

And so I Bill found myself himself, six days later, standing at our their local airport watching a tin commuter plane containing Katz touch down and taxi to a halt on the tarmac twenty yards from the terminal. The hum of the propellers intensified for a moment then gradually stuttered to a halt, and the plane's door-cum-stairway fell open. I he tried to remember the last time I he had seen him Katz. After our their summer in Europe, Katz had gone back to Des Moines and had become, in effect, Iowa's drug culture. He had partied for years, until there was no one left to party with, then he had partied with himself, alone in small apartments, in T-shirt and boxer shorts, with a bottle and a Baggie of pot and a TV with rabbit ears. I Bill remembered now that the last time I he had seen him was about five years earlier in a Denny's restaurant where I Bill was taking my his mother for breakfast. He Katz was sitting in a booth with a haggard fellow who looked like his name would be Virgil Starkweather, tucking into pancakes and taking occasional illicit nips from a bottle in a paper bag. It was eight in the morning and Katz looked very happy. He was always happy when he was drunk, and he was always drunk.

Two weeks after that, I Bill later heard, police found him in an upended car in a field outside the little town of Mingo, hanging upside down by his seatbelt, still clutching the steering wheel and saying, "Well, what seems to be the problem, officers?" There was a small quantity of cocaine in the glove box and he was dispatched to a minimum security prison for eighteen months. While there, he started attending AA meetings. To everyone's surprise, not least his own, he had not touched alcohol or an illegal substance since.

After his release, he got a little job, went back to college part-time, and settled down for a while with a hairdresser named Patty. For the past three years he had devoted himself to rectitude and—I Bill instantly saw now as he stooped out the door of the plane—growing a stomach. Katz was arrestingly larger than when I Bill had last seen him. He had always been kind of fleshy, but now he brought to mind Orson Welles after a very bad night. He was limping a little and breathing harder than one ought to after a walk of twenty yards.

"Man, I'm hungry," he said without preamble, and let me Bill take his carry-on bag, which instantly jerked my his arm to the floor. "What have you got in here?" I Bill gasped.

"Ah, just some tapes and shit for the trail. There a Dunkin Donuts anywhere around here? I haven't had anything to eat since Boston."

"Boston? You've just come from Boston."

"Yeah, I gotta eat something every hour or so or I have, whaddayacallit, seizures."

"Seizures?" This wasn't quite the reunion scenario I Bill had envisioned. I he imagined him Katz bouncing around on the Appalachian Trail like some wind-up toy that had fallen on its back.

“Ever since I took some contaminated phenylthiamines about ten years ago. If I eat a couple of doughnuts or something I’m usually OK.”

“Stephen, we’re going to be in the wilderness in three days. There will not be doughnut stores.”

He **Katz** beamed proudly. “I thought of that.” He indicated **his** bag on the carousel—a green army surplus duffel—and let me **Bill** pick it up. It weighed at least seventy-five pounds. He saw my **Bill’s** look of wonder.

“Snickers,” he explained. “Lots and lots of Snickers.”

We **they** drove home by way of Dunkin Donuts. My **Bill’s** wife and I **Bill** sat with him **Katz** at the kitchen table and watched **him** eat five Boston cream doughnuts, which he washed down with two glasses of milk. Then he said he wanted to go and lie down a while. It took **him** whole minutes to get up the stairs.

My **Bill’s** wife turned to me **Bill** with a look of serene blankness.

“Please just don’t say anything,” I he said.

In the afternoon, after **Katz** had rested, he and I **Bill** visited Dave Mengle and got him **Katz** fitted with a backpack and a tent and sleeping bag and all the rest of it, and then went to Kmart for a groundsheet and thermal underwear and some other small things. After that he **Katz** rested some more. The following day, we **they** went to the supermarket to buy provisions for our **their** first week on the trail. I **Bill** knew nothing about cooking, but **Katz** had been looking after **himself** for years and had a repertoire of dishes (principally involving peanut butter, tuna, and brown sugar stirred together in a pot) that he thought would transfer nicely to a camping milieu, but he also piled lots of other things into the shopping cart— four large pepperoni sausages, five pounds of rice, assorted bags of cookies, oatmeal, raisins, M&Ms, Spam, more Snickers, sunflower seeds, graham crackers, instant mashed potatoes, several sticks of beef jerky, a couple of bricks of cheese, a canned ham, and the full range of gooey and evidently imperishable cakes and doughnuts produced under the Little Debbie label.

“You know, I don’t think we’ll be able to carry all this,” I **Bill** suggested uneasily as he **Katz** placed a horsecollar-shaped bologna in the shopping cart.

**Katz** surveyed the cart grimly. “Yeah, you’re right,” he agreed. “Let’s start again.”

He abandoned the cart there and went off for another one. We **they** went around again, this time trying to be more intelligently selective, but we **they** still ended up with clearly too much.

We **they** took everything home, divvied it up, and went off to pack—**Katz** to the bedroom where all **his** other stuff was, I **Bill** to my **his** basement HQ. I **Bill** packed for two hours, but I he

could not begin to get everything in. I **he** put aside books and notebooks and nearly all **my his** spare clothes, and tried lots of different combinations, but every time I **he** finished I **he** would turn to find something large and important left over. Eventually I **Bill** went upstairs to see how **Katz** was doing. **He** was lying on the bed, listening to **his** Walkman. Stuff was scattered everywhere. **His** backpack was limp and unattended. Little percussive hisses of music were leaking from **his** ears.

“Aren’t you packing?” I **Bill** said.

“Yeah.”

I **Bill** waited a minute, thinking **he Katz** would bound up, but **he** didn’t move. “Forgive me, Stephen, but you give the impression that you are lying down.”

“Yeah.”

“Can you actually hear what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, in a minute.”

I **Bill** sighed and went back down to the basement.

**Katz** said little during dinner and afterwards returned to **his** room. **We they** heard nothing more from **him** throughout the evening, but about midnight, as **we they** lay in bed, noises began to float to **us them** through the walls—clompings and mutterings, sounds like furniture being dragged across the floor, and brief enraged outbursts, interspersed with long periods of silence. I **Bill** held **my his** wife’s hand and could not think of anything to say. In the morning, I **he** tapped on **Katz’s** door and eventually put **my his** head in. **He Katz** was asleep, fully dressed, on top of a tumult of bedding. The mattress was part way off the bed, as if **he** had been engaged in the night in some scuffle with intruders. **His** pack was full but unsecured, and personal effects were still liberally distributed around the room. I **Bill** told **him we they** had to leave in an hour to catch **our their** plane.

“Yeah,” **he** said.

Twenty minutes later, **he** came downstairs, laboriously and with a great deal of soft cursing. Without even looking, you could tell **he** was coming down sideways and with care, as if the steps were glazed with ice. **He** was wearing **his** pack. Things were tied to it all over—a pair of grubby sneakers and what looked like a pair of dress boots, **his** pots and pans, a Laura Ashley shopping bag evidently appropriated from **my Bill’s** wife’s wardrobe and filled now with God knows what. “This is the best I could do,” **he** said. “I had to leave a few things.”

I **Bill** nodded. I **he** had left a few things, too—notably, the oatmeal, which I **he** did not like anyway, and the more disgusting looking of the Little Debbie cakes, which is to say all of them.

My his wife drove us them to the airport in Manchester, through blowing snow, in the kind of awkward silence that precedes a long separation. Katz sat in back and ate doughnuts. At the airport, she presented me Bill with a knobby walking stick the children had bought me him. It had a red bow on it. I Bill wanted to burst into tears—or, better still, climb in the car and speed off while Katz was still frowning over his new, unfamiliar straps. She squeezed my his arm, gave a weak smile, and left.

I he watched her go, then went into the terminal with Katz. The man at the check-in desk looked at our their tickets to Atlanta and our their packs and said—quite alertly, I Bill thought, for a person wearing a shortsleeve shirt in winter—“You fellows hiking the Appalachian Trail?”

“Sure are,” said Katz proudly.

“Lot of trouble with wolves down in Georgia, you know.”

“Really?” Katz was all ears.

“Oh, yeah. Coupla people been attacked recently. Pretty savagely, too, from what I hear.” He messed around with tickets and luggage tags for a minute. “Hope you brought some long underwear.”

Katz screwed up his face. “For wolves?”

“No, for the weather. There’s gonna be record cold down there over the next four or five days. Gonna be *well* below zero in Atlanta tonight.”

“Oh, great,” Katz said and gave a ruptured, disconsolate sigh. He looked challengingly at the man.

“Any other news for us? Hospital call to say we got cancer or anything?”

The man beamed and slapped the tickets down on the counter. “No, that’s about it, but you have a real good trip. And hey” — he was addressing Katz now, in a lower voice — “you watch out for those wolves, son, because between you and me you look like pretty good eating.” He gave a wink.

“Jesus,” said Katz in a low voice, and he looked deeply, deeply gloomy.

We they took the escalator up to our their gate. “And they will not feed us on this plane either, you know,” he announced with a curious, bitter finality.

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When I **Bill** returned to the shelter, **Katz** was up, moving slowly and going through **his** morning groans, and **Jim** was studying **his** maps, which were vastly better than **mine Bill's**. I **he** crouched beside **him Jim** and **he** made room to let **me Bill** look with **him**. It was 6.1 miles to Wallace Gap and a paved road, old U.S. 64. A mile down the road from there was Rainbow Springs Campground, a private campsite with showers and a store. I **Bill** did not know how hard it would be to walk seven miles through deep snow and had no confidence that the campground would be open this early in the year. Still, it was obvious this snow wasn't going to melt for days and **we they** would have to make a move sometime; it might as well be now, when at least it was pretty and calm. Who knew when another storm might blow in and really strand **us them**?

**Jim** had decided that **he** and **Heath** would accompany **us them** for the first couple of hours, then turn off on a side trail called Long Branch, which descended steeply through a ravine for 2.3 miles and emerged near a parking lot where **they** had left **their** car. **He** had hiked the Long Branch trail many times and knew what to expect. Even so, I **Bill** did not like the sound of it and asked **him** hesitantly if **he** thought it was a good idea to go off on a little-used side trail, into goodness knows what conditions, where no one would come across **him** and **his** son if **they** got in trouble. **Katz**, to **my his** relief, agreed with **me him**. "At least there's always other people on the AT," **he** said. "You don't know what might happen to you on a side trail."

**Jim** considered the matter and said **they** would turn back if it looked bad.

**Katz** and I **Bill** treated **ourselves themselves** to two cups of coffee, for warmth, and **Jim** and **Heath** shared with **us them** some of **their** oatmeal, which made **Katz** intensely happy. Then **we they** all set off together. It was cold and hard going. The tunnels of boughed rhododendrons, which often ran on for great distances, were exceedingly pretty, but when **our their** packs brushed against them they dumped volumes of snow onto **our their** heads and down the backs of **our their** necks. **The three adults** took it in turns to walk in front because the lead person always received the heaviest dumping, as well as having all the hard work of dibbing holes in the snow.

The Long Branch trail, when **we they** reached it, descended steeply through bowed pines—too steeply, it seemed to **me Bill**, to come back up if the trail proved impassable, and it looked as if it might. **Katz** and I **Bill** urged **Jim** and **Heath** to reconsider, but **Jim** said it was all downhill and well-marked, and **he** was sure it would be all right. "Hey, you know what day it is?" said **Jim** suddenly and, seeing **our their** blank faces, supplied the answer: "March twenty-first."

**Our their** faces stayed blank.

"First day of spring," **he** said.

**We they** smiled at the pathetic irony of it, shook hands all around, wished each other luck, and parted.

Katz and I Bill walked for three hours more, silently and slowly through the cold, white forest, taking it in turns to break snow. At about one o'clock we they came at last to old 64, a lonesome, superannuated two-lane road through the mountains. It hadn't been cleared, and there were no tire tracks through it. It was starting to snow again, steadily, prettily. We they set off down the road for the campground and had walked about a quarter of a mile when from behind there was the crunching sound of a motorized vehicle proceeding cautiously through snow. We they turned to see a big jeep-type car rolling up beside us them. The driver's window hummed down. It was Jim and Heath. They had come to let us them know they had made it, and to make sure we they had likewise. "Thought you might like a lift to the campground," Jim said.

We they climbed gratefully in, filling their nice car with snow, and rode down to the campground. Jim told us them that they had passed it on the way up and it looked open, but that they would take us them to Franklin, the nearest town, if it wasn't. They had heard a weather forecast. More snow was expected over the next couple of days.

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Katz never really did get into hiking, though goodness knows he tried. From time to time, I Bill believe believes, he glimpsed that there was something—some elusive, elemental something—that made being out in the woods almost gratifying. Occasionally, he would exclaim over a view or regard with admiration some passing marvel of nature, but mostly to him hiking was a tiring, dirty, pointless slog between distantly spaced comfort zones. I Bill, meanwhile, was wholly, mindlessly, very contentedly absorbed with the business of just pushing forward. My his congenital distraction sometimes fascinated him Katz and sometimes amused him, but mostly it just drove him crazy.

Late on the morning of the fourth day after leaving Franklin, I Bill was perched on a big green rock waiting for Katz after it dawned on me him that I he had not seen him for some time. When at last he came along, he was even more disheveled than usual. There were twigs in his hair, an arresting new tear on his flannel shirt, and a trickle of dried blood on his forehead. He dropped his pack and sat heavily beside me Bill with his water bottle, took a long swig, mopped his forehead, checked his hand for blood, and finally said, in a conversational tone: "How did you get around that tree back there?"

"What tree?"

"The fallen tree, back there. The one across the ledge."

I Bill thought for a minute. "I don't remember it."

“What do you mean you don’t remember it? It was blocking the path, for crying out loud.”

I **Bill** thought again, harder, and shook **my his** head with a look of feeble apology. I **he** could see **he Katz** was heading towards exasperation. “Just back there four, five hundred yards.” **He** paused, waiting for a spark of recognition, and couldn’t believe that it wasn’t forthcoming. “One side a sheer cliff, the other side a thicket of brambles with no way through, and in the middle a big fallen tree. You had to have noticed it.”

“Whereabouts was it exactly?” I **Bill** asked, as if stalling for time.

**Katz** couldn’t contain **his** irritation. “Just back there, for Christ sake. One side cliff, other side brambles, and in the middle a big fallen-down oak with about this much clearance.” **He** held **his** hand about fourteen inches off the ground and was dumbfounded by **my Bill’s** blank look. “Bryson, I don’t know what you’re taking, but I gotta have some of it. The tree was too high to climb over and too low to crawl under and there wasn’t any way around it. It took me a half hour to get over it, and I cut myself all to shit in the process. How could you not remember it?”

“It might come to me after a bit,” I **Bill** said hopefully. **Katz** shook **his** head sadly. I **Bill** was never entirely certain why **he Katz** found **my his** mental absences so irritating—whether **he** thought I **Bill** was being willfully obtuse to annoy **him** or whether **he** felt I **Bill** was unreasonably cheating hardship by failing to notice it—but I **Bill** made a private pledge to remain alert and fully conscious for a while, so not to exasperate **him**. Two hours later **we they** had one of those hallelujah moments that come but rarely on the trail. **We they** were walking along the lofty breast of a mountain called High Top when the trees parted at a granite overlook and **we they** were confronted with an arresting prospect—a sudden new world of big, muscular, comparatively craggy mountains, steeped in haze and nudged at the distant margins by moody-looking clouds, at once deeply beckoning and rather awesome.