

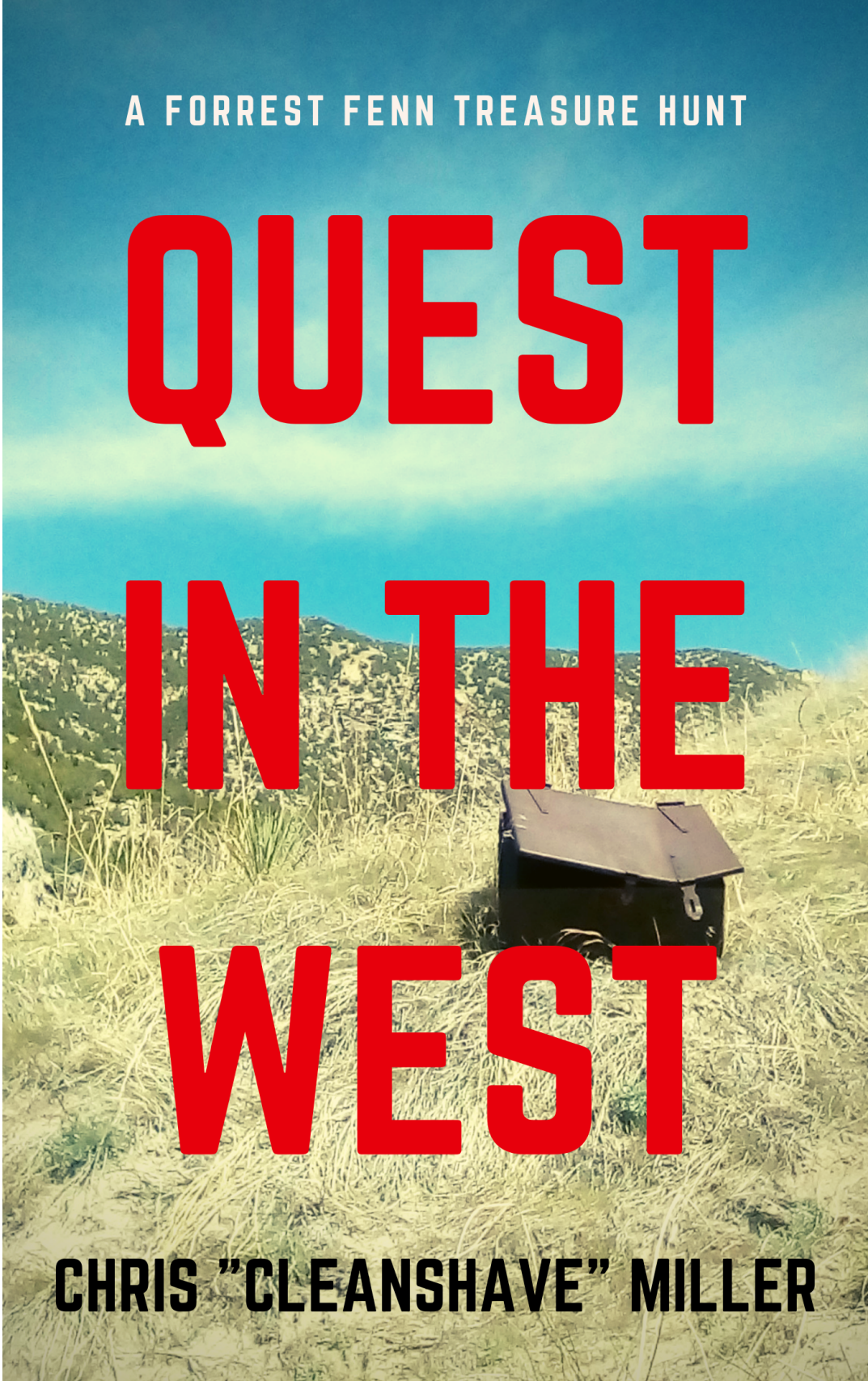
A FORREST FENN TREASURE HUNT

QUEST

IN THE

WEST

CHRIS "CLEANSHAVE" MILLER



Quest in the West

A Forrest Fenn Treasure Hunt

By
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This book describes the author's experiences while traveling and reflect 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 Pulp Travel Series is to Travel Literature what Pulp Magazines were to Literary Fiction. The series is loosely based on the now long forgotten zine format. A small circulation, self published collection of writing where profit is not the primary intent of publication. Each addition to the series will focus on one part of the low budget traveling lifestyle from a personal perspective. Either a short adventure that begins by thumbing a ride to an unknown city, being dropped off at a trailhead for a long hike or riding a cheap bicycle down forgotten roads.

Although zines were mostly photocopied, this series of short travel related adventures is an evolution of that model of creation and distribution as demanded by the logistical limitations of being homeless and without an income while living on the road.

As such the Pulp Travel Series often involves the use of foul language, adult situations, imaginative use of sentence structure and has a general lack of copy editing. Please do not buy this book/zine if that is going to be a problem for your personal enjoyment.

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Introduction

Many people have searched for the Forrest Fenn Treasure only to come up empty-handed. Their solution to Forrest Fenn's poem, which includes nine clues that allegedly reveal the location of a multi-million dollar treasure hidden somewhere in the Rocky Mountains north of Santa Fe, had failed to put the treasure in their hands when they reached their destination.

This isn't that kind of story.

Maybe this is the story of the one treasure hunter that got within 200 feet that Forrest likes to mention. Because, despite my best effort, I could not go the final distance to the location. The treasure is most likely still sitting there, exactly where I thought it was, just out of my reach.

Or maybe not.

Maybe I am completely wrong about the location. That's not what matters. This is the story of my adventure in looking for the treasure. This book exists not only to tell my story, but to reveal the location in the hope that it can be proved or disproved by someone who takes the time to go to the location.

Someone who learns from my mistake.

Chapter 1

How I found out about the treasure was an article in Outside Magazine that had been delivered to an apartment in which I no longer lived. It was a slow day at the restaurant where I had given my notice, planning to live out of my backpack for the foreseeable future, hiking the Appalachian Trail.

The poem, and the idea of a treasure hunt, captured my imagination. For whatever reason I felt like I would be the one to find the treasure. That it was waiting for me. Something that I am sure a lot of treasure hunters have felt.

But I didn't need treasure. Not because I was rich, far from it, I had been homeless for sometime and was counting the days until I was free from work. I was looking forward to a long-distance hike that would hopefully take up a large chunk of the next year. I was hiker trash to the core. I hiked on a low budget and most likely would be broke long before I finished the trail. So heading off to find a treasure with only a vague sense that it was in the Rocky Mountains wasn't a priority.

I needed an adventure, and thru hiking the Appalachian Trail for a second time was what I had in mind. Still, I tore the page out of the magazine with the poem and stuffed it in my map bag, keeping it as an option just in case my life of adventure led me west.

Having had the magazine article in my backpack for longer than I could remember, I never really figured out the treasure's exact location. Worse came to worse I always figured that I'd search the section of Utah mentioned in the article.

But I had to know if that was the best guess. And with hiking you get a lot of time to think. Keep it simple, break it down. That was the plan.

I started by asking what I knew, and what Forrest had said in interviews outside of the poem.

Where was the treasure? The Rocky Mountains. Where in the Rocky Mountains? North of Santa Fe, but it wasn't in Canada, Idaho or Utah according to Forrest Fenn. So that eliminated the theory from the magazine article.

That left New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming. And New Mexico was basically out if the treasure was also at least 8.25 miles north of Santa Fe.

He'd said that it wasn't in a graveyard, tunnel or mine. And his advice was something like, "Don't search anywhere an 80 year old man could not carry a heavy backpack. If you think I could not have put it there, you are probably right."

He'd also said that the treasure wasn't on a mountain top, though maybe close, and was above 5,000 feet in elevation but below 10,200 feet.

Above 5,000 feet? Couldn't I fix Google maps to show only locations above that? Was it possible to eliminate things above 10,200 feet as well? Could I do that on my \$16 smartphone?

I was way out of my depth if the solution required high tech resources. Keep it simple, I kept reminding myself.

There were nine clues in poem. What were they? And how would you tell the difference between the clues and the rest of the poem? Was it that obvious?

So I pulled out the poem and studied it.

*As I have gone alone in there
And with my treasures bold,
I can keep my secret where,
And hint of riches new and old.*

*Begin it where warm waters halt
And take it in the canyon down,
Not far, but too far to walk.
Put in below the home of Brown.*

*From there it's no place for the meek,
The end is ever drawing nigh;
There'll be no paddle up your creek,
Just heavy loads and water high.*

*If you've been wise and found the blaze,
Look quickly down, your quest to cease,
But tarry scant with marvel gaze,
Just take the chest and go in peace.*

*So why is it that I must go
And leave my trove for all to seek?
The answers I already know,
I've done it tired, and now I'm weak.*

*So hear me all and listen good,
Your effort will be worth the cold.
If you are brave and in the wood
I give you title to the gold.*

Most people ignored the first stanza of the poem when looking for clues, but Forrest wrote it, so let's give it some respect.

By saying that he had gone in there boldly, where there is a hint of “*riches new and old*,” he is telling the reader that there is a risk associated with the site of the treasure. The hint of new riches being his treasure I imagined, and the riches of old most likely meant a historic location. Somewhere with a rich history.

But where most people think the clues start is with, “*Begin it where warm waters halt*.” And Forrest had not only said, “Where warm waters halt is not a dam,” but he’d also provided people with a map to use in their search.

I had heard that there was a mistake in the map, and I’d thought that maybe it was something that got included which shouldn’t have, something that would directly tie in to one of the clues. House of Brown, perhaps, though not as obvious. Brownsville or other combinations with synonyms for house. But at the Moby Dickens book signing he had said that perhaps the mistake was not including Canada on the map despite the Rockies continuing out of the country.

Still, I downloaded the best copy I could find, and there, smack dab in the middle was Thermopolis. Was that the warm waters halt reference? Therm as in thermal? Polis, which meant city in Greek, but could also refer to the Old French poliss, as in polish? Which just meant to make smooth and glossy, to refine, as in the warm waters smoothing out after they had bubbled out of the ground?

He had also said that using the map or starting online a person could get to the first two clues but would need to go there to find the rest... Or was I misremembering that as well?

I couldn’t help but laugh that a person who says halt is usually a police officer, so Thermal Police, Thermopolis, meant warm waters halt in a roundabout sort of way.

But I seriously doubted that’s what Forrest Fenn had in mind when he said that warm waters halt. Instead, he probably considered the fact that Thermopolis, Wyoming is named for the Pass of Thermopylae, which you might remember from Greek history, or the movie 300, as the Spartan battle ground, which was a narrow pass leading from Thessaly into Locris.

Was it as simple as using the Pass of Thermopylae in place of Thermopolis to not only understand the meaning of halt, as the Spartans halted the Persian advance, but also pylae in place of polis? Pylae, as in pile, the thermal waters bubbling out of the ground, smoothing out and coming to a halt in pools? The idea being that halt replaced the word city in the first location?

Was it that easy to find the starting location of the clues in Forrest Fenn’s poem?

Chapter 2

Knowing where to start looking for the treasure was less than helpful. I was hiking the Appalachian Trail and planned on making this my second thru hike, which meant walking from end to end. From Springer Mountain in Georgia, along the 2,185 miles north to Mount Katahdin in Maine.

Though I had hiked the entire thing in one hike already, I had failed to complete a second hike the year before. And I hated failure.

I'd started early and had been frozen off of Siler Bald on the Tennessee-North Carolina state line, and though that didn't dampen my excitement to be hiking I thought about the treasure every day while I hiked. Hiking gives you a lot of time to think, and well, the Forrest Fenn Treasure was the most interesting thing in my life.

Is this what Gold Fever felt like, I wondered.

Then, not much further up the trail, the fantasies about the treasure got so overwhelming that I thought about quitting after I'd only gone as far as Gatlinburg. Just over 200 miles of hiking and I was ready to be done? I thought about hitchhiking into Knoxville. Heading west to Thermopolis.

How hard could it be to find the treasure? It was just south of Thermopolis, right?

I forced myself back to the trail, because I was there to hike, but I only made it as far as Max Patch, less than another 50 miles up the trail, and sitting there in the cold wind, feeling inspired, I asked myself what I really wanted out of life. In a way where you leave a silence at the end and listen for a reply.

Find the treasure, it said.

I didn't have a lot of money left, I'd grown accustomed to hiking on a budget. Which meant hiking for less than \$1 a mile, something that most other hikers had a hard time achieving. So like everyone that imagined what they'd do if they won the lottery, I did the same with the treasure. A party where I used to work giving out gift certificates from the restaurant to my regular customers as a way of saying thanks. A thru hiker grant to help people all across the country struggling with the complexity of modern life, or maybe even a reality television show, *Hobo Millionaire*, where I'd use the gold to get my teeth fixed in Mexico...

Once I'd let the Gold Fever take hold I was as good as done with my hike, Into Hot Springs, which was just under 300 miles from my start in Amicalola Falls, and I was ready for a different kind of adventure.

Getting my broke ass across the country.

There was no cell signal or wifi in Hot Springs to arrange bus tickets. I had no idea how I was going to get to Thermopolis or what I'd do once I got there. And that was

far more exciting than hiking a trail I'd already hiked, no matter how much I thought of it as home.

I packed my stinky, sweaty shirts for the only semi-clean thing that I had and walked across the French Broad River and stuck out my thumb. I put on my glasses to look safer, i.e., normal, and the first car picked me up.

Carlos was going to Marshall which was on the way to Asheville, North Carolina. But he wanted to drop me off downtown, "Which is just up this hill," he told me. What he didn't mention was that it was off the highway, over the hill and down into the valley, unfortunately.

By then the sun was out, so hiking up and out of the town, trying to get back to the main road, made me sweat. Something I was trying to avoid for the sake of the people in whose cars I would be riding if I was to make it to Asheville to catch a bus west.

I got to the business road split and stuck out my thumb. What I thought was going to be impossible, again turned out to be a ride from the first car. Hopefully hitchhiking the rest of the way is this easy, I thought to myself.

"Can you straddle that?" The driver asked, pointing to a box on the floor. "It's my wife. Her ashes. She died on the seventh of this month."

"Sorry for your loss sir," I say.

"I'm going to Ingle's, how far are you going?"

"Asheville," I tell him, thinking that Ingle's might be a town. But it's a supermarket a couple of miles away. He dropped me off there and I walked to a semi-decent spot from which to hitch. Cars could see me for a ways, but the location also turned out to be a good spot for the undercover State Trooper to tag speeders. He gave me about ten minutes of getting in the way of his radar before giving up and heading off to another speed trap.

Soon after I get a ride from Roland, a rafting guide headed to Asheville, which turns out to be much farther away than I'd anticipated. He dropped me off near Vance Square and my old friend Miss America sent me a text at almost the exact same time. She was out of work and would swing around to get me. We barely missed a pile-up crash on the highway as we went to pick up her daughter. Then she dropped me off at her house but had to run errands leaving me in her place by myself.

It took two hours to go from hiking the Appalachian Trail and eating a burger in Hot Springs to hitchhike to Asheville.

Chapter 3

How many times had Forrest told people the solution to his poem was simple, and that people tended to over-complicate it.

Keep it Simple, Stupid.

I figured that I had enough money to make it into Chicago, maybe a little further. That left 1,200 miles I'd have to cover with no money. Through Iowa, Nebraska and into Wyoming.

That the treasure was in Thermopolis wasn't much of a surprise, I just hadn't expected to find the beginning of the poem to point to a spot that was named, smack dab in the center of the map Forrest Fenn had released.

"And take it in the canyon down, Not far, but too far to walk. Put in below the home of Brown."

If I was right about Thermopolis this line meant to follow U.S. Route 20 south out of town but not as far as Boysen Reservoir.

The manmade lake was formed by Boysen Dam and was stocked with Brown Trout among other varieties of fish, and if you put in below the dam you'd be on the Wind River heading north, back towards the town of Thermopolis.

Boats or floating of any kind in this section of the river was strictly prohibited. Though this was the route described by the poem, I realized that it was most likely not the route taken by Forrest Fenn to place the treasure. That much was obvious from listening to any of his talks.

So why consider the river route then?

Because that's where the clues were leading.

Like Forrest said in an interview, "The solve is difficult for many searchers because their minds think the clues are tougher to decrypt than they really are."

And because they wrongly assume that there is only one way to the treasure.

Rafting the river would be dangerous, so you could say that it's no place for the meek. But the real clue is in the next line, *"The end is ever drawing nigh."*

People usually took this to mean a cemetery. As if it's some kind of morbid reference to our own imminent death and the unstoppable flow of time. Forrest was diagnosed with cancer when he came up with the idea of hiding the treasure, so it's a semi-logical conclusion. And there is a cemetery up the river as you approach Thermopolis, but I didn't think that's where the treasure was hidden. Because it was hidden, not buried.

Besides, the end drawing nigh meant that you were getting close, not that you were there, not that you were dead. Drawing also meant to pull or drag toward, or attract. As in your destination was being pulled closer by the flow of the river?

That's because, as you float downriver you are looking for Johnson Draw. That was the double meaning of the line and it is one of the canyons off what would now be your left side as you headed north. Though it was formed by erosion there is no significant source of water, meaning that you wouldn't be able to paddle your way in, except for the brief moment when you pass under the railroad tracks above the entrance.

That would be the "*heavy loads*," reference in the poem.

The "*water high*" reference could maybe be a waterfall at the back of the draw, I thought. Or a water pipeline carrying water from the reservoir into Thermopolis along the railroad bridge. And even if I was wrong about Johnson Draw, how many railroad bridges could there be south of Thermopolis and north of Boysen Reservoir?

For a couple of days I'd hardly thought about the treasure. I'd been in the moment, trying to figure out logistics and my budget, until I was sitting on the S3 bus on the way back from seeing downtown Asheville when it hit me full force in the stomach.

"What am I doing?" I almost asked myself out loud. "I should be there..."

Paranoia about someone getting there before me, someone smarter and with more resources, how the location was so obvious that everyone must have figured it out. As if the hundredth monkey effect was real and my thoughts had been sent out and read by the rest of humanity. If I could just get there first...

Bus schedules, distance, and my lack of funds were all playing a role in my slow-motion crawl across the United States.

Asheville was nice enough. More of a big city than Ashland, Oregon was, both of which I was told would be perfect for me to settle down and start a life. Neither of which felt like long term options. Where does a person go who wants to do the things I want and live the way I plan?

Cheap tacos, protein shakes, and hallucinogenics.

Ugh... how have I made it this far without going crazy?

If I was wrong about the treasure I'd be broke in the middle of nowhere.

If I was right, I'd be broke in the middle of nowhere with a huge logistical problem, i.e., carrying almost fifty extra pounds of treasure in my backpack with no idea how to convert a portion of that safely into cash. The logistics are what I thought about, not the treasure itself. I also wondered about things going on off-stage so to speak.

But I had to watch that. I couldn't dwell on possibilities that I couldn't control. Besides which, I can and have dreamt up some damn scary alternatives. I just didn't want to give them power.

The bus to Knoxville couldn't come soon enough. I'd just have to keep the sheer terror under wraps for a couple more weeks.

Act as if I have all the time in the world.

It is mine after all. It was put aside for me.

"The treasure is waiting for me," I repeated to myself.

...and repeated it again.

"The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, it is queerer than we can suppose," said the J.B. Haldane quote on the bedroom wall of the friend's place where I was staying.

Miss America had been pregnant when she hiked the Appalachian Trail, which was how I knew her. It was hard to fathom that the little girl running around the house meant that it had been five years since I'd last seen her. All the more so because she took me into her house without hesitation or reservation.

"Happiness, too, is inevitable," was another quote that they had, this one from Camus, to which I made the joke, "What do you call a cow with black, green and brown spots? Camoo..."

"Don't be absurd," my host joked.

Chapter 4

My stay in Knoxville went from being a simple sleep-over to my friend hosting a webinar for her guru, Swamiji. She had given up her name now that she'd been given a spiritual Indian name which was hard enough to pronounce, never mind spell. When I know a person's real name I find it hard enough to call people by their trail name. Trail names are a tradition on long-distance hiking trails, and that's how I came to be known as Cleanshave. I was one of the few guys that shaved almost every day. So calling her something I couldn't even pronounce was something I avoided, which made me feel uncomfortable as a guest in her home.

A few random people showed up, a trailer park girl from Gatlinburg (*not to be mean, she was very nice, she just happened to live in a trailer park*), an ex-Memphis police officer now turned ayahuasca advocate, and two other women.

First off, I had my reservations about Swamiji. He had this idea of a new species of humans and they would perform tricks to prove their abilities such as remote viewing, third eye seeing through a blindfold. All of which made the presentations seem like a vaudeville church act. To be fair, Kreskin would do some simple tricks first to warm the audience up for the real show, but I didn't think this was like that. I had respect for Kreskin. This was selling people fantasies, and their marketing was pretty good. Not so much on webinar production values.

I also wasn't impressed much by Swamiji's charisma or insight. Which was hard to say because my host, also a former hiking partner, believes, head over heels, in this guy's power. If this guru had any power it wasn't an understanding of the universe, but about ways to position the mind to manifest what you desire. So kind of like a self help guru masquerading as a religion or religious experience.

It certainly wasn't realization as I understood the concept. But what do I know, I'm just a hiker trash drifter.

However, the hook that got my friend was some kind of mystical experience. That, or those, as there were multiple mystical experiences that she experienced, just haven't been framed right. There still is very much of an ego blockage with her, and when I tried to explain my observation she told me that I was wrong.

"I used to be passive like that," she said, "just floating wherever the current would take me."

Then to prove I was wrong she went on to explain exactly what I had said to her, but in a way that she was right and I was wrong.

The problem, for her, is that if you aren't fighting to bend reality to your will then you must be passive. She seemed to be missing the middle ground, where existence is both and neither.

Too many people seeing two things decide one is right, the other wrong. Often the decision is arbitrary. Her big problem was too many options. Which one or ones to pursue? For her, allowing all options to exist simultaneously and allowing them to unfold naturally wasn't an option.

I felt a lot of blocks to understanding in her, but she was trying to understand herself, and maybe the things I was calling blocks are for her strengths. Each person has their own road. Her's had helped me see mine more clearly.

And what more could we ask for from friends?

The ayahuasca guy was very nice and well-intentioned. Too bad we all ended up being awake until 3:45am trying to get through the webinar. There was also some awkward girl drama with the trailer park girl not making friends as easily as she'd thought. The other girls kind of pushed her out of their circle.

But it put a whole new perspective on the guru business for me. If I did ever offer anyone advice it would definitely be at a distance and not up close and personal. Not unless I could get more experience helping people get past the blocks I see.

Luckily nobody was lining up to get life advice from a homeless drifter.

I'd tried to arrange as much as I could from Ashville but the Chattanooga transportation had been a nightmare. The local bus stopped running early and the time I got in made it impossible for anyone to give me a ride. Uber requires the app, which I didn't have room for on my phone. Not that they've sent the account verification email even once for any of the four times requested to get the \$15 off my first ride. Then I went to get a candy bar, the sugar as a sort of alcohol substitute, because I was feeling tension for the first time in months, and some unfriendly guy walks up and tells me to leave my backpack at the door. No uniform, no name tag, no courtesy.

Meanwhile, I'm pretty sure the three kids in the next aisle were shoplifting.

I started to get mad and had to pull back and ask what was wrong. Bungled plans, shitty people, \$2 candy bars and a lack of sleep? I'd only seen two sides of Knoxville, pretentious and ghetto, and I didn't like either. Never really thought there was anything here for me, but since Asheville, I'd really started to notice what I liked and what I wanted out of a city or town.

After the next week or so there may be a kind of settling down.

With or without the treasure.

What is the blaze?

That was the question I kept asking myself.

Because the next part of the poem after, "*under heavy loads and water high,*" which I took to mean the railroad bridge off the Wind River and over Johnson Draw, meant that I'd be looking for a blaze.

"If you've been wise and found the blaze, Look quickly down, your quest to cease," read the poem, which by that point I had memorized.

People always suggested owls for that one and I figured I'd wait until I got there to pass judgement, but if you had a blaze that was a pair of eyes with an arrow pointing down it would look like a very simple owl. Or maybe it's not really a clue, just that your judgement has put you there, and/or a sideways allusion to Owl Creek Mountains.

If the previous line mentioned something up high, the heavy loads and water, then wouldn't that be where the blaze is if you then have to look down?

Is it under the railroad bridge somewhere? Or in the tunnel somehow? But no, Forrest said it wasn't in a tunnel, maybe to keep people out of the railroad tunnel when it could be dangerous.

There is a road that ran behind there leading up into the mountains. On the railroad side of the river. That might give a person an easier way to haul 40 pounds of stuff over two trips instead of having to kayak there in two separate trips.

Besides if Forrest Fenn came in from behind, he would have been at higher elevation, meaning that he would only be carrying heavy loads downhill. That seemed more plausible for an 80 year old man.

Sitting at the bus stop in Chattanooga, I realized that it was the second day after drinking whiskey in Asheville. Hence the mood change I associated with alcohol detox induced stress.

Twice that had happened on this trip. The second day after leaving Gatlinburg I got paranoid that I'd given my sister bad financial advice and if I was wrong she'd never forgive me. (It involved too much money, potentially, and she had high hopes for it.) It took me all day to hike to a cell signal and clear that up.

By the time the bus got to Chattanooga, I realized that I could have just camped there. Literally, right where the bus dropped you off on 23rd St.

The back of the property, which is no more than a vacant lot, is fenced and backing the highway. Trees and shrubs grow along it and I could have slept in their shadow.

"Not such a good idea," Terry said when he picked me up. "There's a crime-ridden ghetto on the other side of the highway with shootings every day."

In fact, he apologized for making me wait in the dark in such a bad neighborhood. I still thought I would have been fine after it got a little darker.

Terry was the husband of yet another lady that I had hiked with for a brief time in Vermont. He took me back to their house, which was 17 miles north near the Southern Adventist University. The baby was in bed and I was quietly ushered towards the shower and showed my room. We chatted for a while, after the shower, then everyone

went to bed. I slept in too late, having tried to get up twice but passed back out. Lack of sleep from the night before.

Twice on this trip I'd been offered a car to drive. Both times a standard, which I can drive. I just feel uncomfortable doing it. So when I found out Collegedale was the headquarters of Little Debbie's snack cakes, I had to walk it. And using money I didn't have, I bought too much, including a baseball cap for the sun and the road walking that I'd have to do out west.

To my disappointment there was no factory tour. "We had to stop that after 9/11," the lady at Little Debbie's tells me. Score another one for the terrorists. Or the fear mindset which seems to have a hold over most people... these days? Or always?

Instead, I spent my time exploring Goliath Wall and Student Cave at Southern Adventist University.

I was dropped off back in Chattanooga with no real plan and on the wrong side of the Tennessee River. I think. I wasn't sure. But I ended up spending money that I didn't have on tacos because it was raining out, hard.

The walk back across Walnut Bridge into downtown looked cool, but I figured I'd wait until the thunder and lightning storm slowed.

I'd managed to sell .2 BTC the night before and transferred that to my bank account to make sure that I had some money available for the rest of the trip. Just using their laptop took forever for them to charge, clean up, and figure out the parental controls.

Once I was on, I was done in minutes, with \$210 deposited into my checking account.

The thought that I could have flown closer, faster and for less money had been nagging at me a few times over the previous week. But the plan had always been taking the bus and hitchhiking. That's the way I pictured it. And I tend to get set on a plan in a way that makes it hard to deviate. Like being programmed.

We had spent most of the previous night running some tests on what I called the Firepower prototype. Like the name suggested it was a device for converting the heat from a fire or flame into electricity so that a person could charge their cell phone from a campfire or even something as simple as a candle or oil lamp. It was something I built which was a combination of an SP1848 Peltier Thermoelectric Panel wired to a 0.9V-5V USB Step-up Power Supply Module.

Heating the TEG didn't produce enough voltage to charge anything. With an ice cube on the opposite side, creating more of a temperature differential, it generated more, but still not enough. Technically it should only need a temperature difference of 20 degrees to get 0.97V at 225MA, but what did I know? I'd had a couple of the prototypes in my backpack for months without ever being able to test them. I figured that since a

candle burns at 829 °C (1,500 °F) it should easily be able to hit a 100 degree temperature difference which should have put out 4.8V at 669MA.

The tests said otherwise.

That meant after all of this was over I'd have to go back to the drawing board and redesign the device. Instead of being a future source of revenue the Firepower device was just another failed idea.

I just hoped the search for Forrest Fenn's treasure didn't turn out to be the same thing.

The Hostelling International Chicago Hostel was pretty amazing.

I'd only partially explored the city after lunch at Portillo's, the reason I told everyone on the Appalachian Trail that I was leaving for Chicago. But I could totally see myself living in the building.

The bus out of Chattanooga was packed. Plus, there were no working outlets in the seats so I arrived with a dead phone. And I had forgotten to charge my backup battery in Chattanooga.

I'd arrived in town with \$2.80, but checked my account balance and found more than I'd expected. Hence two lunches and a way too expensive, \$4, hot chocolate at Panera earlier that morning to wait out the rain and charge my phone.

Checking the next day's plan, Google Maps said that Megabus went further than Omaha, and into Lincoln, Nebraska. If that was true, the plan was to stay on the bus for the extra hour to get me that much closer.

But Google Maps stopped working on my phone. Updates wouldn't go through for insufficient storage, and since I updated Facebook (*which took deleting and reinstalling*) my battery was draining much faster than usual. I also suspected that it was using more data as well which might be a problem out west when I had to rely on it for navigation.

But I saw more of Chicago than I have in the past, despite having been through the city on numerous occasions. And for whatever reason, I was cured of my craving for Portillo's. Not that it wasn't good. But one thing that turned me off was the service. The definition of sweet peppers and hot peppers is totally different in Chicago than it is back east. The female cashier got really upset when I tried to clarify, to the point of being rude. Plus, I'm not sure what Portillo's means by gravy on the Italian Roast Beef Sandwich. Gravy or drippings? Because there was no "gravy".

Also, they call banana peppers "Sport Peppers", which are what I know of as pepperoncinis, which are also called pepper-chinis, yellow peppers, and sweet peppers anywhere else. But here a sweet pepper is apparently a green bell pepper. No idea what hot peppers are as the cashier was too mad to talk to me and charged me for extra peppers I didn't want.

That was the biggest issue in my life. Pretty serious stuff when I felt like I had travelled halfway across the country for a hot dog.

A homeless guy was wandering the restaurant and told me that it was his birthday when he saw me sit down. He wanted me to buy him an Italian Beef Sandwich. When I said I was outdoors too, he said, "No you're not," then thought better of it.

I gave him \$2 in my pocket but didn't buy him the sandwich. A guy at the next table did that.

And sure, I was inside for the night, had been the last few days, but I also didn't have the chip on my shoulder that he had, or the self-inflicted limitations. He mumbled something about getting out of prison under his breath and I could believe it. He hated people for having anything and didn't understand why they got things so easy when it came so hard for him.

I was outside in a way that neither the homeless nor the homebound could understand or relate to.

The story of my life.

At the hostel there was a kid in his early 20's on the phone with hotel security for the place he stayed at before. He had left his bags at the hotel and when he went back they weren't there.

"I gave the bags to someone," he said into the phone. "No, not in uniform. No, he didn't ask me to sign anything, but they gave me a ticket."

He didn't look too happy at the response he got from the other end.

"But why would someone who doesn't work for the hotel take my bags?" He asked, as if no such thing would ever happen.

"We'll review the security footage," hotel security told him.

I tried to imagine his life. Cushy. Insulated. Family and rich friends. Exclusive resort vacations. University that isn't open to a lot of riff-raff. And now this. His first time out on his own and some stupid bellhop lost his luggage. He doesn't even realize that it has probably been stolen.

Then the paranoia hit again. Fear that the treasure had been stolen out from under me. That I was too late. That there was someone else with more resources and speed seeing the obvious.

Then I realized that it was the second night after drinking two weak margaritas in Chattanooga with my hosts. Two drinks, feeling no effects from the alcohol, and yet I had to deal with alcohol detox?

"There is no competition. There is only me," I said in between deep breaths. Forcing myself to relax.

I waited out the rain before heading towards the bus stop. Having a bagel and a couple of bowls of cereal at the HI Chicago before I left. I mapped my route to the Walmart so I could get soda and cashback, but the Google Map update was a strain on

my phone. Crashing and resetting it often. Walking through what I hoped was the last of the rain was no big deal, but Walmart was nowhere to be found.

“Excuse me, do you know where Walmart is?” I asked a local.

“No, but you can Google it.”

Maybe you can, I thought.

By the time I found it, two blocks over, it was abandoned. It was here not six months ago, but it was gone now. Walmart’s are supposed to shutter other businesses, not go out of business. So I hit a bank which would charge me an ATM fee to access my own money. Just in case I want cash on me.

The guy at the bus stop came to Chicago to sell drugs and make some money.

“Cops got this shit on lockdown,” he told me. “Only managed to sell three bags and I’m done. I’m cool and all but I’d rather work a job than have all that.”

So, back to Iowa and his wife. “It’s raining there too,” he told me. “I shoulda brought an umbrella.”

“As long as they don’t have the AC on the bus we’ll be fine,” I said.

When he tried to sit near me on the bus I backtracked a couple of seats.

Chapter 5

When the bus stopped for lunch I decided to spend money, but had a hard time deciding to buy a candy bar. At \$1.99 it was too much, but...

The attendant cashed me out and by the time I was on the bus, I realized that it was \$2 cheaper than everything should have been. It seemed to happen a lot when I needed it, and normally I correct people when I catch it, but this time I kind of accepted it as a gift from the universe.

So, feeling lucky, I asked the driver, "Lincoln, Nebraska is the last stop for this bus, right?" Which it was, but hopefully he would then associate Lincoln, Nebraska with my face. Which would have been great if we didn't switch drivers in Des Moines.

Best laid plans of mice and sneaky men...

But I rode the bus to Lincoln anyway. Which meant 60 or more miles more than I'd expected, but also being in a strange city with no plans at 9pm. I finally figured out how to get on O Street, or Route 6, over the bridge and railroad tracks. Near the largest railroad switching yard in the United States, I seem to remember. I walked out of town for an hour, and broke down, giving into my soft side and paid for a hotel room. When the money is there, the easy options always seem more attractive.

Everything was going to work out, right?

Or was I being delusional?

I washed my shirt and two pairs of underwear in the sink and showered. Up early for the free breakfast, I couldn't figure out how they intended for us to cook the eggs they had set out. The second time back I said fuck it, I'd crack two eggs into a coffee cup and microwave it.

To my surprise they were hard-boiled.

D'oh.

While hitchhiking I had no luck on the safe but less busy side of the on-ramp. I gave a nod to the State Troopers and cops pulling people over near the overpass, wondering if hitchhiking was legal in Nebraska. I switched to the busy side of the overpass and ten minutes later got a ride.

Sort of.

He wanted to see my ID.

"It's illegal to pick up people asking for rides," he said in a thick accent. Which is also why I missed his name. He was from Sudan and was here working at an onion plant, having worked in a meat plant before. He sends money back home for his kids, where he used to be a cowboy. \$200/month for rent, \$150/month for food, \$50/month for schooling.

“I know cattle,” he told me. “Money, not so much.”

“Everyone tell me America is land of opportunity, land of freedom. Land of opportunity? Yes. Land of freedom? No. Africa is land of freedom. You want to do what makes you happy, you do it.”

“A co-worker was going fishing,” he continued, “I said, I’d like to fish too. But he tells me you need a permit,” he said, shaking his head at the memory. “To take a fish out of the water?”

88 miles at 80 miles an hour. He dropped me off at the travel center one exit past his despite falling asleep at the wheel. He had worked a 12-hour overnight shift and only went into Lincoln because he’d lost his keys the day before. He has to work another 12-hour shift later and needs to catch some sleep.

“But it’ll be easier for you to catch a ride from here,” he said before we shook hands and parted ways.

So I walked back out to I-80 and stood at the onramp for west-bound traffic. I held out my thumb. I smiled. And not a single person smiled back. They’re all miserable, while most look away or stare straight ahead. The ones that make eye contact look like fish in an aquarium, with a distant sort of recognition that someone is out there but no idea what that means. I stand there smiling, gesturing with my thumb, raising and lowering my eyebrows, anything to get a reaction.

One 18 wheeler loaded with live cattle takes the corner too close and I have to step back even further off the shoulder. He had parked nearby at first and had plenty of room so I suspect that he did it on purpose. Another asshole in a different vehicle started yelling out the passenger side window as his buddy sped past. I don’t know why people do that, they’re the only ones that can hear what is being said. They’re like dogs barking from a passing car. Then there are the macho guys, alone in their car or truck, who feel the need to stomp on the gas pedal the moment eye contact is made.

Insecure losers.

Little by little I start hating Nebraska. Lincoln seemed cool, enough that I’d considered swinging back through, but this? Did nobody care enough about a person on the side of the road to offer a lift? Were they all that scared of strangers? To the point that they completely disobeyed their Sunday School teachings? Do Unto Others, Love Thy Neighbor?

After five hours I was going to give up. “Ten more minutes,” I said, out loud. “If you want to throw me a ride in the last ten minutes, that’d be great. Otherwise, I’m walking.”

Sure enough, someone pulled over. An 18 wheeler of all things.

The dog’s name was Jake, I can’t remember the owner’s name. I took Jake’s seat so the compromise was that I had to keep petting him. If I stopped he’d paw at me

with unclipped nails that dragged heavily across my exposed leg. Still no pants despite the cold relentless winds. He was a big dog, hairy and shedding.

I guess I wasn't much of a conversationalist because the driver turned on the radio, then made a couple of cell phone calls. After a while, even the dog got sick of being pet and laid down in the back of the cab.

He was going to California, across Wyoming, so I had hoped for Cheyenne. But he wasn't in a hurry. He was headed to Sydney, he hoped, but the sun was getting low and he didn't want it in his eyes. So North Platte was it, like I said, he wasn't in a hurry.

He was heavysset and dirty, both in hygiene and in the language he used on the CB.

"Any of you fuckers out there that can read?" He had shouted into the radio. But he was nice enough to stop and give me a ride, so I hoped his financial situation worked out. It sounded like he paid a lot of bills for a home he is never around to enjoy. Not to mention the wife and daughter getting allowances.

He dropped me off at Flying J and I had to wash my hands three times to get the grime of the dog off. 142 miles then, 88 this morning, so 230 miles for the day. Still over 400 miles to go.

And I had no idea where I'd be sleeping.

I stealth camped next to the river that night. Across the highway from Love's and Flying J, and across the street from the hotel. I got into my spot kind of early, it was still too bright out, so it took a while before I could stretch out, unpack, and relax.

I was up before sunrise, and waiting for the sun I tried to charge my phone. Since the Google updates the phone constantly crashed and the battery didn't hold like it used to, even in airplane mode. Which sucked, because I was super dependent on it to get me where I was going.

I spent two hours standing in the freezing wind on the on-ramp trying to get a ride.

I kept wanting to call him Victor, but the driver's name only had four letters, so Hugo, that sounds right. He picked me up on his way to Las Vegas from Fargo, North Dakota where he lived. He was headed to Las Vegas for work, maybe, he was kind of quiet.

He had a shaved head and a scar running across his cheek.

"I'm headed south through Denver, but I can drop you off at the split," he told me.

We rode in silence mostly, past the last exit before the split. So he just dropped me off out there, on the highway. I cut across the median and walked 80 west, you know, where pedestrians aren't allowed. It was a mile up the highway to the first exit to nothing. Six miles to the next exit, but I didn't dare walk it. Thus far I had an excuse. There was no traffic to hitch so I walked into Julesburg.

Only Janice, an older woman, gave me a ride the last two miles.

I grabbed a Powerade in Julesburg because I expected the sun and exposed walk through farmland was going to fry me. It was 15 miles into Chappelle and I got maybe eight miles on foot before a guy picked me up. Not that the road wasn't busy with single guys in pickup trucks, he was just the only one to make eye contact.

His cousin travels, hitches and cycles, so he tries to pick up hitchhikers when he can. He saw too much of the sand, sun, and cold in the military, carrying a pack, so he's all set with that.

He drove me to Chappelle, past where he was going. He's not from Nebraska he tells me. "People around here are kind of funny," he said. He isn't quite sure how to put in words the type of mentality which prevents anyone from helping a stranger.

More and more on this trip, I keep wondering why I didn't go outside the Megabus box and just get a Greyhound from Chicago to Casper like a normal person? Why the excitement about the hitchhiking adventure? Especially when it was costing me more in the long run because of the hotel splurges, and was taking way longer to get there.

Oddly enough, it didn't feel like I was sabotaging myself. To get direct transportation worked out would have cheapened the goal.

I guess I wanted all of it to be epic.

I couldn't even walk out of the gas station in Chappelle without being offered a ride. Too bad it was in the wrong direction. Two miles later a retired AT+T guy pulled over, he'd just finished playing golf and was on his way home. To Lodgepole, only 10 or so miles up the road, but I was glad to take it.

He dropped me off just west of the town and I walked no more than two miles before a pickup truck that had passed me came back. "Trying to get a cooler spot in hell," he later explained. He's going into Sydney, but he had a cold so it was hard for him to hear. "It's taking a long time to get better," he told me. "You know what gets harder when you get older?" He asked, then answered his own question, "EVERYTHING!"

He rolls his head with the word to make sure I understand that he means everything.

A little further down the road, he starts to tell a story, "This is from way back," he said. "All my stories are from before my marriage. Do you know what changes when you get married? EVERYTHING! Nowadays I work, come home, have a beer and watch the tube. Have dinner and a couple more beers and some whiskey, then the next day I go back to work and do it all over again."

"I did get one good thing out of my marriage... my car insurance went down."

He drops me in Sydney, which is two miles from I-80. Which is no problem because I was in a pretty good mood. Not 10 minutes at the on-ramp and a truck pulled over. Not onto the shoulder, but blocking the ramp. And there's a tractor-trailer trying to get on, so I hurry and jump in.

"I'm only going two exits," he said as I closed the door.

"Oh... what's that, like 30 miles?" I asked, as he pulled onto the highway.

"It's 10 miles down the road."

Fuck, I'm thinking, I just fucked myself. I was hoping for a straight shot into Cheyenne.

When we get to the exit there is literally nothing there. Well, places to camp, but nothing else. And no traffic. "Grab a water out of the back," he said as I got out. I was going to need it, stuck out here, I thought, but he drove away as soon as I closed the door.

There was nothing else to do but walk the mile down to Route 30 and try to walk into Potter, or hopefully Kimball by tonight.

Richard Kimball, on the run, is what I'm thinking about for the entire walk.

I was hitchhiking but nobody stopped. Instead, a mid-20's mom and her daughter came back to get me after passing me first.

"I asked her if we should pick up that guy walking," the mom tells me.

"It's always good to meet new people," the little girl says from the back seat. Her name is Gabriella and she is 6 years old.

They're going into Potter where they live, but instead, they drive me through DIX into Kimball and drop me off on the west side of town. I was feeling pretty good about the universe right then. Like I needed to question my idea of charity, comparing giving money to people versus actually making someone's life better by helping them in a specific and measurable way. And also that there are whole segments of the population that don't have a mindset that's compatible with mine, and that's okay.

Not a mile later I was picked up again. Another mother and daughter. In conversation I mention a potential job in Yellowstone, my cover story for heading toward the Forrest Fenn treasure, and she starts filling me in on the churches there that will help me out. People in Cheyenne that will get me a free bus ticket to get me to that job, food banks and other stuff as well. I offer the daughter my Facebook info if she ever needs any help self-publishing her writing that she seems too shy and too scared to do, and they drop me off in Pine Bluffs.

Just over the Wyoming line and the on-ramp for I-80 west was shut down, but hey, I made it to Wyoming!

I walked out to the working I-80 on-ramp west, where I tried hitchhiking for an hour before sunset, then gave up. 39 miles into Cheyenne. Should I sleep there and try hitchhiking again the next day? Or walk the service road for 40+ miles in the dark?

Fuck it, I'll walk.

Less than a mile down the service road and it was still light enough to see the truck pass and come back.

"How far ya going?" A redneck voice slurs. I let some traffic pass and tell him, Cheyenne. "Well hop in," he said, in an entirely different type of voice.

What the hell.

He lived five miles down the road and I told him even that would help. He's German and was surprised that I recognized his accent. He cruised far past five miles before handing me a soda and took me all the way into Cheyenne. But he didn't want to drop me off just anywhere. He has to know that I'm safe and have a place to stay for the night. So he dropped me at the Motel 6, right next to the highway that I have to take up to Casper.

Sure, I could have walked in and let him drive away. It was only just after 8pm. But I didn't know the city, and I kind of took it as a sign to have faith in the journey. Even in surrendering, I'd be taken care of. So after the room fee and taxes, my checking account was dangerously low.

But no wifi, that's broken. No laundry either, that's out of order. I get to my room and there are no batteries in the remote so I try to call downstairs but the phone doesn't work. And the lights above the bed are out. I went down to the front desk and the night clerk had to lock up and go somewhere else for a different remote. The remote in my room was also the wrong brand.

But whatever, right? Not how I thought I was going to be spending the night. I pictured an all-night death march. I was committed to that. Instead, I got all this. And sure, I'm broke, but I'm almost there. I just have to have faith that it all comes together.

Faith in something so crazy that it boggles even my mind sometimes.

So much so that I find myself asking, "Is this really what I'm doing?"

How was I going to get the treasure out of Thermopolis?

Maybe I-25 from Casper, Wyoming to Sante Fe? To say thank you for the treasure. Then what? ABQ to Kingman? Or south from the Wind River Range through Rawlins, then I-80 west to SLC and then down to Las Vegas as an exit?

Or, just hire a plane to take me somewhere? How much would that be? It would be cool to fly in a small plane, but imagine how funny it would be to find the treasure and fly out of there only to be in a plane crash.

There were private flights that flew out of West Yellowstone... but that puts you too far out of the way. Unless there is some local transportation out of Thermopolis into Yellowstone and from there some kind of shuttle to the airport. But then why not just fly out of Thermopolis Airport?

These are the kinds of logistical questions I ran over and over in my head. Things like how much would the treasure weigh, would it all fit in my backpack, would I have to get rid of gear to make room for the gold?

I couldn't really do anything else unless I could get there... except obsess over the details.

Then my phone crashed for what appeared to be the last time. No matter what I did it wouldn't restart. So no maps or Googling places to hitch or anything like that. Worse, no access to some of my limited money because the two-factor authorization requires me to receive a text at that phone number. And the worst is that it was also my exit strategy for a successful completion of this quest.

And maybe I can do without the maps and the money for now, but the exit strategy?

I kept thinking of how if I'd skipped the hotel room I could have bought the \$50 bus ticket to Casper and maybe my phone wouldn't have crashed from being online and trying to charge it at the same time. Plus I would have had money leftover for breakfast.

In the morning the front desk was no help. I tell the lady working the front desk that I had broken my phone and needed a replacement, asking about Walmart.

"Too far to walk," she said, "There's a bus stop across the street." Which was about the most useful piece of information I could get out of her. When I asked about the schedule she wrote down their phone number for me to call. Which didn't do me any good without a phone.

Besides which it was Saturday, so buses didn't start running until 10am, according to the sign at the bus stop, and I had no idea what time it was. The lady at the hotel was rude enough that I didn't want to cross the street to ask. So I walk, because I know it wasn't 10am yet. A mile in the wrong direction before I turned around to get directions from Little America. It's only 7:30am.

Downtown the visitors center didn't open until 9am. But when it does the lady there tells me where the bus station is, but in a way which I don't believe her.

"Walmart is on the other side of town, on the other side of the airport," she said. "You can drive there pretty easily, but there are no buses from here to there."

She had to dig for a bus schedule, because I wanted some kind of confirmation before I believed her. Looking at the schedule it was clear that she was wrong.

My last phone had cost \$16 and lasted two years. I've picked up a few for as cheap as \$10 when I was doing the phone farm thing. Where you have multiple phones to make money from a variety of apps online and then funnel those rewards into one account. But there was nothing under \$30 in Walmart. So I sat in the McDonald's with no outlets and tried to activate the new phone.

Two hours later it still isn't activated.

I had to buy a loaf of bread just to get cashback to pay for the bus ticket to Casper. I no longer had enough in my checking account to pay for the bus ticket, which was literally the same price as my hotel room the night before.

At the bus station the cops are waiting for a Navajo couple to leave town. They just got out of jail and had their things stolen, they said. So I gave them the bread, plus some snacks, the cream cheese I took from the hotel in Lincoln and a pack of MRE cheese I've been carrying since Georgia. I had \$10 in cash, a little change, and nothing in my bank account.

And my phone still didn't work.

Chapter 6

Cheyenne to Casper was a nice bus ride.

Only 14 people on board the giant bus. No crying kids. No loud talkers. No people playing music. We got into town and I walked down to 1st St. and took a right onto the road to Shoshoni, over 100 miles away. Walked out the Platte River Parkway as the sun was setting, wondering how far I was going for the night.

It was supposed to rain and/or snow the next day, so should I push big miles while it was clear? Or do I sleep while I don't have to find a place to set up my tarp? Three to four miles an hour, ten hours, I should make it to Powder River by morning. Just in case, I brought a second liter of water.

There was no way I was hitchhiking in the dark. As it was, cops drove by me every ten minutes or so and the road out of town was way busier than I'd expected, lined with gas stations and industrial warehouses. None of the cops slowed down for a closer look or stopped me until I was out by the airport. He slowed down, threw on his flashing lights and swung back around to stop me on the side of the road. I took my hands out of my pockets and tried to show him my face without blinding myself in his headlights.

"Where are you headed?"

"Thermopolis."

"And you just thought you'd walk there?"

I kind of laugh at how stupid that makes me sound and that kind of puts him at ease.

"Planning on doing any hitchhiking?"

"Maybe tomorrow," I tell him, "but not tonight. Way too dark for that."

"Wyoming state law requires you to walk facing oncoming traffic," he informs me. "I couldn't see you until I was right up on you."

It's true, I was dressed all in black. Black backpack, rain jacket and shorts. Even my baseball cap was dark blue. And I'd been carrying my neon reflective piece of a vest that I usually clip onto my pack for road walks, but it had been in my hand for the last five miles.

I was too excited by the adventure of hiking off into the unknown to stop and pin it to my back.

So I switched sides of the road, determined to at least make the next five miles to where the officer said it becomes more desolate. By the time 11pm rolls around I was looking for a place to sleep. Cover was hard to come by, so I settled on three low tumbleweed bushes ten feet off the edge of the road and maybe 15 miles outside of Casper. And because I'd been watching the lightning in the sky directly ahead of me I was concerned about rain overnight. Even though I'd been sprinkled on twice, the clouds had seemed to part and dissipate as I walked.

Reluctantly I took out my tarp and placed it over me. If it rained, and that never went well set up like this, at least I could sit up under the tarp and pack. But it didn't rain. In fact, the skies cleared and the bright moon made me feel like I was on display. By 5:30am it was getting light out. Not much, but enough. And because of the tarp, I had condensation issues. My bivy was wet at the top, probably from my breath, but also at the foot. I pulled the sleeping bag out of the bivy and packed that in its stuff sack, then put the wet bivy at the bottom of the pack and resumed walking by 6am.

By 7am it was light enough that I started hitchhiking. Maybe 20 cars went by, mostly single guys in empty pickup trucks. I started wondering if anyone believed in God or Jesus in these parts, and wondering if they'd let me be stranded out in the rain.

There was a truck that slowed, turned around to hit me with their lights, real slow, then sped off to turn around and resume their trip. Were they looking to see if I was anyone they knew?

At 8am Benjamin picked me up. On his way to church but he doesn't mention that at first. "Not a good day to be out here," he said. "Storms coming."

And it looked like it from the horizon.

"How far are you going?"

"Shoshoni."

He was headed to Riverton so he'd drop me off. He mentions the free hot springs in Thermopolis and tells me that he's a retired professor now doing piano tuning. He always wanted to do a long-distance bicycle ride, and the way he said made it seem like it was an impossible dream. I asked about Boysen Lake to distract him from his reverie, and he mentions fishing. Keeping the Forrest Fenn poem in mind I mention brown trout, to which he replied, "Rainbow trout mostly," then he names off a bunch of other species and something about a fishery, but inside I'm devastated.

Am I wrong? Is this really a Quixotic adventure? Have I really left myself stranded in northern Wyoming with no money? With no cell phone to even call for help?

But I smile and talk for the long ride. No need for Benjamin to know about my problem. About my failure. Not that it is that, not yet, hopefully not at all, but my monkey mind grasped onto that idea to tell me how stupid I had been, and I had to marginalize or sideline that voice to carry on the conversation.

“Snowpack is at 200%,” Benjamin tells me. “People are worried about flooding when it melts.”

I’m worried about the river crossing to get to the treasure, which may or may not be there.

By the time Benjamin dropped me off in Shoshoni, it was raining with a mix of snow.

“I feel really guilty leaving you here like this,” he said. But he has been away working and promised his wife that he would meet her at church, besides which he is supposed to play guitar today at the service.

“I got myself into this,” I told him. “I’d planned on being wet, and maybe even cold.”

I get my pack out of his back seat and he motions towards the front door. One more goodbye? I already said it when I got out, even said God Bless while I was getting my pack. But instead, he hands me a folded bill, cash, which is crisp and new and says \$100.

“Take care,” he said.

“Uh... thank you, Benjamin.”

I’ve never taken money from someone like that. Especially not so much. I needed it, and I wanted to give it back, but I didn’t. I walked into the gas station kind of dazed.

Half an hour later and it was still raining, but it had mostly turned to snow.

“I’ve always wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail,” the blue-haired girl who worked at the gas station tells me as she swept the floor. She’d only lived in Shoshoni for three months, but she hoped to hike the trail in ten years. With her boyfriend, she adds, so as not to lead me on.

Ramblin Man had been playing overhead when I walked into the gas station. When it really started snowing, Don’t Fear the Reaper came on the gas station radio. “Seasons don’t fear the reaper, nor do the wind and the sun and the rain...”

Three hours later it was still snowing and supposed to last for a couple more hours. Slightly less in Thermopolis, so the idea was to start walking there once the snow started to slow down. But the snow just kept accumulating and I didn’t feel like I could stay in the gas station forever. Besides, for the only thing in town, the gas station was quite busy. But cold wet feet and a night of 27 F temperatures didn’t sound too appealing either. There was a library around the corner, but being Sunday it was closed.

It turned out that there was one hotel in town, .3 miles away from the gas station. A couple of blocks.

I had that \$100 in my possession for only a couple of hours and here I was going to spend it.

"I'll just go check the price," I told myself. But the wet, windy and cold walk there made me realize otherwise.

There was a moment of panic on the cold walk from the gas station to the hotel when I realized that I'd never looked at the bill. What if it was one of those religious leaflets made to look like money so that people would pick them up, tricking them into reading about Jesus?

That would have been funny.

And tragic.

It took me hours to figure out the heat. But to be fair, I took a four to five-hour nap as soon as I checked in. When I woke up everything was charged again and even my phone number transfer had gone through to the new phone. The hotel room had cost me more than I'd wanted to spend, but the upside was that I still had more money in my pocket than I did that morning.

Plus, I didn't die out in the snow.

And the weather looked great for at least the next week.

In the morning I walked to Thermopolis, 32 miles from Shoshoni, because it was going to be a nice day. It only took about eight hours. The views were amazing, and because it would be hard to figure out exactly where to be dropped off if I was hitching or to have a plausible excuse for being dropped off in the middle of the Wind River Canyon, I never once stuck out my thumb.

As it was I was within 100 yards of my goal. I didn't want to believe it, the view was different than I'd imagined. Then I realized that Google Street View probably distorted distance beyond the road and its immediate surroundings. It was so daunting that I didn't want it to be the place. But as I kept walking it became apparent that it was.

The first problem was the river, which on Google Maps and Street View appeared to be crossable. In real life, it was anything but. And if I couldn't cross the river then I had to come in from the other side. The railroad tracks seemed impossible simply because there was too much traffic and I'd be too visible. Besides which, I'd seen several track crews on the tracks and one train go by. That only left dropping in from above.

Boysen Peak Road Google Maps said. But looking at it when I walked into town it appeared to be gated off farther down the road from Route 20, so...

But it was getting late, I had to find a place to sleep for the night and fill my water. If I could just cross the river this would be so easy. Or if I had money I wouldn't have to stealth camp somewhere to try and hike up to the peak the next day.

The night before, at the hotel, I had a dream that Forrest Fenn was telling me about false or negative clues, and at the time I was relieved that I didn't know the actual location. If I did the thoughts could leak out of my head. Then refilling my water, I thought a random old guy was Forrest Fenn.

I was thinking about this way too much.

Something that also worried me was that there were no water pipes on the railroad tracks coming out of Shoshoni. But I hadn't passed the reservoir by then, so maybe... But there was none on the north side either. Which might sound like a weird detail, but considering the 'Water High' remarks in the poem, that had been my solution.

Was I wrong? Was all of this for nothing?

I hiked out of Thermopolis at 7pm and by 8pm I was tucked into a cave across from Wedding of the Waters, just south of town. Tucked in is maybe stretching it. I was at its entrance, semi exposed to traffic. To push deeper into the cave required a squeeze and even though it looked like it opened up enough inside to lay down it also kept going. How far I'd never know.

The soft dirt inside and in front of the cave showed no tracks of any kind so I was fairly certain that there was nothing in there. By 9pm I'd unpacked my sleeping bag and was dozing off. At 4am a train went by on the tracks across the river. "So, two trains a day?" I wondered.

By morning, 5:30am, the full moon had set enough that I was exposed to its full glare, it's light no longer blocked by the hill or the cave walls, I was on display again for all the passing vehicles who cared to look up. But if I kept laying flat they couldn't really see me, right?

Before it got too light out I hiked out to Boysen Peak Rd., following Google's directions to the top. The first gate was open, a second closed. But I followed another turn with no gate which turned out to be wrong. So I backtracked and stared at the gate. No lock, just a simple chain and slot thing to keep animals in or out. It looked like there were cows grazing further down the road. And oddly enough there was a large rabbit there that didn't run from me. As if he wasn't sure what I was.

"I'm not here to bother you," I told him. I wanted to go through the gate and up the mountain but the warning signs on the previous gate about fines for trespassing kept me in place. If the gate had been open I would have walked in. I certainly wasn't hunting, fishing or trapping. Just a quick in and out up the road. After all that had to have been how Forrest went. Then downhill in two trips to drop the treasure and the chest.

I was beginning to curse Forrest Fenn more and more the more difficult this was becoming.

So I walked back into town. Library maybe, hot springs maybe, an inner tube and some trash bags to float across the river maybe. A life vest would be easy.

But the library was closed, it was supposed to be open but there was a librarian meeting. No time listed to open. So I walked up to the Bath House, the public and free hot spring soaking pool. 20 minutes max, the signs say. I signed in and soaked my feet and legs. The worker was eyeing my pack repeatedly but didn't say anything about the fact that he thought I was a dirty, homeless drifter. When I left though he invited me to come back in a few hours to soak again.

By noon the library still wasn't open, but by sitting outside and using their wifi I learned a few things about the area and the river. None of which made me happy. But maybe there was a bus out of Thermopolis at the Shell gas station. There had to be one, right? Only the gas station was an Exxon, not a Shell, and Greyhound didn't list it as a stop. None of which sounded very promising.

I was starting to feel paranoid that I'd been in one place for too long. That the police were taking notice of the new homeless guy in town. Then I thought about it. I'd only been in Thermopolis for 24 hours.

I sat in the McDonald's sipping soda until 8pm. Some of the morning staff had worked late but at least they'd gone home at 7pm. It felt weird having them know that I was in there for a few hours in the morning, and now a few hours at night.

I walked out of town and a couple of high school kids who'd seen me in McDonald's circled their diesel pickup around to cruise by me in the opposite direction. They got close to the white line as they passed and opened up the throttle on the truck. Luckily that was all they did.

I double checked at the gas station about the bus. "Not anymore," the tired woman working the register tells me. "Bus service was suspended in 2015. Casper or Buffalo are your only options."

123 or 132 miles, either direction.

Pat Benatar, Invincible, was playing on the overhead speakers. So I walked out, nervous, having to pee way too much from all that McDonald's soda. One way or the other I was going to have to find out if I was right or wrong about the location of Forrest Fenn's treasure.

The Baptist Church sign on the way out of town read:

God creates opportunities, It is up to you to grab them.

Chapter 7

I got to the railroad bridge and dropped under, to pee and wonder why I didn't sleep there. It was tempting. But I had to push on, I had to know. Not knowing would be worse than dying. I'd always want to come back.

So I walked the railroad tracks out across the bridge, which sounds easy, but every hint of headlights I'd drop to the ground and freeze. Laying off to the side of the tracks for cover and to prevent me from being silhouetted. Occasionally laying among the bones of roadkill or putting my hands in cow patties.

Once past the bridge I still remained low and quiet as possible. Making sure not to kick the rocks that made up the railroad bed or knock them against the rails. I tried to muffle the crunch under my footsteps as much as possible even though I was alone and had the sound of the river to cover me.

I hopped the fence from railroad property to get on Boysen Peak Road. The telephone poles that run along it were my indicator that it ran close, even in the dark. Though it was a full moon it had been rising later and later each night and now the sky had a cover of clouds to help diffuse the light when it decided to show itself.

Even on the road, I continued to drop when lights came over the hill from town. It was ridiculous maybe, but even at that distance, my shadow was visible on the ground. I hiked up the road, sweating heavily and panting. The farther from the lights I got, the higher up the hill, the more confident I felt.

Then one of the dark trees looked like it had two trunks, which was odd. Even odder was that it moo'd and ran away with two smaller bushes following it.

"Crap, cows," I said out loud. I'd had a bad experience hiking with cows in southern California and didn't want to repeat that little incident. Especially when I couldn't see them clearly.

Then there were more cows. Watching me in the dark, walking up the road. I had considered that they let them free range up there but that hadn't really meant much until then. Maybe there was a barb wire fence running along the side of the road? I took out my pocket flashlight, and with my hand over much of the beam, tried to inspect the roadside. That there was no fence was apparent when several more startled cows ran from one side to the other. I immediately drew my umbrella from my backpack. My only weapon against the herd. And as I looked up the last part of the climb to the flat area it was apparent that I'd only just started to walk into the herd.

That slowed my walking. That and the aggressive mooing of what sounded like a large male ready to protect the herd. And he wasn't running to get away from me.

Cows. Anything but cows, I thought. Just to be safe I backtracked down the hill, looking behind me for sneaky, quiet cows, and listening to the threatening sounds of a

male protecting his herd. Further down I pulled out my phone, having lowered the brightness before I left town, and checked my GPS. Two-thirds of the way to the top of Johnson's Draw. I'd come so far...

But I walked all the way back down the hill until I could see the train cars parked on the siding that had been there for days. Well, for as long as I'd been in town. I hopped that fence and walked down to the tracks. I wanted to see just how bright the lights were from the cars before I decided to try and run the two and a half miles south on the railroad tracks. And if they were bright on the road, down here they were blinding.

But what else was I going to do?

I took off my pack for a little bit to try and dry off some. I was sweating and stinking way too much.

Nothing to it but to do it.

So I threw on my pack and did my involuntary check, wallet, phone, EDC, water bottle... my elbow tap which tells me that the water bottle is in place came up empty. I can't go spend how many days in Johnson's Draw without a water bottle, even if I did have my filter.

So I took out my flashlight again, and covering it with my hand I discreetly checked the area behind the train where I'd been hiding. Nothing. Thinking back to when I put my umbrella back in I did remember it being a loose fit. My umbrella and water bottle share the same side pouch. That meant that it had already been missing. Of course, when I hopped the fence from the road to get down to the tracks.

Luckily it was easy enough to spot in the darkness.

No sooner than I started down the tracks I heard the train horn. It was just after 10pm, the night before there wasn't a train until 4am. If I'd started without my water bottle I would have been caught in front of the train with nowhere to go.

I laid down between two small hills to let the train pass. The parked cars on the side track probably would have been enough to keep me hidden, but I wanted to make sure. If that train had come through when I was on the tracks there would have been nowhere to hide. And if a work crew was following behind it?

But with the one train having gone by and it being a single track out past the dam I was pretty sure that I wouldn't see another one for a while. Long enough to run the two and a half miles while hiding from the lights of every car and truck that went by?

Waiting was the wrong option, there was nothing to wait for. So I did my involuntary check and ran. I ran until I was out of breath and sweating even more. Then I walked. My head was on a swivel. Any glow in either direction and I dropped down beside the tracks, away from the road. If it was behind me I'd try to ascertain if it was on the tracks or on the road and look for some kind of alternative hiding place.

Then I'd get up, do a gear check, and run. Or more like hustling at that point. Trying to put in as much distance as I could before the next car or truck came down the canyon. I'd drop to hide and check to be certain that I wasn't laying on my new phone zipped inside my jacket pocket so it couldn't be jostled out and lost.

Then at one point, I looked across the river from where I was hiding and there were tractor-trailers parked there for the night. And me just standing there across the river from them. No lights came on, there was no movement, so I continued to hustle along as quietly as possible until they were out of sight. I'd never even thought about that as a problem with running down the tracks.

It seemed to take forever but I finally made it to Johnson Draw. Checking my phone though it was no more than 30-40 minutes since I'd started down the tracks. I went up to the grassy side of the draw, and checking for cars first, turned on my flashlight. Just over the hill was an old iron box that'd been pried open. Inside was empty. I hoped that wasn't what I came for. I quickly made camp behind a boulder and stripped out of my sweaty clothes. My only hope was that it wouldn't rain.

Originally I'd thought the area would be more desolate. Even the railroad bridge I'd thought would be taller and made from timbers like something from the 1800s. I'd thought that it would have been there in some forgotten nook. But there was no water main like I'd hoped, in fact, there was a water treatment plant on the south side of town. And also while in town I'd read that there'd been a train derailment here in 2010, so the bridge itself wouldn't have been a great hiding spot. Then again, there was that pried open rusted box behind the hill. That didn't stop me from checking the bridge first thing in the morning after being woken up by an overhead airplane.

Spotter planes? That was another thing I hadn't thought of, so I moved my cowboy camp back farther up the draw to camp under some trees.

Heading up the draw to search, it was hard not to want to look under every rock outcropping and in every sort of naturally made hiding spot. But I kept repeating to myself, "If you've been wise and found the blaze." That was the clue. The "heavy loads" had been the railroad tracks and with no piped water that meant I was also still looking for "water high."

Way back in the draw I saw it. A kind of multi-story indentation in the cliff. The kind you could picture Indians and outlaws hiding out under. If I was going to hide a treasure it would be somewhere epic like that. So I climbed and pushed through the brush to work my way towards it. All the while scanning for the blaze. "If you've been wise," like an owl I always thought.

There was an old homemade ladder knocked down that went to a cave up high. A pile of droppings underneath drew my attention. Mouse bones in poop. Owl droppings. And sure enough, there was an owl in the cave, sitting still, watching me. Was it even real I wondered?

I knew I should have read the poem again that morning before I left so that it would be fresh in my memory. Despite having read it dozens of times that had all been back when I'd originally figured out this location. It was, "look quickly down, your quest to cease," if I remembered right. But down? There's nothing down here, that is, even if the owl is the blaze. Maybe it's fake. Again, not what I pictured.

But if I looked all the way down there was the pool that collected from the "water high." It wasn't very big, but it was ice cold. Why was it that when I'd first read the poem I'd thought the treasure was hidden underwater? Something about, "it will be worth the cold." Is it in that pool, I wondered.

I climbed down, stripped, and the whole time the owl never moved. I did find a tick on me, which made me a little paranoid. I'd already had Lyme Disease once. I didn't need it again. Not to mention that I couldn't afford medication unless I found the damn treasure.

The water was so cold that it hurt, which made staying in for more than a minute almost impossible. Melted snow falling from above and pooling in a shaded canyon wasn't going to warm up any time soon.

I felt around the edges as much as I could. I peered at it from every angle hoping for a glimpse of something promising. The deepest part was surprisingly up to my waist, reaching in just didn't seem to go deep enough. Besides, I was still wearing my sleeping base layer which is always supposed to stay dry. Now it was soaking wet.

So I hiked back to the hideout as I was beginning to think of my campsite. I could search all week, weather depending, with one exception. Water might be an issue unless I hike back up to that pool and filter from that.

A quick lunch of peanut butter by the spoonful and a trial sized 3 Musketeers candy bar. A short nap in the sun after I'd dried out my clothes and picked all the burr like seeds off my socks and base layer bottoms.

I reread the poem a few times, but after my nap I found myself drawn to climbing up from my hideout to look at the rusted metal box again. I wish I knew the exact dimensions of the metal box I was looking for, I knew they were available online, but there's no signal out here to check on short notice. I didn't even have a tape measure to gauge this one's dimensions accurately enough.

But if it is the box I'm looking for, why leave it way out here by the railroad tracks? Had the treasure already been found, by reservation people who don't want more tourists heading back to look for it? Is it there as a warning? No need to come any further, look, it's empty.

Then again, it could just be an old railroad toolbox. Checking the area closer there was a storage box built into the side of the draw with old railroad ties and a heavy metal door. The box looked like it could have once been stored there.

The box Forrest used is said to weigh 20 pounds by itself. After it gets dark I thought, I'd have to go over and try to pick it up and gauge its weight.

Only I slept in because there didn't seem to be any hurry. My morning pee told me that I was pretty badly dehydrated and I'd have to get some water in me soon.

I rolled up camp so that it would be less visible, and took my pack with me. I had a feeling that the treasure was up in the owl cave, all I had to do was lift that ladder up there and climb in. I just hoped the owl was gone for the day. Just in case, I had my umbrella, which has not only protected me from herds of angry cows but rattlesnakes and crows as well. A murder of crows that were dive bombing at my head on the Pacific Crest Trail. I often joke that if I slipped off an icy trail up in the mountains I would use my umbrella like Mary Poppins and float to safety.

Part of the reason I believed that the treasure was there is that in rereading the poem I also read the rest of what was on the page. How I found out about the treasure was an article in Outside Magazine right after I'd become homeless. I thought then, for whatever reason, that the treasure was mine. So I ripped out the page with the poem, my only clue, and had been carrying that in my pack for almost two years.

It was never about the money, for me it was about the solution. And maybe destiny. But in rereading the rest of the page I came to a part that I remember laughing at because of the sheer implausibility. The people searching for the treasure are about to drop over the edge of a 50-foot cliff with a rope tied around their waist. But, buried in there is an interesting tidbit.

"...Fenn made his money selling native artifacts from the Southwest. Where did Southwestern cultures hide valuables? On cliffs."

But no rappelling here, just a ladder. A ladder that would have been easy to knock over once the deed was done. Once the treasure was hidden.

"If you've been wise and found the blaze..."

Well, if I'd been wise like the owl I'd be up there.

So I hiked back to the cavern where the owl was and tried to circle around to get a better vantage point for looking into the cave. But in doing so I became dizzy. I was too dehydrated for the exertion. And I had meant to filter water first thing when I got there.

It was funny how the water was more important than the treasure. Realistically, even if I found the treasure I wouldn't have any "money." I'd still be broke, only then I'd have a lot more weight in my pack to hitchhike with.

Anyway, I let the dizziness pass and climbed out to the opposite side of the arc around the interior of the cavern. It was a great sleeping area, easily defended, but still no better view of the interior of the owl cave. But also no sign of the owl, so that was good.

The trick would be getting the knocked over ladder uphill and into place. It was easily 20 feet long, if not more, and it was made of heavy tar soaked planks nailed together to form the length, with natural branches nailed onto that to form the steps.

It wasn't light.

After an hour of moving it into position and failing once, I still hadn't been able to raise it. With the bottom end jammed in the only solid ground available, I picked the top end up over my shoulders, above my head, and slowly walked down the ladder towards its base. The whole time the top getting higher and higher. Occasionally scraping the rock wall, I'd have to step out farther, away from the wall, down the slope.

And then the weight was too much. I tried to hold it, catch my breath, push a little more, but it sagged down, on top of my head. "Just get a little run at it and push," I said, trying to encourage myself to make it happen. But that was it, a 45-degree angle was all I could muster. I couldn't get under it anymore. And so I dropped it, and in doing so dislodged the rock that I'd used as a support base.

If the blaze was in there, and the treasure just below it in a crevice or crack, I'd never know it. There was no way I was going to get this ladder upright.

Not by myself.

I sat there contemplating my predicament for what seemed like forever. In the end, I dragged the ladder over closer to the edge and heaved it over a best I could. There was no covering my tracks or hiding the fact that I'd been slipping in the mud and owl shit. My hands were full of splinters and the skin torn in places and scratched in others.

I went down to the pool and filtered water, hoping that my filter worked. Who knew how much owl shit had fertilized this water. I thought again about the treasure being below, look quickly down, and of braving the cold, and I wondered about an 80-year-old man trying to climb that ladder with 40 pounds, or even 20 if he did it twice.

I circled the pool a couple of times, seeing nothing again, but also aware of the illusion that it was shallow. Seeing nothing and having no desire to jump in again I took out two hematite magnets that I kept as a fidget tool and a Pillow X stuff sack that I'd been carrying for a hiker who lost it on the Appalachian Trail. When I finally did catch up to him a week later I'd forgotten all about it. I clipped this to the end of my bear rope and went magnet fishing. Hoping that the small magnets would find and attach themselves to a metal case.

That was if the chest was even ferrous metal, which didn't seem to be the greatest choice for a box to hide underwater for years at a time. You'd want it somewhere higher where it would stay drier. Somewhere like the cave above my head.

Even though it was never about the money, with most of it going to charity after I got my teeth fixed, it was still hard to walk away from the area. I couldn't even really call

this a solution without seeing the treasure. But if I couldn't get up there to look then I had nothing else. This was the end of the line.

I couldn't help but think of one of the last lines in the poem, "If you are brave and in the wood." I'd come to suspect that maybe the treasure was for the Native Americans, for this reservation. I'd decided long ago to give them a large chunk, but now, maybe, it was all theirs. Maybe I'd ask Forrest, or maybe I'd just send an anonymous letter.

For the moment, I was back to being broke and homeless without options, other than pulling all those splinters out of my hands and hiking into town after dark.

Chapter 8

I packed and waited for it to get dark. Of course, a train went by at 7pm, far too early to run into town. With at least four to six hours between trains, by my guess, I'd have to wait for the next one for it to be dark enough. Unfortunately the longer I waited the brighter and higher the moon would be.

I decided to unpack my sleeping bag and take a nap until the next train went through. And I almost missed it. I was in the middle of a dream and wasn't sure if it had really gone by or not. More of the same ducking and dodging traffic headlights, my head on a swivel, all while brightly lit by the moon this time. Thankfully there were no parked trucks along the road and at 1:30am there was less traffic.

It took 38 minutes to reach the parked train cars for a break to dry off, then another twenty or so minutes to the bridge over the tracks on the south side of town. There I unrolled my sleeping bag and caught another three-hour nap in the dirt and god knows what kind of feces.

In town I sold some more bitcoin so that I'd have money for a bus ticket to Denver. "If I can get to Casper," I thought. Then I made a sign at the picnic area just south of Wedding of the Waters. "Shoshoni," it said, then in smaller print, "Please!"

Within five minutes I had a ride.

Mary Ann and her dog, on the way to Idaho for a doctors checkup and to visit a friend. She's older but used to ski. From the sound of it, she has broken both legs and numerous other bones. She's worried that a recent surgery will mean that she can't take care of her garden and yard this year. "I'm a smoker so things aren't healing as fast as they should," she told me.

She dropped me off at the gas station in Shoshoni where I wrote on the back of the cardboard sign saying, "Casper, please." Then I walked out to what looked like the edge of town, it was hard to tell, where it looked like a car would have plenty of room to pull over. Just under 20 minutes later Jerimiah pulls over to give me a ride all the way to Casper. I think he just needed someone to talk to, but he mentions something about building a stairway to heaven. It's a story about his uncle, but by the way he said it I suspect that was his motivation.

He showed me the bus station in Casper, which I already knew and had told him twice, then he dropped me off at the library. He was just trying to be hospitable.

130 miles in three hours, was that a personal hitchhiking record?

The plan was to buy bus tickets online and print them at the library. But it was Good Friday, the Friday before Easter, so the library was closed.

I walked down to the bus station, which was also closed, and the schedule on the wall said they open at 4:30pm. But it also said that the only bus south is the one at 10:45am.

A double-check online seemed to confirm this.

Fuck.

Stuck in Casper for the night with nowhere to go.

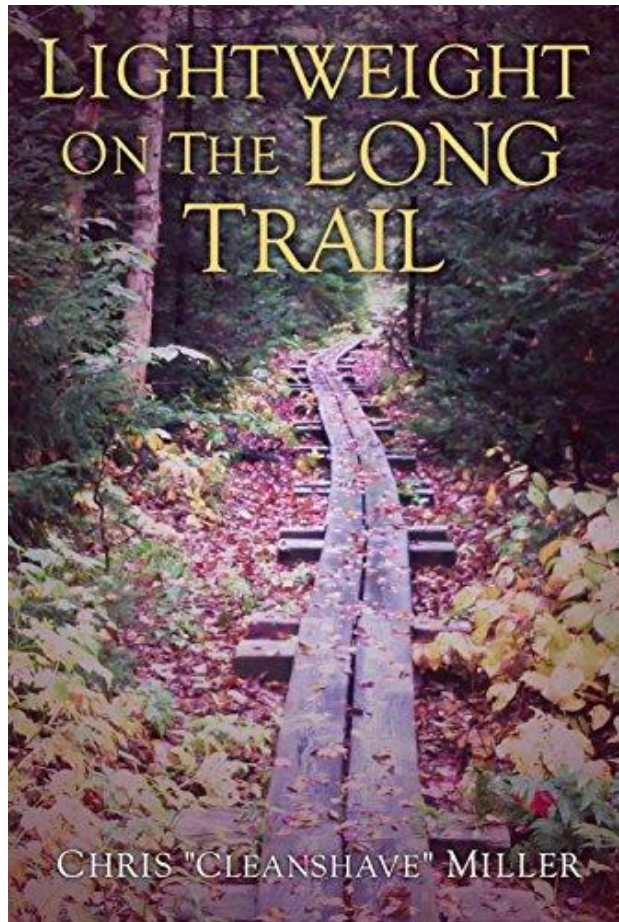
For the lack of another set of hands to lift that ladder I would never know how close I was to finding Forrest Fenn's treasure.

I had failed.

Not because I wasn't smart enough or willing to take the risk. But because I didn't have a single friend to join me on my adventures.

Camping along the Platte River Greenway, I don't think I ever felt more alone.

Also Available

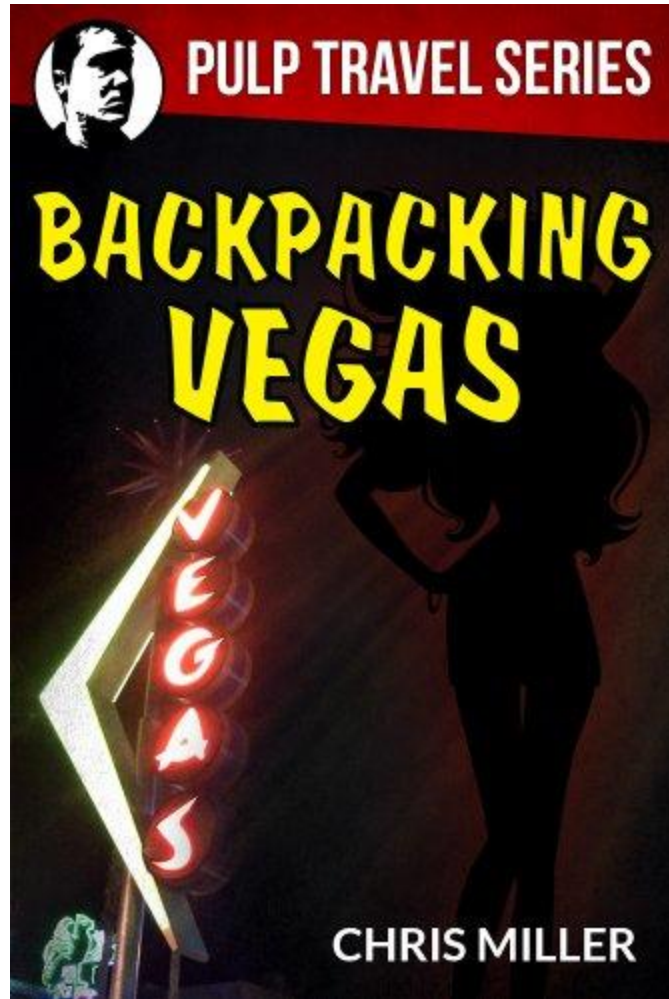


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About the Author



Chris "Cleanshave" Miller is an avid hiker and low budget traveler. He has bicycle toured the East Coast Greenway to raise money for Meals on Wheels, jumped off the Stratosphere Hotel in Las Vegas, taken the Polar Bear Plunge in Newport, RI, hiked the Appalachian Trail, Vermont's Long Trail, and the Oregon Coast Trail among many others, and cycled Adventure Cycling's Southern Tier on a fixed gear bicycle.

He is currently traveling Southeast Asia, living out of his backpack.

[Check out the Blog: Cleanshave.org](http://Cleanshave.org)

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