so I turn around and try to deliver a drink to a customer.

They seemed to have moved, and the restaurant is filling up fast. It makes it hard to locate them. I'm tempted to leave his drink where he was sitting but there are children in nearby seats and a little girl keeps trying to take a sip.

Taking it away from her I return to the bar area thinking that if I don't find this guy I'm going to drink it myself.

Chilled Yukon Jack in a rocks glass.

Only there is a new customer coming in who wants to sit, and the table where I was supposed to deliver the drink gets changed out. I still have the drink in my hand and am trying to let the situation take care of itself when a female bartender who just came on shift wipes the tables down and takes care of the new customer.

I'm glad to let her have the work, I don't care if I lose out on the tips.

Then it's back to the kitchen, past the same rock wall while I'm thinking that the owners won't be happy that I'm passing off paying work and just doing support stuff. They want me to make money so I'll be happy and stay with them.

That's when I realize that the rock wall is pressing too tight.

I don't want to continue.

I'm not doing this anymore. I try to back out the way I came but it is just too tight. I feel the rock wall pressing on me and it is hard to breathe. I fight back panic and I wake up in the top bunk listening to an older hiker below me snore.

He hasn't finished the trail yet.

It's 5 am, my first day off the trail and I'm already up.

Already wondering what I got myself into by agreeing to go back to work.

From the hostel, we got a ride to a gas station in the middle of nowhere Maine where you can buy a ticket to the rest of America.

Boston, South Station.

Everything feels strange and alien, like I'd emerged into some kind of pre-apocalyptic theme park. Something like they would have in the future to remember what it was like before. Before everything returned to the way things were supposed to be.

Everything seemed temporary and transient.

That the roads and clean vehicles were all just part of the show.

The way it was.

Portrayed by actors.

Into Boston's South Station I had never realized how many hot girls circulated amongst the

general population. My friend Matt meets me but my head is on a swivel.

Blue Diner for burgers.

Downtown Crossing for jeans.

Bus and subway rides.

Back at his house we cook and watch movies.

I try to sleep in the guest room. My feet swollen and red. Huge. My toes feel like they are broken when they are touched. Toenails will never be the same and the infection from wearing the same dirty wet socks through all of Maine is still there.

Try to elevate my feet, 2:30 am.

I have been awake for almost 24 hours.

Then I'm showered and ushered out the door, my friend has to work, I have to...

And I can't think of anything.

I get a haircut and buy a bottle of vodka and sit in the park, under a tree and think about camping there. I think about running away. Before long the bottle is gone and I sleep it off in Back Bay, a hobo for real now. Only this time in new jeans and sporting a decent haircut.

The train takes me back to Attleboro because I don't know what else to do. Still drunk I wander from the train station to the restaurant where I used to work and order food. And drinks.

They call my family and my sister is sent out to pick me up.

The rest is a blur.

Throwing up in the bathroom I realize that I have been here before. I know this apartment. This is the way it is supposed to happen. Deja vu.

In the morning I have no idea where I am, how I got there. And somehow it doesn't really matter.

I have to build a whole new world.

I throw up some more, in my mom's new boyfriend's apartment.

I have a backpack full of stuff and I smell.

Sober lasts all of a few days.

Work calls, it's important.

I wait for the Lexus to show up at the street corner where I told them to meet me. The tinted window slides down enough to be able to hear her voice, "It's a meeting, get in."

"So what's the situation with your clothes?" she asked.

"Everything is gone, everything I owned was lost when my mom moved," I say, pretty sure I blurted that out while drunk at the restaurant.

"Everything?"

"Everything," even the first 1,400 pictures from my hike I wanted to add. The only thing I really cared about at this point.

She puts the car in gear and we hit the highway.

"Some of the others are worried about the smell."

The first night back I had left my sweatshirt in the restaurant, it smelled so bad the waitresses wanted to throw it away.

"Don't worry, once I get a shower and some new clothes this will all be gone," I laugh looking out the window at the bright lights of fast-food restaurants flashing by.

All be gone.

The tailor is more than happy to remeasure my chest size to fit the shirts. "You've lost quite a bit of weight since I saw you last," he says noting my measurements. "How is the tuxedo holding up?"

"I lost it."

"Lost?" he asks raising one eyebrow, but he doesn't ask anything else and I don't offer. Instead, I look at myself in the mirror, skinny. I'm worried that I'll put the weight back on fast but don't say anything. The shirts, slacks, and ties are going on her credit card along with a new jacket and some socks.

I guess someone missed me.

"Clear your head, let me know when you are ready to work," she says leaving me at the curb in front of my mom's boyfriend's place.

I'm ready.

It's the only reason I'm back.

Back to the Grind

The ship, white and warm on the inside, was heading on a collision course with the surface of the Earth.

It was almost funny that we were going to crash.

I wasn't worried until I looked at the numbers and saw just how fast we were coming in. Too fast. There was no time to strap in, this was going to be bad. I adjusted myself in the seat to protect my body from most of the impact and held on, waiting for it.

It was snowing outside when we hit and skidded across the surface of the planet. I barely felt the impact and had to ask another passenger about it.

"I thought you said we were coming straight in?"

But the ship had settled and she never answered.

The rest of us were already working our way outside to the rolling fields of fall. Some snow, dead fields of grass. I didn't notice if it was cold, I was thinking adventure.

And I noticed that we crashed near a high school off to the right that was just getting out of class for the day, college maybe because the kids were going for their cars. In the parking lot.

First I needed to steal a car.

Then I woke up.

At my mom's house. Correction, in my mom's boyfriend's house, in my sister's room.

Unlike every other time when I wake up this time I didn't feel like I should be back on the trail. Until this moment I have always woken up thinking that I had to finish the trail, that I had to get back to it somehow.

This time the adventure is where I crash-landed.

Not as bad as the crash I had been anticipating, and yet the land is desolate, dead, and in some stage of winter.

I needed some kind of adventure to keep myself occupied.

Despite being broke I needed something, for my own sanity.

And I was hungry.

The Hamburger Hunt had been on my mind for a long time, and since my friend Karen was willing to drive I scrounged up enough change to buy a few burgers on a simple loop, a Golden Brown Beefy Triangle if you will that started with Louis Lunch.

Louis Lunch in New Haven, CT is a historic landmark for being the oldest operating hamburger stand in the United States, and some argue the location where the hamburger was invented. I don't know, what am I a beefamatician?

What I do know is they serve a tasty burger allegedly made from five different cuts of beef, and so you don't spoil the flavor condiments are not allowed in the consumption of this masterpiece of meat. Also, they don't give you buns, or rolls, or whatever you want to call them that usually go on the outside of any self-respecting burger. Instead, you get two slices of toasted white bread and you'd better be happy with that.

A short hop north to Meriden, CT lands you are in the twilight zone of burger cooking. Sometime in the early 1900s, they started cooking their burgers the way they ironed their clothes, with

steam. These steamed burgers are a tradition and Ted's Restaurant has been serving them up since 1959. I don't want to make a bad joke about it being the same steamer since they opened but let's just say that it will be a long time before I try another steamed hamburger.

Besides which the vertical cast iron hamburger stove at Louis Lunch is from 1898 and those burgers tasted great.

Ted's cooks little square patties that I wished had fit the bun. Instead, there was some extra roll, no doubt to catch the melted mozzarella cheese they cover the burger with and makes for a damn tasty presentation. But unlike the first burger of the day, these needed a little condiment love to get them down.

Normally my intestines shouldn't feel like sausages, but how many cheeseburgers could a person eat before their insides ripped and the ground up, half-cooked beef that had been packed in spilled out?

The original plan then called for a nice hike to Heublein Tower in an attempt to try and burn off some of those burgers before the Rhode Island finale. Located just north of Ted's in Talcott State Park it is a castle tower the manufacturing magnate of A1 Steak Sauce and Smirnoff Vodka built for his fiancée.

"It's too humid. It's uphill, I just went to the gym yesterday and my trainer..." Karen is saying when we pull into the parking lot.

"The view is awesome."

"You go, I'll wait here," she says slumping back into the driver's seat of her car.

Haven Bros., the supposed end of the Golden Beef Triangle wasn't to be either. Located in downtown Providence, RI, the Haven Bros. had a Triple Murder Burger that I wanted to try.

"Maybe just a salad," she says.

Murder Burger!

"Maybe. I have to get home in time to watch the new Thursday line up on NBC."

"Really?" I ask.

What happened to adventure? I want to run off these burgers and go out and eat more. Instead, I have to settle for a burger at the Greek place where we ate. A burger topped with lettuce, tomato, feta cheese, and tzatziki sauce while she finishes her salad.

No Haven Bros., no Beefy Triangle, not as it was originally envisioned anyway.

My large intestines breathe a sigh of relief.

The rest of me is disappointed.

Sleeping indoors is out of the question.

Sleeping in my mom's boyfriend's place, in my sister's bedroom makes it worse.

I try to go back to the haunted bedroom. To the friend's house where I had stayed before.

She reluctantly lets me in, drinks and cable TV, she catches me up on the gossip. She is living in her bedroom now having made peace with whatever it was that haunted her.

I can stay on the couch for the night.

Only her cell phone rings and a short conversation later it is apparent that I can no longer stay.

"It's not a man," she says like that makes a difference. It's her friend that is having problems with her boyfriend. A girl that I am not allowed to be in the same place because she doesn't want me to see how much weight she has gained. We used to be friends, close friends, now she is embarrassed to be seen in public.

Stupid drama bullshit, but I leave.

2 am, Cumberland, Rhode Island with no place to stay.

That would have worried me before, now, I could care less.

I take the bottle of vodka I brought over and walk down the unlit bike path. The Blackstone

River Bikeway, my old friend. Happy to be out under the sky and moon and stars. Happy to be free.

And I suddenly realized that what would have been a scary idea six months ago now seemed like the obvious choice, just lay down and go to sleep.

Anywhere.

Of course, stealth camping had been considered before, but not like this. Everywhere I looked was a place to sleep. Out of sight, out of mind.

I wasn't going to be bothered by cops or vagrants, hell I was one, or both. I was pretty drunk.

The only problem was the damn mosquitoes.

In the dream, Freyr, Neon Mud, and Broken Condom and I are sitting around a picnic table bullshitting.

Freyr had a haircut and was back into his life, going to college somewhere in Germany to take over the family farm.

Broken Condom was eating ice cream and things were fine for him, just as they always had been and probably always would be.

Neon Mud was smoking and still talking about the trail, laughing at the memories. When I mention hiking the Bay Circuit Trail in Massachusetts he immediately wants to know the details. I explain what I know and he is interested. He is ready to go again.

Just about. But maybe he has to find a job.

You wake up because the mosquitoes become unbearable.

Biting at your hands and face early in the morning.

I had spent the night in the old Blackstone Valley Drive-In wrapped in my rain jacket and finishing off the bottle of vodka watching the moon. Listening to the frogs.

I would have slept later except for those damn mosquitoes.

Mosquitoes that made me get up and walk to the now open McDonald's to pretend to eat an egg McMuffin. In reality, I slept there at a table for another few hours before waking up to a gaggle of old men arguing about whether I was homeless or not.

The problem was I could only pretend to stay awake for so long.

The face stared back at me from the mirror, "What are you doing?"

Pressed pants, button-up shirt, new belt and shined shoes. Shaved and smelling the way Calvin Klein intended.

The question was, do I put on the blue tie or do I blow my brains out?

Work is the same as it always was, packing Chinese take out and seating elderly customers for lunch specials. It's funny how fast it all becomes natural. How fast we can forget the past.

An old friend named Stan comes in with his mother and daughter, "Haven't seen you in a long time," he says.

"Yeah, nice to see you," I say, "it has been a while."

I'm busy at the restaurant and they look like they are in a serious family meeting type of mood. When they're finished I make a point of saying goodbye, he's nice enough for a former crack addict. In fact, he has been nice to me every single time we hung out, even that time he got upset and tried to strangle me for saying the word crack too many times.

It was really a girl's fault anyway. They have that effect.

Besides, that was a long time ago and he hasn't done that stuff in years.

"So you planning another bike trip?" he laughs.

That was a year ago, he doesn't know about my hike and I make the mistake of mentioning that

I just got back. Fucking ego.

Now he has to tell me about something he has done that is better or at least comparable. He mentions an award his DJ company received, though when he first came in he was telling me how he is quitting the DJ business, he's too old, "Time to grow up," he said, "I've put it off long enough."

It doesn't measure up, I can see it in his eyes and I feel like a condescending prick for saying how cool that is about his award, the words leave my mouth and I hate myself.

His mother is looking at him and for a minute with his guard down, he tells me that he just found out he has a son. And that he is a grandfather.

He only found out about his daughter a few years ago and now this, a 21-year-old son with a 3-year-old child. Come to think of it so is his daughter, they're both the same age, from different mothers.

The phone rings and I wave politely as they walk out saying goodbye. I can't really respond, I'm on the phone taking someone's take out order. It makes me feel shallow, not being able to spend more time, and grateful at the same time for having a distraction that got me out of whatever was coming next.

This is what I missed being out on the trail?

Then the regulars start coming in and everyone wants to know about my hiking trip. Only saying hiking trip sounds demeaning.

It wasn't a trip.

It wasn't a section hike.

It was a thru hike, and it was a fucking life-changing experience.

They are nice enough, and genuinely interested, but I can't bring myself to go into details about the hike. It's not that it is too personal, it's that they wouldn't understand the full depth of the experience when the only thing they have to measure it against is here, in a small town where you play Keno and drink scorpion bowls for entertainment.

"How was your hike?" They ask.

"It was good."

"Fine."

"I enjoyed myself."

"Good to get out of here for a little while."

All pat answers, and they all mean the same thing, I don't want to talk about it.

"It was awesome, wouldn't change a thing," means I like you enough that I'll answer a few questions. A few, don't push it.

Don't get drunk and say that I'm your hero.

Don't go telling my story, that you half pieced together from a few sporadic blog posts to a bunch of other regulars that could probably care less.

Now they have to pretend to be interested to be polite, to ask more questions because how is it again you can...

And from there you can fill in the blank with all the questions you got before your thru hike:

"Did you sleep in the woods every night?"

"What did you eat?"

"You carried a gun right?"

Except now you are so much more sure of yourself and your decisions that when people tell you you are crazy to have hiked the whole thing without a gun you can tell them to go fuck themselves. Or at least let them think you are crazy with a twisted little smile and let them tip you a little more.

Guys have to prove how macho they are by saying things like they would pack a piece and everyone should hike the trail at least once, even though they didn't know what the Appalachian Trail

was until a few minutes ago.

And why are you flexing your muscles fat fuck? Your girlfriend is your girlfriend. Now say something that proves how much cooler you are than me so I can back you up and make you feel better.

I need the tips.

But sometimes it doesn't come, life experience isn't gained by watching TV until you pass out after a long day at work.

Well, the work part counts.

Experience is a responsibility.

Having thru hiked the AT it was my responsibility to not only tell these fucking robots about the trail but to tell them that there was another life possible. You didn't have to be angry all the time, or depressed or scared that the crappy life you managed to work yourself into was going to collapse.

Then after work, a few drinks to decompress, and before I know what happened I'm drunk out of my mind trying to find the right playlist to fit my mood.

Heaven knows I'm Miserable Now by the Smiths.

Live and Let Die by Wings, the James bond theme.

It makes me feel less depressed.

And the depression around here seems to be infectious.

Standing in waist-deep water, it is a cloudless day.

Looking around the lake as my awareness expands I can feel the cove off to my right that goes deeper inland than the trees near where I am standing.

I don't look left. It seems unformed and infinite.

It is where the sun resides.

In my left hand, still, just under the surface of the water, are people. Representations of people that I believe to be actual and real.

Instead of the humanoid figure one might expect they are flat and jelly-like, covered in a rough coating of sand. Thinking about it now I realize that they are the same size and shape as shoe inserts.

The analogy to souls makes me cringe.

I lift the people up out of the water and bring them close to my lips.

"Awake," I say.

"Awake."

The word is meant for them, only it seems to have an effect on me as well. I'm looking around, more aware of my surroundings than ever before.

The water is a murky brown. Looking deeper into the water I see snakes, black snakes, and I start to worry about being bitten and work my way back towards the shore. That's when I wake up.

I spend the day walking. I don't know what else to do.

The printing of my thank you cards, the ones with my summit picture, were printed too big, but I don't have the money to fix it and decide to send them out anyway. One more thing to get me down. One more reason to walk.

I walk the length of the Blackstone River Bikeway, 11 miles one way, end to end. Then I walk back again. Packed a sub. Hungover when I started, by noon it rained and I pulled out the rain jacket, grateful that it kept people away.

Nice.

Hike back, I didn't want to go home, that place that I am staying. The place where I'm supposed to sleep.

I don't want to go.

When I get back they have bought me a mattress to replace the plywood I threw over the bare slats in the bunk bed. My \$5 answer to where I am going to sleep is replaced by a \$100 mattress that I didn't pay for, that I don't need.

"Thanks but it isn't necessary."

I don't know if they would understand, I just want them to return it and save the money. I don't want to be staying here. My mom's boyfriend bought the mattress though so now maybe it seems as if it is OK that I'm here.

I hate that.

My sister has been out at Dunkin Donuts for hours, she was crying when they came home and she left. Now she comes back in and looks like she has been crying all day.

Brown paper bag. I know that profile, but she doesn't drink.

"Whiskey and sour mix," she says, "Want a whiskey sour?"

Trying to laugh it off. I catch her reading the Evan Williams bottle label, like it is going to have instructions on it. She pours some in a mug and reads the directions on the sour mix.

She stops and tries to talk to me but it comes out in bursts like she is trying to hold back from crying.

"It's not that I don't want you here or that I'm not glad you're back," she says, "It's not that."

"So what is it then?" I ask.

"I'm just sick of having everything taken away from me and being kicked to the ground."

"I used to have a home, a car, and a best friend and now I have nothing," she continues, "It's all gone."

She takes off her glasses and wipes her eyes.

I give her a minute not sure what to say.

My sister sees life from the eyes of a victim. Everything is because something was done to her. She didn't lose the car because she couldn't afford to get it fixed, because she didn't work or save money, she lost it because it was taken away from her.

Her only friend was her dog and he died while I was away hiking, he had a tumor that she had known about for years and he was old, maybe only 12 or 13 but old enough.

The house, I don't even want to get into the fact that she was living with my mom and they made a series of bad judgments. So now instead of being in the last apartment with my mom, she is in this one with my mom and her boyfriend, and now I'm staying in her room.

The straw that broke the camels back.

The world is a bad place, and it took everything from her.

And now she is drinking.

"No car, no home? Me too," I say.

She doesn't respond.

She puts on her headphones and sits at her desk. There is no other place to go, there is too much clutter. Even with two storage units, the apartment is stacks of stuff that is hard to move around.

I want to leave, want to give her the space she thinks she needs even if it is only here in this room. I know I can't fix her, I have tried before telling her, "Change your mind and you can change the world."

She doesn't get it.

She doesn't get that she is her own problem.

I go to bed early.

In her room, on the new mattress, with brand new Egyptian cotton sheets. My backpacks stacked on the bed, the only things I own now except the work clothes on the hanger.

Too much stuff.

What the fuck am I doing back here?

I'd be better off, hell, they would be better off if I never came back.

Standing there at the front desk I wasn't sure if I had heard him correctly.

It was so matter-of-fact, yet secret, that it was slipped in so no one would notice. He wasn't coked-out, wasn't tweaking, biting his lips or pupils dilated. In fact, he had put on some weight since the last time I had seen him.

That was a good thing.

The fact that he wanted a gun was not.

"All bets are off," he says taking a sip from the Bud Lite bottle in his hand.

And his eyes didn't waver when he told me whom he was going to kill.

He was drinking beer from the bottle. I was wearing that stupid pink tie and the same old gray button-up shirt I always wore. I should have another shirt, but somehow the money always seemed to spend itself long before a shopping spree could be imagined. I need someone to shop for me, I'm thinking as I try to get inside his head.

The murder is talk, I think to myself, noticing a look of pain in his eyes. The talk is cover for emotions that are completely alien. Something he is entirely incapable of dealing with since his wife passed away years ago. He hasn't thought anything through, hasn't ever run off of anything other than a limited range of emotions.

For him the choice is simple.

Fall back on what is known.

Violence.

I seat the next set of customers in the restaurant with a smile.

"Table for two?"

Their table is chosen by the seating list, but also where they will see the least if I happen to get a beer bottle upside the head. I know that a human skull cannot be crushed by an opened beer bottle. This fact comforts me little as I imagine the bottle being smashed into my head. I use the vivid visualization to cancel out any pain receptors in the upper half of my body and feel my blood pressure drop as I return from the dining room.

Head wounds bleed.

I won't let that happen.

When I get back the murder talk is forgotten. His new girlfriend that had given him hope in a new life was gone. He had wanted her to move in with him, and for a time it had helped. But she didn't want her kids from another marriage visiting, she didn't get along with his kids.

He was trying to fix it, to make it all right again.

Now she is gone.

The girlfriend that he loves more than anything since his wife.

And he needed a gun, not for her, for her ex-husband that he felt was in the way.

I deescalate the situation and empathize with his situation to the point where he is slumped over on a stool staring blankly down at the bar, hunched over, defeated.

Lovesick and scared.

He is not going to hurt anyone, he just needs someone to love him back.

I drink after work, down the street at the restaurant less than a block away from where I looked at an apartment. Where I'll be living.

It feels... wrong.

One year lease. A roof over my head.

It almost makes me sad.

Drink a few more Long Island Ice Tea's. Walk home in the tie I borrowed, worrying about dry cleaning.

Deal with the Devil

As soon as the apartment lease is signed I feel trapped.

I think about running away, now, before I have enough time to start accumulating a bunch of useless crap. A weight bench, bookcases, a desk, and heaven forbid, a TV. Not to mention the dishes I will now need, the rugs for the bathroom and my bedroom. A shower curtain, a trash can? Does the list ever end?

The one year lease turns out to be 11 months, and it's strange, but the realization that it is 30 days less that I have to be in the same place makes me feel so much better. Like early parole.

I sit there in the apartment on the couch the previous tenants left behind and wonder if I made the right choice. Should I have just turned around on Katahdin and started hiking south? Should I have stuck to my original plan and hiked the Long Trail southbound?

You were out of money, my brain says.

Now you have this. Deal with it.

11 months to build a base, a solid foundation for the rest of my life based on what I thought through and determined during my thru hike. I should have stopped just before Katahdin, somewhere in the 100 Mile Wilderness and written down everything I wanted to happen, everything I wanted to get done when I returned to the world from my hiking trip.

I just can't seem to get organized, everything is in disarray, I have to help move my mom's stuff in my free time, they still aren't settled from moving during my hike. More stuff has to be put in storage, a new storage unit has to be purchased for the overflow.

Making money is moving too slow and time moving too fast.

I feel like I have been here forever.

I feel like I'm being smothered.

At work, people call me by my name but it doesn't register. I haven't been called that in almost 5 months. Cleanshove or Clean or maybe Doctor Daypack by a select few.

But Chris?

It doesn't sound right, doesn't feel right.

Who is that person?

It's not me.

But if I'm no longer Chris then who am I? Am I the guy that pours a powerful Scorpion Bowl or packs take out in a paper bag with crisp edges and clean lines, with none of that wrinkled paper or dented corners? I'm the guy that the waitresses all rely on to fix their billing problems and deal with unruly customers?

Is that what I want to be?

After work, it's only a short walk to my apartment. Not long enough and I decide to walk for another half an hour in circles around the neighborhood. Route 1. For all the hustle and bustle there isn't really anything here. There are no libraries or bookstores, there is no coffee shop, no gym.

Instead, there are a handful of fast-food restaurants within walking distance, if anyone around here bothered to walk, which they don't. Within a block of my house are two liquor stores and a 24-hour convenience store where I can get junk food or lottery tickets any time the urge strikes me.

This is what I chose?

I have another dream, a dream that I'm dreaming.

I'm laying there, half-awake in my dream feeling the edges of a dream within a dream. Laying there on the hardwood bench is so real, so it's not a dream. But I know it is. The thought stops the dream within a dream and I sit up in the dark. Light comes from a set of stairs where I go to talk to myself.

There are two of me up there one a little higher and set back relaxing in bed, maybe a pile of pillows. The other is closer, working on something, maybe a computer. I ask a few questions and get the answers from the lower and closer of the two, answers to questions I don't remember. The answers seem to make sense. The higher version of me just nods knowingly and watches. There are other people there too, girls at the edges, off to the left.

I retreat down to my space only to find that it is a little more illuminated than before. And I'm surprised by the amount of clutter. Like old stuff thrown in storage and forgotten. An upside-down chair on a dresser. Cobwebs. I lay down in a comfortable space where I first woke up in the dream, still as comfortable and comforting as before. I am relaxed and at home, secure. But looking out at the stuff I hadn't been able to see before I realize that there is a lot of work ahead if I want to clean out this whole basement. That's what I'm thinking as I go back to sleep.

Inside the dream.

There is so much more to be done.

Karen comes over to the new apartment and I'm hoping to fix my botched haircut. Usually, when I decide to cut my own hair, it is either because I want to save a little money or don't want to be bothered with having to make my way to a barber. It has to be done now.

That and I am usually drinking when this decision hit me.

Only this time I was sober.

And I wasn't doing such a good job of working the clippers.

The thought occurred to me that I should just start drinking and eventually I would work my way back to finish the haircut and be done with it. But... I had to look somewhat presentable at work and I didn't think shaving my head was an option either. I had done that years ago, just after I started working there when I was waiting tables. It had been my birthday and all I wanted to do was shave off all the hair on my head. A clean start for the new year.

A clean shave.

Strange. That was years ago and I think about it now for the first time. When they reacted so badly at work at the shock of me being without hair I questioned if I really wanted to work with the public when I couldn't just up and decide to shave my head.

To get a tattoo on my wrist.

To carve an x in my forehead.

Would I really have to think about everything I did and consider how that would affect my place of employment?

Anyway, that was years ago.

Cue today and Karen says, "Wow, this is one of the nicest flophouses I have ever been in."

"Thanks, I'm like the Martha Stewart of crack dens."

There is no furniture except the couch which the previous tenant had left behind, my mattress on the floor of my room and stacks of books piled in my bedroom. My only possessions besides the four backpacks and two tents hanging in the closet.

We go out for dinner, to get away from the new place. I still can't stay indoors for too long

without feeling anxious.

“How do you do this?” I ask at the bar in an Olive Garden.

“How do I do what?” she asks.

“Stay sober in a world that is so boring.”

“Didn't you drink when you hiked?”

“Okay, maybe in a few towns, but mostly when this,” I say gesturing around me, “reached out to touch me.”

And it sounds so pathetic.

She takes another sip of her drink and the appetizers arrive.

“While I was hiking the thought of drinking was never there. Here, there is nothing to do. And there is a liquor store conveniently located across the street.”

In my head, I'm thinking that it is a battle of will.

Me versus convenience?

Me versus opportunity?

You don't have any discipline, do you? My brain asks.

Endure the boredom, minute after minute, hour after hour, day after agonizing repetitive day.

Without drinking.

I don't know if I can.

The new roommate says it will be a while before he buys anything for the apartment. He is going to focus on his room first. He is still living paycheck to paycheck, without any savings.

“No problem, I'm not too worried about the rest of the house. Might pick up a table for the kitchen and some pots and pans from my mom so we can cook but that's about it for now.”

I don't care if we never furnish the rest of the apartment. Except for the fact that the people at work want to have a house warming party, offering to buy and cook all of the food. That's why I work there, despite anything else you could say about the place, the people that own it care about their employees.

When they found out that another Appalachian Trail thru hiker that I had known died before finishing the trail they were concerned. Everyone, from employees to regular customers asked how I was doing, if everything was all right.

Secretly I couldn't imagine a better place to die. Everybody dies and you don't know when that is going to happen. There are no guarantees that you'll live to be old enough to shit yourself daily and forget the names of every member of your immediate family.

Why would you want to die that way anyway?

Why not go doing something you loved?

Only there was a dark side to their concern. They wanted to make sure I got everything out of my system. They wanted me back the way I was, focused on working hard and building a life here. They let me have my time off, indulged me, now I was expected to snap out of it.

My once in a lifetime experience was supposed to be just that, once. Now I could understand the people I had met who had hiked the Appalachian Trail multiple times.

“The AT can get in your blood,” a hiker had told me, “You'll never be the same again.”

When I bend down behind the bar to get someone a glass of wine I have to kneel down gently, my knees still don't work right, and it reminds me of the trail. It's been a month since I have finished and I am still feeling the damage. I can walk fine. But there is something about the cartilage in my knees. Waiting tables makes them hurt. Too much moving, I don't know.

Something.

Before it was the downhills. Felt like my knees were going to give out. Right under my knee cap. Like all the strength had gone away. On the trail, I would just think I wasn't sufficiently warmed up enough. It might take an hour or two to get in the groove but then you'd be cruising.

Now the pain is the only reminder of the trail.

My plans to do an overnight hike on the nearby Warner Trail keep getting pushed back. People call out of work and I try to pick up as many shifts as I can, trying to put some money away, catch up. Truth is I'm broke. I need as many hours as I can get right now. I have an apartment to pay for and I haven't even seen what the gas and electric bills are going to look like yet.

I wanted to hike the North-South Trail across Rhode Island. Had already warned them at work that it would take about a week, they wanted me to do it in 5 days so I wouldn't miss the busy weekend. Without any money, I'm no longer motivated to take a week off of work.

How quickly it happens, in little ways, here and there. And suddenly I'm one of them again.

Working to pay bills, to stay afloat.

I'm bored and restless. There is no room to move around or to be me. Everything feels like it is crushing in on top of me, stifling.

At one point I realize I have just read through three separate trail guides. I want to leave. Why did I sign that lease? What am I going to do? How am I going to get through almost a year in the same place?

I think about running away again. Backpack and a few things, see ya. Hit the road, never come back.

I think about the people that helped me get into this apartment, who bought me clothes so I could go to work, who held a position open for me at the restaurant.

I can't let them down.

Or myself for that matter.

So this is Christmas

Christmas.

One year to the day that I decided to hike the Appalachian Trail.

Am I glad I did it? Hell yes.

Would I do it again? In a heartbeat.

I think about the trail every day and I still eat way too much without getting nearly as much exercise as I should. I'm quickly getting fat again.

I want to say that now my focus is on building a better life, striving for big goals and utilizing the lessons of the trail to make them a reality. The lesson that no matter how far you have to go, no matter how impossible it seems, all you have to do is put in some effort every day to see results. And that goal will be achieved before you know it.

That's what I want to say.

The truth is that the flash of insight I gained while on the trail is quickly being drowned out by the noise and clutter of the world that I have returned to. There are too many demands on my time, on my attention. Things are starting to slip by, time is going too fast and not enough is getting done. There always seems to be something in the way.

Obligations.

The drinking.

Myself mostly.

When all of a sudden you realize that the world you have come back to isn't the same one you left, where do you go from there? Even if the world is the same and it is only you that has changed, what do you do?

Conform, fit in, try to be like everyone else?

Or do you embrace the new you? Do you decide that there is nothing wrong with the way you feel? You are what you are, it is the world that is wrong.

Will you dare take the next step on this new trail?

About the Author



Chris Miller is a writer and traveler who is working towards location independence by making the majority of his income from online ventures.

He thru hiked the Appalachian Trail in 2011 and has ridden a bicycle over 2,500 miles on the East Coast Greenway to help raise money for Meals on Wheels.

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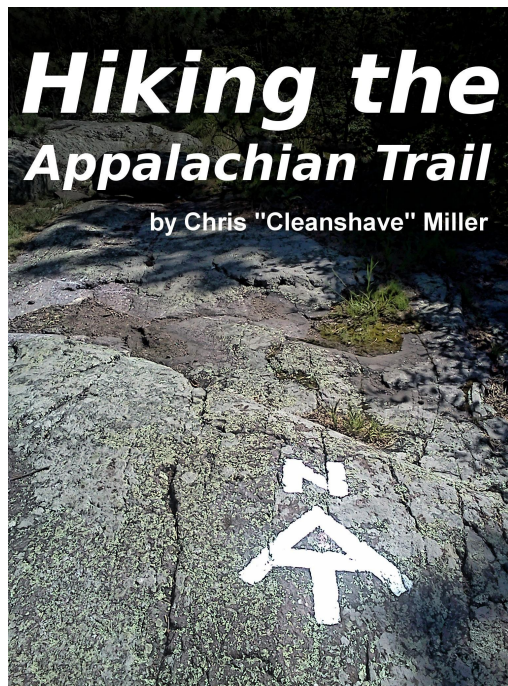
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Or don't, it's totally up to you, but I would very much appreciate any feedback, criticism or encouragement.

Life is Your Adventure, Live Your Dreams



Thinking about the Appalachian Trail?

Sick and tired of the day by day, shelter by shelter accounts published by other former thru hikers?

Hiking the Appalachian Trail is a powerful book that will satisfy your longing.

Just imagine that for the first hike of your life you decided to thru hike the Appalachian Trail. In 2011, Chris "Cleanshave" Miller did just that. With no hiking experience and being physically unprepared for the demands of the trail he still managed to keep hiking the 2,184 miles from Georgia to Maine.

Despite physical injuries, financial setbacks and succumbing to Lyme Disease he managed not only to hike, but to fall in love with the trail and experience a profound personal transformation.

Read [Hiking the Appalachian Trail](#) and put yourself on the trail.