A Walk in the Woods

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BILL BRYSON

Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa. Here, he met his friend Matt Angerer, who features under the pseudonym Stephen Katz as Bryson's travel companion in *A Walk in the Woods*. As a young adult, Bryson dropped out of college to travel in Europe and ended up settling in the United Kingdom. During that time, Bryson worked as a journalist, ending up as high-ranking writer for *The Times* and editor for *The Independent*. Bryson also began writing memoirs centered on travel. His first travel memoir, *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small Town America* documented his experiences exploring the United States in the 1980s. Bryson subsequently wrote several travel memoirs based on his experiences traveling in Europe, notably *Notes from a Small Island* (set in the United Kingdom), before returning to the United States. *A Walk in the Woods* documents Bryson's attempt to get reacquainted with his native land after spending many years abroad. Consequently, in the memoir, Bryson often compares his experiences in Europe with those in Appalachia. Bryson has also written many nonfiction books on a range of topics, including science and language. Bryson has earned numerous writing awards, accolades, and honorary doctorate degrees for his contributions to literary culture—and he was also knighted in the United Kingdom. Bryson lives in Hampshire, England with his wife, Cynthia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bryson explores the Appalachian Trail in 1996, and he explores the history since its construction in his memoir. Conservationist Benton MacKaye conceived of the Appalachian Trail in the 1920s, and construction was completed on the project in 1937. Bryson also addresses the history of logging and deforestation in Appalachia, particularly focusing on the railroad boom of the late 1800s, which prompted many timber merchants to engage in mass deforestation until preservation efforts resumed in the 1930s. Bryson also criticizes the preservation efforts of the National Park Service, especially their botched preservation efforts in Appalachia during the 1940s and 50s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Bryson is known for his many travel memoirs, notably his 1996 memoir about Britain, *Notes on a Small Island*. This book, like *A Walk in the Woods*, fuses personal experiences, cultural history, and amusing anecdotes. Bryson's other travelogues include *Neither Here nor There: Travels in Europe* (1992) and *In a Sunburned Country* (2000). In *A Walk in the Woods*, Bryson alludes to several historical authors, particularly those who glorified the American wild. This includes 19th-century naturalist John Muir, whose wrote nonfiction books *A Thousand-mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916) and *Our National Parks* (1901). Bryson also discusses Henry David Thoreau, who famously extolled the American wilderness in *Walden* (1854), but actually (as Bryson wryly notes) disliked straying too far from the comforts of home. In *A Walk in the Woods*, Bryson reflects at length on the reckless ways in which human beings exploit nature and drive other creatures to extinction, which are both themes he takes up at length in his subsequent science book *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2005). Bryson is known for infusing everything he writes with humor, a trait he learned from reading books like P.G. Wodehouse's *My Man Jeeves* (1909) and James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1947).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Walk in the Woods
- **When Written:** 1997
- **Where Written:** New Hampshire
- **When Published:** 1998
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** The Appalachian Trail
- **Climax:** Bryson concludes that although he didn't complete the Appalachian Trail, he still hiked part of it—and in doing so, he learned a lot about his home country.
- **Antagonist:** Ecological destruction
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Silver Screen. Bryson's memoir was adapted into a movie in 2015 starring Robert Redford as Bill Bryson and Nick Nolte as Bryson's travel companion Stephen Katz.

It's Kind of a Funny Story. In 2017, CNN named *A Walk in the Woods* the funniest travel memoir ever written.

PLOT SUMMARY

In 1996, Bill Bryson moves to New Hampshire after living in Europe for the last several years. Motivated by a desire to explore his homeland and grow more acquainted with the United States, he decides to hike the Appalachian Trail. As soon

as he starts reading about the American wilderness, however, he realizes that he's in over his head. He assumed that hiking in the United States would be similar to hiking in Europe, where people mostly walk in the countryside and then retire in a rural village inn. However, he soon learns that he's going to have to camp and be prepared to fend for himself in the wilderness. After buying lots of camping gear, Bryson reads voraciously about the threats of the wild and stays up for hours each night imagining himself being mauled to death by **bears**. Terrified of being in the woods alone, Bryson reaches out to his network for a travel companion—and Stephen Katz, an old high school friend he hasn't seen in years, agrees to join him. Bryson's wife is skeptical, as she remembers Bryson finding Katz irritating on their last trip together many years ago.

Surely enough, when Katz shows up, he's heavily overweight and addicted to junk food. He immediately informs Bryson that he needs to eat every hour or he has seizures, and he insists on stopping by Dunkin' Donuts on the way to Bryson's place. Despite Bryson's trepidation, they fly to Georgia in March, where they'll enter the Trail near Springer Mountain and hike northward to Maine through the summer. The taxi driver who takes them to Springer warns the duo that most people quit the hike within the first week, and some even quit within a few hours of hiking.

The next morning, Bryson and Katz set off. Both of them have heavy packs, which make the hike difficult. Bryson soon outpaces Katz, who lags behind, struggling under the weight of his pack. After arriving at the summit of Springer Mountain, Bryson is too exhausted to enjoy the view. He also has to go back, find Katz, and carry Katz's pack for him, which irritates him to no end. They struggle in the grueling terrain, which is a series of relentless uphill climbs and steep gorges. Along the way, Bryson reflects on the history of the Trail's construction, the logging industry (signs of which are evident throughout their hike), and the sinister feeling of being so isolated in the woods. On their fourth day, a woman named Mary Ellen latches onto them, though they find her bragging, selfishness, and patronizing comments infuriating. The trio soon arrive at the Walasi-Yi Inn, and Bryson is shocked to realize how mesmerized he is by products like canned cheese and cold soda after a few days in the wilderness. After a couple days hiking with the insufferable Mary Ellen, Bryson and Katz ditch her and hitchhike to Haiawassee for a night in a motel and a welcome break from the Trail.

Their first day back on the Trail after a night in a real bed is tough on both men. They bump into a man who tells them that Mary Ellen dropped out of her hike and that snow is expected. Three days later, Bryson and Katz reach Big Butt Mountain just as it starts snowing. They try to ascend the mountain but find themselves caught in a fierce blizzard. Their poorly marked maps also lead them astray, but they manage to find their way back to the Trail and hole up in a shelter with another pair of campers named Jim and Heath, who generously share their food. Bryson and Katz spend a few boring days in a near-empty logging town called Franklin, before Bryson forces Katz to get back on the Trail. After a few days, they cross over into Tennessee and reach the Smoky Mountains. Bryson reflects on the diverse ecosystem of the Smoky Mountains and laments the inept preservation efforts of the National Park Service, which seems to do more damage than good to the area. He also worries about bears, though their only animal encounter is with an army of rodents in one of the shelters.

Bryson and Katz continue their hike through several punishing, rain-filled days; when they reach the summit of Clingman's Dome, they can't see the view because the weather is so bad. The pair hitch a ride to Gatlinburg, where they spend the night. Bryson dislikes the tourist hubbub in Gatlinburg, which seems like more like hillbilly-themed mall complex than a town. Bryson spots a scale map of the whole trail in a shoe store and realizes that their tough days of slogging through the woods have only taken them through a tiny increment of the Trail. They admit that they're never going to hike the whole thing, but the thought is oddly liberating. The duo decides to skip a portion of the Trail and travel to Virginia, resuming the hike in Shenandoah National Park.

On the way to Virginia, Bryson reflects on some of the Trail's early hikers. He's bemused that few people enjoy hiking the Trail, though many feel compelled to do so. Bryson also notices that the Trail is almost completely surrounded by urban sprawl, and he finds the endless highways, chain restaurants, and strip malls ugly. Bryson thinks that the landscape must have changed a lot in the last century. He discusses the history of botany in Appalachia, noting that many of its rare plants and flowers have gone extinct since Europeans colonized the Americas.

Bryson feels fitter and healthier as he hikes through Shenandoah. He thinks it's odd that Americans seem peculiarly unaccustomed to walking—the country's infrastructure seems to be primarily set up for drivers. In Shenandoah, Bryson thinks about the damage that pollution has caused to the nation's forests. One night, Bryson is terrified to hear rustling outside his tent. He realizes an animal is prowling around nearby and is too terrified to go to sleep, though the animal already retreated to the forest. The pair hike on, and a couple days later, Bryson stops to rest in a beautiful glade. They don't know that in a few weeks, two women will be murdered there. They also bump into an obnoxious group of campers who selfishly take over their shelter and push Bryson and Katz out into the rain. The next day, Bryson and Katz part ways for a break. They've hiked 500 miles so far, and they'll reunite to tackle Maine in August.

Bryson explores a stretch of the Trail between Virginia and New England by car over the course of June and July. He visits Harper's Ferry and enjoys imagining the American Civil War soldiers hiking and camping on the Trail. He visits the Appalachian Trail Conference's headquarters and talks with a

woman named Laurie Potteiger about the dangers of the Trail. Bryson is still worried about wild animals, though he learns of no fatal attacks on the Trail. He does, however, learn about nine murders on the Trail since the 1970s, including the two hikers who were recently murdered in the glade he passed through a few weeks ago.

Bryson attempts to reenter the Trail in Pennsylvania, where the landscape has been decimated by mining activity. He drives around for ages and can't find the Trail's access route, though he explores an abandoned mining town called Centralia and trespasses near a mountain that has been completely destroyed by zinc miners. Bryson also learns that there were once many farms and villages lining the Trail in Delaware, but many of them were bulldozed to make way for industrial activity, which deeply saddens Bryson. He thinks nostalgically about his pleasant hiking experiences in Luxembourg, where he could walk along trails and retire in quaint little country inns at the end of each day. He wishes things were more like that in the United States.

Bryson drives and day-hikes along the Trail in Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire. He struggles to connect with the Trail while dipping in and out of it like this, and he hits a low point. Bryson enjoys hiking near Mount Greylock, where many historical writers set their stories. In New Hampshire, Bryson hikes with his friend Bill Abdu. After forgetting his waterproof raincoat in the car, Bryson gets hypothermia, but he makes it to a lodge in time to warm up. Bryson thinks about all the people who die from hypothermia while attempting to explore the area's natural terrain.

Two weeks later, Bryson and Katz reunite to tackle the Hundred Mile Wilderness in Maine. It's the most remote and taxing stretch of the Trail, culminating at the summit of Katahdin. They struggle to readjust to hiking with heavy packs, and within a few hours, Katz has foolishly discarded most of his clothes, food, and drinking water to lighten his load. The heat, humidity, and dense forest in Maine are intimidating, and Bryson and Katz soon realize that they're out of their depth in this terrain. The duo soon approaches a rotting lagoon. When attempting to cross it, they both fall in and nearly drown. Two more experienced hikers deftly cross the lagoon by lifting their packs above their heads, and they warn Bryson and Katz that the terrain is going to get a lot tougher.

Bryson and Katz spend the night in Monson and enjoy a hearty meal of hot food. The next day, the pair has an argument: Bryson is upset because Katz has started drinking again after being sober for years. Despite the tense mood, the pair forge on. The forest grows darker and more ominous, and the Trail features a series of impossibly large rock faces and fast flowing rivers. Katz falls in and nearly drowns again. They've only made it 15 miles into the Hundred Mile Wilderness and are quickly growing dejected. Katz and Bryson have a heart to heart, and Katz explains that he started drinking again because he finds it hard to socialize and is often lonely. The pair clears the air, and Bryson offers to hike ahead and get water for them from Cloud Pond as a gesture of goodwill. When Bryson returns to the meeting point, Katz is nowhere to be found. Bryson searches frantically for hours in the woods but sees no sign of Katz. He spends the night at Cloud Pond worrying about Katz getting lost in the dense underbrush and disappearing forever.

The next morning, Bryson searches for Katz again. After a couple hours, he finds Katz sitting by the Trail, looking disheveled and covered in blood. Katz had apparently grown delirious with thirst and gotten lost; he only found the Trail again by chance. The pair decides that they'd rather be *anywhere* other than where they are, and they abandon the Trail, opting to mark the end of their journey in a town called Milo, instead of atop the summit of Katahdin like they'd planned. Katz still thinks that they made a commendable effort, even though they didn't complete the journey. Bryson completes a number of day hikes over the next month, and he eventually parts ways with the Trail on Mount Killington in Vermont. All in all, he's hiked 850 miles of the 2,100-mile-long Trail. He didn't become a "mountain man" as he envisioned, but he learned a lot about the United States. He still hiked the Appalachian Trail, at least in part, which is something to be proud of.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Bill Bryson – Bill Bryson is the memoir's author, narrator, and central character. At the start of the story, Bryson has just returned to the United States after living abroad in Europe for years. He decides to hike the Appalachian Trail to get reacquainted with his homeland. Before departing on his trip, Bryson imagines that the trip will be like hiking in Europe, where people commonly go for long walks in the countryside and then relax in a country inn. However, Bryson soon learns that hiking on the Trail is far more punishing: the terrain is challenging and dangerous, and the slog is tiresome. He's terrified of **bear** attacks, and he's disappointed to find the areas surrounding the Trail seem to be entirely comprised of highways and strip malls. Bryson tackles some of the Trail by hiking with his friend Stephen Katz, and he traverses the rest by car. In the end, neither scenario satisfies him—he wishes he could find something closer to experiences in Europe, where walking is far more popular as a pastime than driving is. Despite his dissatisfaction with the overall experience, Bryson develops a healthy respect for the woods, and he bemoans the destruction of the landscape by loggers. It disappoints him that preservation efforts don't seem to be much of a priority among the organizations that look after the nation's woodlands. Despite his irrational fear of wild animals, Bryson concludes that humans are actually the biggest dangers in the wild, since

we treat Appalachia's ecosystem so carelessly. Bryson also absorbs the ethos of kindness and consideration that hikers seem to share on the trail, and this helps him develop more patience with his Katz, who really struggles with hiking. Neither of them fully learns to love being in the wilderness, and they end up quitting the Trail altogether. In the end, Bryson is happy to have discovered a newfound appreciation for the simple comforts of everyday life (such as showers), which he used to take for granted until he lived without them.

Stephen Katz – Stephen Katz is an old friend whom Bryson hasn't seen for years. He lives a lonely life as a recovering alcoholic in Des Moines, Iowa. When Bryson solicits a companion for his hiking trip, Katz jumps at the chance to join—even though he's heavily overweight and hooked on junk food, and he hates hiking. Katz struggles throughout the journey, and he often makes rash, foolish decisions, like dumping all his drinking water because it's too heavy. Even though Katz rubs Bryson the wrong way, the two eventually warm to each other after learning to look out for each other and work as a team. Katz is particularly prone to saying the wrong thing, but this often works in his favor, as his comments tend to ward off people whom Bryson wants to avoid. Katz is amused by Bryson's irrational fear of **bears**, and he often teases Bryson about this. Katz never warms to hiking—in fact, he's miserable throughout most of the journey. Nonetheless, he demonstrates a bullish resolve to get through the experience without making it too miserable for Bryson. The pair eventually develop a warm friendship, having bonded over the miseries of the Trail.

Mary Ellen – Mary Ellen is an annoying hiker from Florida who tags along with Bryson and Katz for a few days in the first week of their hike. She exaggerates her hiking skills, talks constantly about useless topics, blows her nose incessantly, and irritates Katz immensely. Bryson wryly notes that despite the romantic promise of solitude in the woods, it's still possible to get stuck in the company of utterly stupid and banal people.

Lollie Winans – A murderer kills camper Lollie Winans and her friend Julianne William in a glade on the Appalachian Trail about a month after Bryson and Katz pass through the same spot. Her murder reveals that although many people fear wild animals like **bears**, human beings are often the greatest threat to hikers' safety.

Julianne William – A murderer kills camper Julianne William and her friend Lollie Winans in a glade on the Appalachian Trail about a month after Bryson and Katz pass through the same spot. Her murder reveals that although many people fear wild animals like **bears**, human beings are often the greatest threat to hikers' safety.

Chicken John – Chicken John is a famous hiker whom Bryson bumps into while hiking the Appalachian Trail just north of Pennsylvania. It's taken Chicken John several months to hike about halfway through the trail because he keeps getting lost. He doesn't mind though, as he meets several kind and helpful people along the way.

Wes Wisson – Wes Wisson is a taxi driver who routinely drops people off at the base of Summit Mountain as they prepare to hike the Adirondack Trail northward to Maine. On occasion, he also picks people up and drives them to the airport after they've completed hiking the trail southwards from Maine. Wisson shares several funny anecdotes about people who give up hiking after mere hours or days into their trips.

Benton MacKaye – Benton MacKaye designed the Adirondack Trail in the 1920s, conceiving it as a place for city workers to reconnect with nature. He planned to build villages along the route that thrived on pastoral activities. Interestingly, MacKaye didn't base the trail on any historical routes but devised it as a way to connect the highest points in the Eastern United States. As a result, the trail is neither well-worn nor easy to navigate. MacKaye completed building the trail entirely on volunteer labor. Even today, it's sustained entirely by volunteers.

Alexei Pitka – Alexei Pitka is a famous **bear**-hunter who shot down a grizzly bear. When he approached the bear, it was still alive and it grabbed Pitka's head between its jaws. Astoundingly, Pitka survived. The anecdote fills Bryson with fear about encountering bears on his own hiking trip, even though grizzly bears aren't native to the area in which Bryson is hiking.

Henry David Thoreau – Henry David Thoreau was a 19th-century philosopher who romanticized the virtues of walking in nature—though in reality, he rarely ventured too far from his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. Despite the values he extolled, Thoreau found the Adirondack Trail horribly savage, wild, and distressing when he attempted to hike part of it.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bryson's wife – Bryson's wife features at the beginning and end of the story. She's skeptical about Bryson's plan to hike the Appalachian Trail. She's even more doubtful of Bryson's motivation to hike the trail with Stephen Katz, whom she remembers as somebody Bryson was always annoyed by.

Justin – Justin is a man who runs the Walasi-Yi Inn along with his wife, Peggy. The inn is the first building that hikers trekking north will come across along the Adirondack Trail. It's located about a week's hike from the starting point at Mount Summit in Georgia.

Peggy – Peggy is Justin's wife and co-owner of the Walasi-Yi Inn. She often encourages disheartened hikers to keep going as they pass through.

Connolly – Bryson and Katz meet fellow hiker Connolly partway through their trip. They hike together through Shenandoah National Park.

Laurie Potteiger – Laurie Potteiger works at the Appalachian Trail Conference. Bryson has a brief chat with her when he visits Harper's Ferry, and they discuss the risks of hiking on the trail.

Dave Mengle – Dave Mengle is an avid hiker who sells Bryson hiking gear when he's preparing for his trip. He's deeply knowledgeable and passionate about the distinctions between different kinds of equipment.

Keith Shaw – Keith Shaw owns an inn in Monson, Maine. Bryson and Katz spend the night there before they tackle the dreaded Hundred Mile Wilderness.

Darren – Darren is a man who's driving along the highway with his fiancé Donna. Although he's driving erratically in his drunken state, Bryson and Katz gratefully accept a ride to the nearest town during their hike.

Donna – Donna offers Bryson and Katz a ride when they decide to hitchhike to the nearest town partway through their trip. She's clearly drunk, as is her fiancé Darren, but Bryson and Katz accept the ride anyway.

Beulah – Beulah is a heavy-set woman whom Katz meets at a laundromat. He attempts to go on a date with her, not knowing she's married.

Beulah's husband – Beulah's husband chases Katz out of town when he realizes that Katz attempted to flirt with his wife.

Buddy and Jensine Crossman – Buddy and Jensine run a filthy, dilapidated campground where Bryson and Katz hide out in a blizzard.

Bob – Bob is an annoying camper who bothers Bryson with details about his camping gear until Katz (in a rare moment of Bryson's appreciation) shuts him up.

Stephen Herrero – Stephen Herrero is the author of *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*. Bryson reads the book as he's preparing for his hiking trip. Instead of reassuring Bryson, the book triggers a deep-seated fear of **bears** that haunts Bryson for the majority of his trip.

David Anderson – David Anderson is a 12-year-old boy who gets eaten by **bears** during a camping trip on the Appalachian Trail. Stephen Herrero recounts the story of David Anderson in his book, *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*. David's fate fills Bryson with dread as he anticipates his upcoming hike.

Myron Avery – Myron Avery was tasked with beginning construction on the Adirondack Trail in 1930. He gave up after five years following arguments with Benton MacKaye and growing skepticism about MacKaye's vision.

Rayette – Rayette is a heavy-set waitress whom Katz flirts with on the morning that Bryson and Katz begin hiking the trail.

Henry C. Bagley – Henry C. Bagley was a 19th-century railroad man who decimated the woods in Georgia for timber to fuel his railroad in 1890. Bryson discusses Bagley to expose how much deforestation has taken place since the formation of the United States.

James Dickie – James Dickie is the author of *Deliverance*, a novel about four men on a canoeing trip who are terrorized by inbred woodsmen in northern Georgia. Bryson recalls the book when he arrives at a motel in the same area.

Dolly Parton – Dolly Parton is a famous singer who grew up in the Great Smoky Mountains.

Earl V. Shaffer – Earl V. Shaffer was the first person to hike the whole Appalachian Trail. He completed it in 1948 over 123 days, even though most people at the time thought such a feat was impossible.

Stuart Udall – Stuart Udall was the U.S. secretary of the interior from 1955–1961. In 1968 he passed the Trails System Act, turning the Appalachian Trail into a national park and thereby protecting it from encroaching industry.

Leonard Ward – Leonard Ward hiked the whole Appalachian Trail in 60 days in the 1980s, setting the record for the fastest hike.

David Horton – David Horton beat Ward's record for hiking the whole Appalachian Trail in 1991 by running instead of walking, even though he cried most of the way.

Bill Irwin – Bill Irwin, a blind man, hiked the whole Appalachian Trail with the help of his seeing-eye dog. Famously, he didn't enjoy hiking at all but felt compelled to complete the journey.

Asher Brown Duran – Asher Brown Duran painted *Kindred Spirits* in 1849. The painting depicts two men looking off into a majestic wilderness. Bryson imagines that's what he might have seen if he hiked the trail before industrialization, even though he knows the artist likely embellished his depiction of nature.

John Bartram – John Bartram was an 18th-century American botanist who sent cuttings of plants to London. He discovered over 200 new species.

William Bartram – William Bartram was John Bartram's son. Like his father, William was an avid botanist around the time of the Revolutionary War.

Thomas Nuttall – Thomas Nuttall was a traveler from Liverpool who discovered many new plant species after exploring the American wilderness in the 1800s. He donated all of his cuttings and wrote a seminal encyclopedia of botany.

Stonewall Jackson – Stonewall Jackson was a Confederate general in the American Civil War. Bryson thinks about Stonewall Jackson while visiting Harper's Ferry, where Jackson spent time camping on the Appalachian Trail during the war.

Rebecca Wight – A disturbed man shoots Rebecca Wight and her partner, Claudia Brenner, while they're having sex near the Appalachian Trail. Wight was killed, while Brenner survived. Bryson briefly recounts their story when thinking about the dangers of the trail.

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Colonel Edwin Drake – Col. Edwin Drake discovered the first oil gusher in Pennsylvania in the 1800s, thereby kickstarting the industry of oil mining in the area. Bryson discusses Drake when lamenting the negative impact of mining on Pennsylvania's natural landscape.

James Tefil – James Tefil is a geologist who studies erosion.

George Innes – George Innes was an artist who painted the Delaware Water Gap in the 1800s, before the area was industrialized.

Gwen Schultz – Gwen Schultz is a scientist who studies ice ages.

Herman Melville – Herman Melville wrote the novel *Moby Dick* from a study facing Mount Greylock, which is part of the Appalachian Trail in Massachusetts.

Nathaniel Hawthorne – Nathaniel Hawthorne was a writer who set some of his stories at Mount Greylock, which is part of the Appalachian Trail in Massachusetts.

Edith Wharton – Edith Wharton was a writer who set some of her stories at Mount Greylock, which is part of the Appalachian Trail in Massachusetts.

Alden Partridge – Alden Partridge was a hiker who coined the term "physical education" in the 1700s. He was known for hiking 100 miles in just a few days.

David Quammen – David Quammen wrote the book *Natural Acts*, documenting all the ways people can die from hypothermia.

Richard Salinas – Richard Salinas was a hiker who died from hypothermia after wandering off a well-defined trail in search of a shortcut. His story reminds the reader that human ineptitude and bad decisions are often the reasons why people die in the woods.

Bill Abdu – Bill Abdu is a friend who joins Bryson to hike through New Hampshire, where Bryon gets hypothermia.

Derek Tinkham – Derek Tinkham and Jeremy Haas attempted to hike Mount Washington when the weather was -32°F. Tinkham survived, but Haas froze to death.

Jeremy Haas – Derek Tinkham and Jeremy Haas attempted to hike Mount Washington when the weather was -32°F. Tinkham survived, but Haas froze to death.

Grandma Gatewood – Grandma Gatewood was a hiker who, like Chicken John, was famous for getting perpetually lost on the Appalachian Trail.

Jim and Heath A father and son hiking duo with whom Bryson and Katz weather an intense storm.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ISOLATION, COMPANIONSHIP, AND KINDNESS

When author and narrator Bill Bryson decides to hike the Appalachian Trail in 1996, his fear of hiking alone in the remote wilderness leads him to seek out a travel companion. He ends up taking the trip with Stephen Katz, an acquaintance whom he hasn't seen in years. Bryson's wife thinks this is a terrible idea—she remembers Bryson finding Katz incredibly annoying, so she wonders if Bryson will be able to tolerate Katz's company during the months-long hike. When Katz arrives, his unhealthy lifestyle and lack of preparation make Bryson worry that Katz's company will be a burden. At first, it seems like Bryson is right, as Katz's every move seems to frustrate Bryson. Yet as Bryson and Katz continue on their journey—which is not only isolating but much more physically grueling than expected—the little kindnesses they offer each other (as well as the kind gestures that other hikers extend to them) start to soften Bryson's initial misgivings. The way they look out for each other creates strong sense of companionship that helps each cope with the challenging experience of hiking in such remote territory.

Although Bryson is grateful that he won't have to hike alone, his initial incompatibility with Katz makes Bryson question whether including him was the right move. From the moment Bryson sets eyes on Katz, he regrets his decision to invite him along: Katz is severely overweight, addicted to junk food, and somewhat dimwitted when it comes to survival skills. Bryson loses patience with Katz's labored hiking pace in the first couple hours of the hike and decides to hike on ahead, reflecting that "I stood and waited a long while [...] but eventually turned and struggled on. I had enough agonies of my own." Similarly, when Katz doesn't know how to pitch his own tent, Bryson seethes internally, thinking to himself that Katz is a "big, soft, flabby baby" who's going to make the trip more difficult. From the start, Bryson views Katz as a liability rather than someone with the potential to become a much-needed friend for him on the Trail. Similarly, on several occasions, Katz (who's struggling with his load), thoughtlessly sheds essential food stocks that Bryson and Katz need to get through the next few days, which Bryson finds utterly idiotic. Bryson's frustration implies that he often thinks of Katz as a burden

rather than a balm against isolation, especially in the early phases of their journey.

Bryson soon learns that many hikers on the Appalachian Trail thrive on the camaraderie and kindness they share with each other, especially in tough moments, which softens his attitude toward Katz. Bryson starts to feel a sense of camaraderie with hikers along the Trail, because they all share the same burdens: "the same weather, the same discomforts, same landscapes, the same eccentric impulse to hike to Maine." In struggling through the "ever-taxing terrain," Bryson is deeply moved by kind gestures from others along the Trail. For example, volunteers often leave canned food (and even, on occasion, cooked meals like fried chicken) in hiking shelters along the route, which revive Bryson and Katz tremendously as they slog through the mountainous terrain. Similarly, an innkeeper named Peggy provides a warm, welcoming environment for hikers who pass through, and her positive attitude motivates Bryson "to keep going." Even Katz, who never gets used to the difficult journey, looks "chipper" after a restful stop there. Though simple, these small interactions and gestures of kindness make a big impact on Bryson and Katz, who are otherwise isolated on their journey.

As Bryson and Katz come to depend on the kindness of strangers, they also start to appreciate the little ways in which they look out for each other as they grapple with the remote, challenging terrain. Bryson gets used to stopping and waiting for Katz, and he discovers that these moments of solitude help him appreciate his surroundings and feel more comfortable in the forest. These restful moments help him acquire a sense of peaceful solitude—or "perfect aloneness." He's able to enjoy spending time alone while also knowing that Katz will be around to help him endure the "unnerving isolation" of camping at night. Bryson and Katz learn to accept each other's quirks in ways they don't initially anticipate, which helps them work as a team as they tackle their difficult journey. For instance, although Bryson finds Katz a little rude, he learns to appreciate Katz's ability to ward off people Bryson doesn't like. When a hiker named Bob corners Bryson and monologues at length about his see-through pouch until Katz interjects with a cutting comment to get rid of Bob, which delights Bryson. In this way, Bryson learns to see Katz's quirks—many of which he initially found irritating—in a new light. Additionally, despite grappling with an impossibly long journey ahead, Bryson and Katz don't hesitate to help carry each other's heavy packs or turn around and backtrack on the miles they've covered to help each other. Bryson admits that small gestures like these make him happy, because "we seemed to be looking out for each other. It was very nice. I can put it no other way." Despite his misgivings about Katz's company, he deeply appreciates the kindness that they show each other. In the end, the small gestures and the sense of camaraderie that hikers along the Trail share with one another inspire Bryson and Katz to forge their own companionship. This helps them manage their isolation and push on with their grueling journey, despite their clashing personalities.

WILDERNESS VS. URBAN SPRAWL

A Walk in the Woods documents author and narrator Bill Bryson's attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail with his friend Stephen Katz in 1996. Bryson fantasizes about exploring the wilderness and getting reacquainted with his homeland after many years living abroad in Europe. Bryson imagines that the experience will be similar to hiking through Europe, where he walked through an easy mix of farms and fields and slept in charming villages along the way. But Bryson soon learns that the car-friendly United States is an entirely different beast: the more territory Bryson covers, the more he realizes that Appalachia's forests are almost entirely surrounded by highways, strip malls, and abandoned industrial towns. Bryson ultimately decides that the culture of visiting nature by car and treating it like a tourist attraction that's separate from everyday life underserves Americans. He finds more value in experiencing nature when it's interwoven more organically into the fabric of everyday life—for example, alongside farmland and villages—than when it's isolated as something separate and somewhat inaccessible.

Bryson is unsettled to learn that it's quite difficult to have a spontaneous adventure on the Trail. Before his trip, Bryson imagines that he can "throw a loaf of bread in a sack, [...] jump over the back fence," and start exploring, just like 19th-century naturalist John Muir describes. However, he soon finds himself agonizing over all the camping gear he'll need to carry, and he realizes that being in nature is going to be more like a daunting slog than a breezy adventure. Bryson fantasizes about finding "convivial inn[s]" along the Trail, where he can wind down after day's hiking in a quaint village with a "hot bath, a hearty meal, and a soft bed." But there are few alternatives to camping besides chain motels and fast food restaurants, which seem disappointingly cut off from the natural surroundings.

Bryon also grows frustrated by having to drive on endless highways to find an access point for the trail—something that undermines his fantasy of easy, spontaneous, and fun exploration. Bryson finds it bizarre that the government bulldozed many farms and villages alongside the Appalachian Trail to create a "corridor" separating nature from human society to make it feel more remote, thereby rendering it impossible to reach the Trail by foot. In Pennsylvania, Bryson drives around for hours but can't actually find the Trail's access point, eventually giving up, which leaves him baffled as to why it's so hard to get access to the famous Trail and explore its rural environment. Bryson also imagines himself surveying magnificent views from mountaintops, but dense forest and bad weather plague his journey, and he spends most of his time disoriented in dense woodland that "chokes off views." He's

disappointed that the Trail's challenging terrain leaves him unable to enjoy much of the rural landscape at all.

By the end of his journey, Bryson concludes that Americans tend to treat nature as a remote, somewhat inaccessible curiosity to be visited, rather than an accessible part of everyday life. Bryson become discouraged by the "either/or proposition" of nature and commerce in the United States. He either has to carry heavy supplies with him and trek for days in unforgiving terrain, or visit nature by car, sleep in motels, and eat junk food in chain restaurants that just happen to have a nice view. At one point, Bryson traipses through a series of parking lots in search of a Kmart, which is supposedly the only place near the woods that sells insect repellant. As he walks, he reflects on how much he dislikes finding no happy medium between being in the woods (where towns and society seem utterly distant) and being in urban sprawl (where nature is, at best, an occasional scenic backdrop). Reflecting on his time in Europe, Bryson decides that hiking in Luxembourg—where natural spaces mix easily with pastoral environments like villages, inns, and farms—was far more palatable. Bryson also has fond memories of England, where hiking demands no more than a packed lunch, a map, and the promise of a warm dinner at a quaint country inn at the end of the day. It's disappointing to Bryson that few environments like that exist along the Trail—he thinks that such settings entice people who don't like camping (like himself) to enjoy rural environments. With this, Bryson observes that American society tends to treat nature as some remote, untouched curiosity that's sectioned-off between highway systems and commercial sprawl—a setup that he believes does a disservice to the country's beautiful landscape. He concludes that this structure makes rural adventures less accessible and less pleasant—and it ultimately renders the promised pleasures of a "walk in the woods" somewhat out of reach.

FEAR, DANGER, AND HUMAN DESTRUCTION

In *A Walk in the Woods*, author and narrator Bill Bryson decides to hike the Appalachian Trail in 1996. As he prepares for his journey into the woods, he reads about countless potential dangers and grows increasingly terrified of deadly encounters with snakes, poisonous plants, falling trees, and worst of all, **bears**. Despite his worries, Bryson learns that he—and everything else in the Trail's ecosystem—is actually far more likely to die at the hands of a human being. Bryson discovers that many animals in the wilderness are being driven to extinction by human activity, as are the Trail's quickly diminishing forests. In exposing these facts as his journey unfolds, Bryson ultimately stresses that that although humanity fears the dangers of the wild, we are the most dangerous creatures in Appalachia.

Bryson has a deep-seated though somewhat irrational fear of the wilderness. In retrospect, he highlights how inflated his fear is using humorous anecdotes. Bryson begins his story with a comically expanding list of ways he could die, ranging from rattlesnakes to poison sumac. As Bryson's list grows longer, it becomes increasingly outlandish—he ends up terrified that he might drown in a puddle. Bryson illustrates just how inflated and unrealistic his fear of the wilderness is when he starts including death scenarios that have nothing to do with being the woods—they could happen anywhere, even in his own backyard. And even after Bryson grows more accustomed to camping the woods, he lies awake for hours each night imagining bears mauling him to death, despite knowing his fear is vastly exaggerated. One night, when Bryson hears some rustling noises outside his tent, he panics, pulls his tent closer to his friend Stephen Katz's, and stands guard in his underwear with a stick all night—even though the animal has long since fled into the forest. The experience was clearly terrifying for Bryson at the time, yet the audience is meant to find his account funny. By making light of his fears, Bryson suggests that it's foolish to view every minor brush with an animal in the woods as a death sentence.

Although Bryson is terrified of going into the woods, he infuses his story with facts, statistics, and anecdotes that underscore how little of a threat the forest's ecosystem actually is to him. In fact, he finds out that people pose a greater threat to one another than the wilderness does. Bryson admits that the chances of being attacked by a bear in the Appalachians "is remote," since Grizzly bears (which Bryson comically describes as bullet-proof) aren't native to the east coast where he's hiking, and "black bears rarely attack." In fact, there's only been one fatal bear attack in New Hampshire since 1784, and none ever in Vermont, implying that Bryson faces a very small chance of being eaten by one (or any other animal, for that matter). A woman named Laurie Potteiger, who works at the Appalachian Trail Conference, similarly informs Bryson that she's only heard of two non-fatal snakebites and one person who was struck by lightning in almost a decade, showing that Bryson's worries about the Trail's worst threats are somewhat misplaced. Bryson gradually learns that the greatest threats on the Trail are actually other people. For instance, two people are brutally murdered in a glade just a few weeks after Bryson rests in the same spot himself, exposing how easily Bryson could have been the murderer's victim. It turns out at that least nine people have been murdered while hiking the Appalachian Trail since the 1970s, revealing that Bryson's chances of meeting a murderer are far higher than facing off with a bear. Bryson and Katz's closest brush with death actually happens when poorly marked Trail signs lead them astray in a blizzard, implying that human ineptitude is a far greater threat to their survival than wild animals are.

Bryson also learns that human activity is driving Appalachia's living ecosystem to extinction at alarming rates, proving that

we pose a greater threat to the Trail than the Trail does to us. Bryson bitterly reflects that most large mammals found in the Appalachians—including the prairie dog and pronghorn antelope—were driven to extinction in the 1900s by "varmint campaigns" offering hefty bounties for hunting animals deemed a nuisance to farmers, like mountain lions. While human deaths on the Appalachian Trail are rare and largely coincidental, the extinction of many animal species was a calculated mass effort on humanity's part. Bryson is similarly saddened to discover vast stretches of tree stumps on his journey, knowing that Appalachia's forests used to contain 20-story-high trees before loggers descended on the area in the 1800s. It's sobering for Bryson to learn that the Forest Service, which oversees the nation's woodlands, was actually designed to function "as a kind of woodland bank, a permanent repository of American timber." Its job is to make sure that some timber—rather than preserved forest—remains for future generations' logging and mining needs. It disappoints Bryson that the organizations looking after the nation's forests play such an active role in the destruction of its wildlife, posing a grave threat to the Appalachian Trail and the many species that call it home.

It grows increasingly obvious to Bryson that despite fixating on the forest's more improbable perils, human beings are singularly responsible for the most deaths along the Appalachian Trail—whether we're killing animals, plants, or one another. Bryson thus eventually acknowledges that he should be most worried about human activity in the woods. When it comes down to the data, human beings are the greatest danger in the Appalachian ecosystem.

DEPRIVATION, COMFORT, AND GRATITUDE

Bill Bryson (author and narrator of *A Walk in the Woods*) imagines conquering the wilderness and becoming a "mountain man" when he undertakes a mammoth hiking trip along the Appalachian Trail—but he quickly learns that the hike is a punishing exercise in self-deprivation. The trek is arduous, and he has to cope without comforts that he often takes for granted (such as warm food, pleasant company, or a comfortable bed). Although Bryson gets used to discomfort, he never fully warms to living this way, leading him to abandon the Trail before he's made it to the end. Despite this failure, Bryson does acquire a newfound satisfaction in simple pleasures like soda, showers, and something to read—which he might have previously found mundane. The discomfort and deprivation that Bryson experiences on the Trail thus aren't completely wasted. Although Bryson gains a healthy respect for the woods, he also develops a newfound ability to enjoy simple comforts that most people take for granted in their day-to-day lives.

Bryson believes hiking the Appalachian Trail will teach him how to survive in the wild like a "mountain man." However, the discomfort and deprivation Bryson experiences eventually make him abandon his goal. Before his trip, Bryson fantasizes about how good it will feel to know that he can "fend for [himself] in the wilderness." He imagines himself proudly feeling like he can hold his own around hunters who boast about "fearsome things done out-of-doors"—he, too, will be able to proudly say that he's survived in the woods. On the trip however, Bryson finds "every step [...] a struggle" and quickly grows dispirited by the Trail's relentless slog of uphill climbs. Spending time in the wild is much harder than Bryson initially thought—no matter how much time he spends hiking, it's undeniable that "a central feature of life on the Trail is deprivation." The unsatisfying meals of noodles, the misery of walking for hours in bad weather, and the aches and pains from sleeping on hard ground only make Bryson more aware of his discomfort. Bryson thus realizes that his fantasies of becoming a tough "mountain man" are overshadowed by his desire to return to civilization.

Bryson does eventually learn to respect the vast and intimidating natural surroundings—yet the biggest lesson he learns is the capacity to feel profound gratitude for simple, seemingly banal comforts of everyday life. For instance, when Bryson comes across amenities like a grocery store or an inn with a shower during their trip, he feels "utterly captivated" and ecstatic at the simple pleasures on offer. Bryson's sobering realization that the wilderness is harsh and unforgiving enables him to find immense joy in things like a can of soda or a shower—things that he previously would have taken for granted in day-to-day life. At one point, Bryson finds himself unexpectedly "thrilled, sublimely gratified" to discover an abandoned Graham Greene novel at a trail shelter. From this chance discovery, he concludes that "if there is one thing the AT teaches, it is low level ecstasy—something we could all do with our lives." Again, the brutality of life on the Trail makes it so that a simple comfort like a book inspires extreme gratitude and even "ecstasy"—something that Bryson suggests everyone should cultivate in their lives. When Bryson and his travel companion, Stephen Katz, finally abandon their trip partway through the Hundred Mile Wilderness in Maine, Bryson admits that "we were never going to become mountain men." He does, however, learn a profound appreciation for the "world of comfort and choice." Fittingly, the duo opts to mark the end of their journey with a much-anticipated six-pack of cream soda in a town called Milo, instead of atop the summit of Katahdin as originally planned. Despite failing to conquer the wilderness in the way he initially imagined, Bryson emerges from his journey with a newfound capacity to enjoy life's simple pleasures after realizing how desperately he's ached for the comforts of home.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BEARS

Bill Bryson's shifting attitude toward bears—from terror to sympathy—represents humanity's misconceptions about the wilderness. From the start, Bill Bryson's attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail is marred by his irrational fear of wild animals, notably bears. He devotes large portions of his account to describing all the terrible ways in which bears have killed humans, and he stays up for hours each night, terrified of being mauled by one. As the story progresses, however, it grows increasingly obvious to Bryson that animal attacks are extremely rare on the Trail. In contrast, human attacks—on the landscape, plants, animals, and other humans—are far more frequent. Similarly, most hikers who die in the attempt do so because of human ineptitude: they struggle with bad maps and get lost in the woods, or they make poor decisions like failing to carry the proper gear for bad weather. It's only in the final few days of his trip that Bryson is able to direct his fear towards the actual threats he faces, rather than the perceived threats he imagines in his mind. Bears thus symbolize the irrational and somewhat misplaced fear of the wild (and its perceived dangers) that many human beings have.

Our fear of the wild often prompts us to do terrible things to other creatures, such as hunting those we perceive to be a threat. Most large mammals native to the Appalachian Trail—including bears—were, in fact, hunted to extinction or near extinction in the 20th century. Despite our misgivings about the threats that we face in the wilderness, *we* are actually the biggest dangers in the wild: we cut down trees, hunt wild animals, kill each other, and make silly mistakes that endanger our lives. Moreover, our fear of the wilderness often prompts our desire to conquer it, thus amplifying the threat we pose to other living creatures in nature. Bryson thus uses his shift in attitude about bears to imply that the wilderness would be a lot better off if human beings focused on changing our own behavior—rather than changing our environment to assuage our often-misplaced fear.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor edition of *A Walk in the Woods* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Who could say the words "Great Smoky Mountains" or "Shenandoah Valley" and not feel an urge, as the naturalist John Muir once put it, to "throw a loaf of bread and a pound of tea in an old sack and jump over the back fence?"

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson opens his memoir by explaining that he's just moved to New Hampshire after several years in Europe. As he explores the woods around his home, he grows fascinated by the prospect of exploring the American wilderness. Bryson is partially motivated by writers of the 1800s and early 1900s, like naturalist John Muir, whom he quotes here. As Bryson explains, part of the reason why he wants to hike the Appalachian Trail is to explore the United States. But while Muir makes the prospect sound enticing, Bryson soon learns that Muir's notion is somewhat romanticized—in fact, it's nearly impossible to do as replicate Muir's experience today.

Bryson soon learns that in order to access the wilderness, he has to drive to it. Moreover, the nation's forests are so cut off from civilization that it takes Bryson a lot more preparation than throwing some food in a sack and wandering off. He has to prepare to camp for days and carry everything he needs with him, because the territory is so remote. The John Muir quote represents Bryson's vision (or fantasy) of what hiking and exploring rural America will be like. Later in the novel, Bryson laments the lack of opportunities in American society for people to wander into the woods and start exploring the way Muir suggests. Part of Bryson's criticism rests on the fact that much of the American landscape has been reclaimed for drivers, which makes exploration on foot particularly challenging.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Through long winter nights in New Hampshire, while snow piled up outdoors and my wife slumbered peacefully beside me, I lay saucer-eyed in bed reading clinically precise accounts of people gnawed pulpy in their sleeping bags, plucked whimpering from trees, even noiselessly stalked (I didn't know this happened!) as they sauntered unawares down leafy paths or cooled their feet in mountain streams.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson prepares for his trip by reading about how to defend himself from bears. He quickly learns that bears are somewhat unpredictable, so if he bumps into one in the wild, things could go either way. He also reads many terrifying accounts of people who were mauled and killed by bears. Although Bryson knows that his chances of encountering a bear on the Trail are quite slim, he nonetheless lies awake at night, unable to sleep as he imagines himself being hunted and killed by bears.

Later in the story, Bryson realizes that wild animals on the Trail aren't much of a threat to human beings at all. To begin with, we've already killed most of them. The more Bryson learns about the way human beings treat wild animals, the more he realizes that they're not the ones hunting us—rather, we're the ones hunting them. Bryson's fear of bears thus represents the inflated sense of danger that human beings perceive about the wilderness: we often perceive the wild to be such a threat to us that we try to tame and control it. But ironically, in doing so, we expose ourselves as the most dangerous creatures in the wild and the greatest threat to the Trail's ecosystem.

> I still have my appendix, and any number of other organs that might burst or sputter in the empty wilds. What would I do then? What if I fell from a ledge and broke my back? What if I lost the trail in blizzard or fog, or was nipped by a venomous snake, or lost my footing on moss-slickened rocks crossing a stream and cracked my head a concussive blow? You could drown in three inches of water on your own. You could die from a twisted ankle. No, I didn't like the feel of this at all.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Before Bryson embarks on his journey, he's incredibly anxious about the dangers of being alone in the wild. Bryson is aware that his sense of fear is inflated, and he uses humor to underscore this throughout the story. In this quote, Bryson completes a list of all the ways he could die: the list began in the last chapter with wild animals, but ends here with him dying from a twisted ankle. As Bryson's list gets longer, it grows more ridiculous, and he ends up imagining scenarios that could happen anywhere—even on the street outside his own home. Bryson intentionally presents his fear of the wilderness here in a comically exaggerated way—his use of humor signals to the reader that his fearful thoughts and behavior are somewhat irrational. Just after this, Bryson further underscores the irrationality of his own fears with facts and statistics that conflict with his own worries. With this, it becomes clear that human beings pose a greater danger to themselves than any wild animal or environmental hazard does.

> "It'll be hell."

Related Characters: Bryson's wife (speaker), Stephen Katz, Bill Bryson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Fueled by his fear of the wilderness, Bryson decides to solicit a travel companion on his hike of the Appalachian Trail—but the only person who agrees to join Bryson is an old high-school friend named Stephen Katz. In this quote, Bryson's wife warns Bryson that bringing Katz along is a bad decision. The last time Bryson traveled with Katz, they had an awful time, and they haven't spoken since. Bryson agrees with his wife, but he's too scared to tackle the Trail alone, even though he probably won't get along with Katz.

At first, it seems like Bryson's wife's prediction—"It'll be hell"—will prove correct. Katz is heavily overweight, somewhat obnoxious, and ill-prepared for a taxing physical journey. Nonetheless, as time passes, Bryson and Katz bond over the difficulties of the Trail and learn to work together, taking their cues from other hikers who help one another out along the way. Bryson thus uses the evolution of his relationship with Katz to inform the reader that difficult experiences often cause people to connect, and that it can be extremely rewarding to foster an attitude of kindness and patience toward others—even when personalities clash.

Chapter 3 Quotes

"I, oh…I threw out the filter papers."

I gave a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "They couldn't have weighed two ounces."

"I know, but they were great for throwing. Fluttered all over." He dribbled on more water. "The toilet paper seems to be working OK, though."

Related Characters: Stephen Katz (speaker), Bill Bryson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

On their first day on the Trail, Bryson quickly outpaces Katz, who lumbers under his heavy pack. When Bryson retraces his steps and tracks down Katz, he realizes that Katz has foolishly thrown out many essential items to lighten his load. In this quote, Katz reveals that he threw out the filter papers for their coffee. Bryson can't help but laugh—the filter papers barely weigh anything.

At first, Bryson struggles with Katz's behavior, which he finds idiotic. But the more they bicker, the more they struggle on the journey. Soon enough, Bryson and Katz realize that they'll fare better if they try to get along. Bryson thus develops more patience with Katz, and Katz tries to behave more pragmatically on the hike. The efforts they make to reduce their burden on each other make a tremendous difference as they progress through the grueling terrain, and they learn that looking out for each other and working as team makes the journey much less taxing overall.

Chapter 4 Quotes

Woods choke off views and leave you muddled without bearings.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Before Bryson embarked on his journey through Appalachia, he envisioned himself standing on mountaintops and surveying the beauty of the wilderness. In reality, however, he spends most of his time battling through dense thickets of trees that leave him disoriented and reveal little of the natural landscape.

This quote is Bryson's first mention of his sobering realization about the poor visibility in the woods, and he revisits this idea several times throughout his memoir. He never does get used to the dense and forbidding surroundings, and he ultimately concludes that the Trail offers far fewer opportunities to enjoy the natural landscape than he anticipated. This realization leads Bryson to conclude that the Trail is not as pleasant to traverse as he thought it would be. It also prompts him to ruminate disappointedly on the erasure of rural life (including farms and villages) from the Eastern United States within the last century. He thinks that wandering through villages and fields would be a lot more pleasant than hiking through dense forests.

The inestimably priggish and tiresome Henry David Thoreau thought nature was splendid, splendid indeed, so long as he could stroll to town for cakes and barley wine, but when he experienced real wilderness, on a visit to Katahdin in 1846, he was unnerved to the core.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Henry David Thoreau , Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson's first few days in the woods are pretty miserable: he can't see anything, the ground is hard, his body aches, and the journey is utterly uncomfortable. He wishes he were exploring a less punishing environment in which nature and people mixed more easily (for example, a country village).

Many writers, however, praise the American wilderness, including Thoreau (who famously extolled the virtues of the woods in his 1854 book *Walden*). Thoreau also dismisses rural environments like farms and villages, arguing that they're vastly inferior to the untamed wilderness. Funnily enough, as Bryson points out here, Thoreau spent a lot of time praising the wilderness and denigrating villages, yet he seldom strayed too far from the comforts of his own village. When he did visit the Appalachian Trail, he found it terrifyingly remote, and he didn't stick around too long.

Bryson brings up Thoreau because he thinks American

society tends to glorify this idea of the raw, untamed wilderness without actually valuing rural towns and villages all that much. In fact, many of the villages on the Trail were bulldozed to oblivion. Bryson suspects that such attitudes and actions were influenced by Thoreau's writing. All this irks Bryson tremendously, because after rural environments have been erased from the landscape, all that's left are punishing woods or car-friendly urban sprawl—and he's not particularly fond of either.

> In fact, mostly what the Forest Service does is build roads. I am not kidding.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

As Bryson and Katz plod on through the forests of Georgia, Bryson thinks about the organizations tasked with looking after these stretches of wilderness. He focuses in particular on the National Forest Service, and he decides that the Forest Service's priorities are woefully askew. The Forest Service was designed to protect the nation's forests—not for the sake of preserving the environment, but for future generations' lumber interests. Because logging was happening at such an alarming rate by the early 1900s, the Forest Service stepped into make sure the timber wasn't all used up at once.

Bryson finds it both odd and disappointing that the Forest Service isn't really concerned with preservation—it's primarily concerned with making sure that some timber is left for people to cull in the future. In fact, the Forest Service spends most of its funds clearing trees and creating roads for loggers. This bothers Bryson, as he thinks that American society should be less exploitative in its approach—especially because deforestation ravages the landscape, destroys living ecosystems, and drives many species to extinction.

> You become part of an informal clump, a loose and sympathetic affiliation of people from different age groups and walks of life but all experiencing the same weather, same discomforts, same landscapes, same eccentric impulse to hike to Maine.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Within their first week of hiking, Bryson and Katz start to notice a sense of camaraderie among hikers along the Trail. Hikers seem to look out for one another, give one another updates on the progress of other hikers, and leave encouraging notes at the camping grounds along the routes. This ethos of support, kindness, and encouragement has a palpable effect on Bryson and Katz, who don't get along very well at the beginning of the trip. Within a few days, however, they start looking out for each other the way other hikers do. The shift in their attitudes makes a big difference in their relationship and helps them work as a team, which makes the challenging terrain seem much more approachable.

In this quote, Bryson also informs the reader that a hiker's journey is marked by discomfort. He never quite gets used to this, though it prompts him to yearn for the simple comforts of everyday life that he never noticed before, such as showers. In this way, his grueling hike on the Appalachian Trail helps him cultivate gratitude, even after he eventually quits the trail and returns to regular life.

> We seemed to be looking out for each other. It was very nice. I can put it no other way.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after reflecting on the sense of camaraderie among hikers on the Trail, Bryson starts to notice little ways in which he and Katz are now looking after each other. Bryson is no longer impatient when he has to stop and wait for Katz to catch up. Katz, in return, stops complaining about the journey, and often picks up Bryson's walking stick when Bryson (who's a little absentminded) leaves it propped against a tree and forgets about it. The realization that both men are making an effort to help each other out warms Bryson's spirit, as he notes here.

This quotation marks a transition point in Bryson and Katz's

relationship. At first, Bryson thinks of Katz as a burden. Within a week, however, he's starting to appreciate the consideration they're showing each other. By the end of the memoir, their relationship blooms into a fully-formed friendship. Bryson thus shows how the kindness he and Katz show each other at this stage lays the groundwork that allows their relationship to evolve past their clashing personalities.

"You're too fat. You should have lost weight before you came out here. Shoulda done some training, 'cause you could have like a serious, you know, heart thing out here."

Related Characters: Mary Ellen (speaker), Stephen Katz, Bill Bryson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Bryson ruminates on how kind and considerate hikers seem to be on the Trail, he and Katz bump into an insufferable woman named Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen displays an astounding lack of tact in the she way she talks to Katz. Here, for example, she berates Katz for his weight despite being a hefty woman herself. Mary Ellen ends up latching onto Bryson and Katz for a few days, though her persistent bragging and self-serving quirks prompt them to ditch her (although they later feel guilty about this).

Mary Ellen embodies the exact opposite behavior of most hikers on the trail: she inserts herself into situations, takes food from others but doesn't share her own supplies, and constantly tries to outpace others on the Trail. Consequently, most other hikers try to avoid Mary Ellen. Her self-aggrandizing bravado also motivates her to push herself too hard, and she ends up dropping out of her journey within a few days. Mary Ellen's character thus serves as a cautionary tale for people who act selfishly in an environment where mutual support is essential to success.

I was beginning to appreciate that the central feature of life on the Appalachian Trail is deprivation, that the whole point of the experience is to remove yourself so thoroughly from the conveniences of everyday life that the most ordinary things—processed cheese, a can of pop gorgeously beaded with condensation—fill you with wonder and gratitude.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Justin , Peggy , Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

A few days after embarking on their journey, Bryson and Katz arrive at the Walasi-Yi Inn, which is run by a couple named Peggy and Justin. It's the first building they've seen in days. Bryson is shocked by how captivating the experience is: he's so mesmerized by things he never noticed before (such as "processed cheese" and "a can of pop") that he reflects on this experience. Bryson had anticipated developing a newfound love for the natural wilderness on his hike—yet so far, the journey has been punishingly grueling and austere. Curiously, however, the discomforts of the wilderness encourage a newfound ability to appreciate mundane things that Bryson previously took for granted. Bryson revisits this idea several times throughout his trip, and he ultimately concludes that one of the biggest lessons he learns from the Trail is the ability to appreciate the small comforts of everyday life in a new way.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Planetary scale is your little secret.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson and Katz have just returned to the Appalachian Trail after a much-needed rest break in a town called Haiawassee. They start to fall into a rhythm and are growing more accustomed to the natural environment. Bryson uses this moment to pause and reflect on what he's learned on the Trail. He still finds the discomfort quite punishing—although he doesn't know yet, this constant struggle will ultimately cause him to abandon the Trail. Nonetheless, he also acquires new perceptions about the world, perhaps the most insightful of which is his newfound appreciation for how large the planet actually is. He's been hiking for almost two weeks and has only covered a miniscule portion of ground. This is one of many instances in which Bryson's experience on the AT gives him new insight

about things he previously took for granted. And though Bryson doesn't take his discussion of planetary scale any further here, he revisits it at length in his subsequent writing, notably in his 2005 book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

These are, in short, seriously inadequate maps. In normal circumstances, this is merely irksome. Now, in a blizzard, it seemed closer to negligence.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

After a relatively manageable stretch of hiking following their break in Haiawassee, Bryson and Katz get stuck in a terrifying blizzard. Worse still, their poorly marked maps seem to be leading them astray; they are dangerously close to perishing in the woods. So far, Bryson has spent no time worrying about the quality of his maps. In fact, he's spent most of his time obsessing about bear attacks (which are highly unlikely on the Trail). Though it takes several weeks for Bryson to acknowledge this, his brush with death in the blizzard teaches him that many people die in the woods because of human ineptitude rather than any environment hazards. People are either ill-equipped to handle the weather, or they wander off the trail and get lost (as Bryson and Katz do here). As the story progresses, Bryson discovers that wild animals are the least of his problems on the Trail. He should be far more worried about human beings, because they often unwittingly endanger themselves (and others) in the wild.

Chapter 7 Quotes

For the Smokies are a very Eden.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

As Bryson and Katz trek northward into Tennessee, they approach the Great Smoky Mountains. Bryson describes the Smokies as a metaphorical Garden of Eden (the biblical garden of paradise) because they are extremely biodiverse and brimming with life. The Appalachians are one of the few mountain chains on the planet that run from north to south, and as the glaciers of the most recent ice age traveled southward, the Smokies picked up a lot of wildlife. This is one of the reasons why botanists have been fascinated with the area since the 1700s. Bryson suspects there are even species nestled within the Smokies that we haven't yet discovered, and he stresses the Smokies' biodiversity because he thinks human beings should take far greater care of this natural wilderness than we do. Bryson sadly laments that preservation efforts are few and far between, and the National Park Service seems to care more about its parking lots than about preserving the rare wildlife in this region. All this prompts Bryson to conclude that human beings are destroying this ecosystem, and we're therefore its most dangerous threat.

We slopped up to the summit of Clingman's Dome—a high point of the trip, by all accounts, with views in clear weather to make the heart take wing-and saw nothing, nothing whatever but the dim shapes of dying trees in a sea of swirling fog.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson and Katz are in the Smokies, and they're approaching the long-anticipated summit of Clingman's Dome. Unfortunately, it's raining—they're soaked, and they can't see the view through the rain and fog. This is particularly disappointing because they've trekked for weeks in the woods, where there aren't many views at all, except of more trees.

Prior to embarking on their journey, Bryson and Katz both had romanticized notions of becoming formidable "mountain men" who effortlessly conquered the AT. But bad weather plagues Bryson and Katz throughout their journey, and neither of them quite get used to constantly battling against the elements. Between the snow in the South, the rain in the Smokies, and the stifling heat and humidity in Maine, they never quite find their footing in nature. The experience overall is marked by discomfort and

disappointment, and many of their highly anticipated moments (like seeing the view from Clingman's Dome) evade them. In the end, Bryson decides that although he thought he would enjoy spending all this time in the wild, he actually ended up missing the comforts of home.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"By 1987, Gatlinburg had sixty motels and 200 gift shops. Today it has 100 motels and 400 gift shops. And the remarkable thing is that there is nothing remotely remarkable about that.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

After a disappointing experience at the summit of Clingman's Dome (where the view was obscured by the rain), Bryson and Katz head to Gatlinburg, a tourist town near the Smoky Mountains. Gatlinburg is a bustling commercial town that many tourists visit when going to see the Smoky Mountains. Bryson finds it baffling that so many people travel so far to see nature, yet they spend all their time eating in the same chain restaurants and shopping in the same stores they'd find at home. Bryson uses Gatlinburg to illustrate his argument that American society tends to treat nature as a tourist attraction. He thinks that American society encourages people to visit nature by car and look at it from a distance, rather than treating it like something to participate in and be a part of. This bothers Bryson immensely—not least because this attitude encourages the development of miles upon miles of ugly urban sprawl surrounding U.S. national parks.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"Jeez, it's ugly[.]"

Related Characters: Stephen Katz (speaker), Bill Bryson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson and Katz make a hasty exit out of Gatlinburg, and head toward Virginia. Along the way, they notice the vast spread of highways and familiar chain restaurants that line the route, such as Dunkin' Donuts and Burger King. Before embarking on their journey, Katz spent most of his time in such venues; in fact, he adores junk food. Yet after a short time in the woods, it's suddenly obvious to Katz how ugly all this urban sprawl is—he just never noticed it before. Bryson uses Katz's reflection to criticize the relentless spread of commerce across the United States. He thinks it's a shame that so much of the landscape is consumed by highways and chain restaurants, especially given that less than 200 years ago, most of what they pass through now was woodland. It bothers Bryson that American society dedicates so much of its infrastructure to highways (and the amenities that line them), and he wishes this wasn't the case.

"It was horrible. And then lavishly, in unison, we wet ourselves.

Related Characters: Stephen Katz (speaker), Bill Bryson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

While Bryson and Katz are driving toward Virginia, Katz comments that the seemingly endless stretch of highways and commercial sprawl is abysmally ugly, and Bryson agrees. He hates the driver-oriented landscape, and he thinks it's a shame that so much of the country looks like this. At the same time, they've both been suffering in the woods. Hiking has been arduous and taxing, and they've both missed the comforts and conveniences of their regular lives. This is why Bryson jokes that they wet themselves when they return to their civilization life, albeit briefly.

Bryson ultimately decides that he prefers the comforts of society to life in the wilderness (although Katz never particularly liked the wilderness, only joining Bryson because he was lonely and bored at home). In this quote, Bryson acknowledges that his conclusions about the Trail are somewhat paradoxical. He finds the spread of commerce beyond the woods incredibly ugly, yet he enjoys the conveniences they offer him. In the end, Bryson decides that he can't reconcile his longing for civilization (and the comforts of soda and air conditioning) with his disdain for urban sprawl, and he admits that he has conflicting feelings about urbanization.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ The Appalachians alone lost four billion trees, a quarter of its cover, in a generation.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson and Katz have left the Smokies and entered Shenandoah National Park. As they explore the area, Bryson reflects on the tremendous damage that human beings have caused to the forest's ecosystem. Apart from deforestation and logging, which he's already discussed, human beings have also introduced diseases into the ecosystem from far and wide around the globe. Here, Bryson is discussing an Asian fungus that destroyed four billion trees in Appalachia within a generation.

Bryson also notes that preservation efforts seem to be lackluster at best. Bryson learns that the National Park Service knows about such threats but usually ignores them. It becomes increasingly obvious to Bryson that human beings are destroying Appalachia's ecosystem—partly because of logging, but also because of negligence and lack of preservation. All this leads Bryson to conclude that human beings are a massive menace to such ecosystems. It's disheartening to Bryson that we don't do more to preserve our rapidly dwindling environment, and he raises such examples to motivate his readers to care about these issues.

❝ If there is one thing the AT teaches, it is low-level ecstasy—something we could all do with more of in our lives.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson and Katz are hiking through Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, and he's just discovered a paperback novel that another hiker left behind. Bryson is happy about this, as he's just run out of things to read. It astounds Bryson how much finding the novel delights him. He describes himself as "delighted, thrilled, sublimely gratified" before concluding that he's learning how to take pleasure, or "low level ecstasy" in little wins like this. Bryson thinks that the deprivations of hiking make him crave things he used to take for granted, and he concludes that such exercises in self-deprivation teach people how to experience newfound pleasure in things they wouldn't otherwise notice. To Bryson, this is a big win. He subtly implies here that many people would live happier lives if they learned to appreciate the little things, such as access to running water or—as he's just realized—something new to read.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ "Well you know what I've got in here, just in case? [...] Toenail clippers—because you never know when danger might arise."

Related Characters: Stephen Katz (speaker), Bill Bryson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson and Katz have just had a run in with an unidentified wild animal: in the middle of the night, Bryson heard something prowling around outside his tent and panicked. He ended up standing outside his tent in his underwear and holding a stick in case the animal came back. Katz, on the other hand, didn't fuss at all and just went back to sleep. It's morning now, and Katz teases Bryson with this joke about using toenail clippers as a weapon. Katz thinks that Bryson's fear of wild animals—and bears in particular—is foolish. And he's arguably right—after all, there have been hardly any fatal animal attacks on the Trail since its inception. Bryson is well aware that his fear of wild animals is wildly inflated—in fact, he should be more worried about human beings, since they are the biggest killers on the Trail. Bryson frequently pokes fun at his own exaggerated fear of wild animals in retrospect. His inclusion of Katz's joke in the memoir thus signals to the reader that Bryson knows his fear is irrational.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ We experienced the whole of Luxembourg. Not just its trees.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson is driving around the Northeastern United States and visiting parts of the Appalachian Trail by car. He's spent several weeks hiking in the woods, looking at nothing but trees, and several weeks driving to the woods with his car. Here, he reflects on both experiences, deciding that he doesn't like either. He's craving some sort of middle ground between the two. Bryson feels nostalgic about his experiences in Luxembourg, as he found Luxembourg much easier to explore by foot. The footpaths led him through villages, farmland, and woodland. Every night, he could stop for the evening and sleep somewhere comfortable. And in the end, he felt like he learned a lot about Luxembourg through its varied rural environments. He hasn't as yet found anything like that experience in the United States, and it makes him sad. Bryson feels like people would enjoy the landscape a lot more if they could experience a mix of wilderness and rural life and actually go for "a walk in the woods."

"In America, alas, beauty has become something you drive to, and nature an either/or proposition—either you ruthlessly subjugate it, as at Tocks Dam and a million other places, or you deify it, treat it as something holy and remote, a thing apart, along the Appalachian Trail.

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson has been exploring various sections of the Appalachian Trail in the Northern United States by car. After his visit to Delaware, he formulates a sobering reflection about American society, captured in this quote.

Bryson thinks that the American landscape is divided in two. Society treats some of the land as "holy and remote" natural territory that must not be touched at all (meaning that officials won't build amenities along the Trail to make life easier for people who want to visit it). On the other hand, society "ruthlessly subjugate[d]" the rest of the landscape, creating endless urban sprawl (in which people will do whatever they want to the land without a second thought about the damage they cause). This means that if Bryson wants to experience nature, he "either" has to hike in punishing conditions for days on end, "or" he has to drive around and see nature from his car window. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground where people and nature can coexist more harmoniously.

This fact deeply bothers Bryson; he doesn't enjoy engaging with nature given the options on offer. More importantly, he thinks that American society doesn't really respect nature. He argues that human beings are part of the world's living ecosystem, yet we act like we stand outside it and can do whatever we want with it. Admittedly, we do set aside some areas of nature for recreational purposes (such as the Appalachian Trail). In the end, however, Bryson concludes that it's insufficient to partition off some woodland to make us feel better about the damage we do elsewhere.

Chapter 19 Quotes

"Now here's the plan [...] We hike and camp like mountain men."

Related Characters: Stephen Katz (speaker), Bill Bryson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 340

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson and Katz have just reunited, and they plan to tackle the Hundred Mile Wilderness in Maine. Katz suggests they hike without camping gear and go into the wilderness like "mountain men" would, without any supplies, but Bryson thinks that Katz is being idiotic. After all, the Hundred Mile Wilderness is notoriously difficult terrain. Despite the fact that Bryson teases Katz about his suggestion, Bryson is somewhat enamored with the idea of conquering the Appalachian Trail and feeling like a "mountain [man]" who can survive in the wilderness. This romanticized notion of manliness is actually one of the reasons Bryson decided to hike the Trail in the first place. It doesn't take Bryson and Katz long to realize that Maine's forests are intimidatingly challenging, and they struggle almost immediately, endangering both of their lives. The pair eventually abandon their fantasies of being "mountain men," and they realize they're much better suited to life in civilization.

Chapter 20 Quotes

"Where you going?" asked the driver.

"Anywhere," I said. "Anywhere but here."

Related Characters: Bill Bryson (speaker), Stephen Katz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 402

Explanation and Analysis

Bryson and Katz have just attempted to hike through the intimidating Hundred Mile Wilderness, the Appalachian Trail's northernmost stretch. It culminates at the summit of Katahdin, where they planned to end their trip. However, within the first 15 miles of the Hundred Mile Wilderness, they discover that they're far out of their depth. Within the last 24 hours, Bryson and Katz have nearly drowned. Then, Katz got lost in the woods overnight, unable to find his way back to Bryson.

After reuniting, the pair have an epiphany: neither of them wants to hike any farther. Although the duo wanted to experience Maine's forests, they find the claustrophobic terrain utterly miserable, and they long for the more hospitable (and less deadly) realm of civilization. Bryson flags down a truck, and when the driver asks where they're going, Bryson utters the response quoted here. Bryson doesn't care where he ends up, as long as it's away from the Trail and somewhere—anywhere—closer to civilization, which is where he really belongs.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

When Bill Bryson moves to New Hampshire after several years abroad, he notices a path leading into the woods that's signposted as part of the Appalachian Trail (known as "AT"). The AT is 2,100 miles long, and it runs from Maine all the way down to Georgia, through several mountain ranges with enticing names like the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Smokies. The idea of walking the AT fascinates Bryson—he reasons that it'll help him get into shape, reconnect with his homeland, and learn how to survive in nature. He even jokes that it will make him feel manly. Bryson also knows that global warming might soon destroy this natural wonderland, and he wants to see it before it's gone.

From the outset, Bryson is motivated to learn how to survive in the wilderness, imagining that it will make him seem tougher and manlier. At this stage, however, he has no idea that he's vastly underestimating how grueling the Appalachian Trail is going to be, and how hard it actually is to survive in the woods. Bryson is also acutely aware of the damage that humans cause to nature, and his nod to global warming here foreshadows his emphasis on ecological destruction throughout the book.

Bryson talks to a few people who've hiked the Trail and realizes that he's in over his head. He thinks about all the dangers he might face, including rattlesnakes, coyotes, wolves, drunk hillbillies with guns, and skunks with rabies. Bryson even hears about a man who got up in the middle of the night to pee and wound up scalped by a short-sighted owl. Bryson imagines himself meeting his demise surrounded by wolves, fire ants, or even mosquitos. He thinks about all the diseases he could get and the strange and painful ways he could die. Then he starts thinking about murderers—at least nine hikers have been murdered since 1974. He wonders what he got himself into.

As Bryson starts preparing for his trip, he soon realizes that he's severely underestimated the task ahead. Bryson uses humor here to show that his fear of animals in the wild is somewhat irrational. He could die from a disease-bearing mosquito bite in his own garden just as easily as he could in the woods, so his fear is clearly inflated. Bryson also mentions the dangers that human beings pose to one another. He'll spend a lot of the book weighing up the risk that animals pose to human beings versus the risk that human beings pose to Appalachia's ecosystem.

Attempting to avoid bad weather, Bryson decides to begin his hike in Georgia in March so that he can arrive home in New England by October, before the winter storms set in. Estimates of the AT's length vary but tend to hover around 2,150 miles long. The large mountain ranges make it a tough slog as well. Bryson calculates that it would take about five months and five million steps to walk the whole Trail. He'd imagined having a nice daily stroll and sleeping in country inns—but he soon realizes that he's going to have to camp, carry his own food, and hike with a heavy load on his back.

Bryson fancifully imagines that hiking in the United States will be as easy and accessible as staying in rural inns and going for a leisurely walks in the woods). Yet given the well-known difficulty of completing the Appalachian Trail, Bryson will soon realize that the Trail is far more remote and challenging that anything he's tackled before.

Bryson goes to buy camping equipment and finds himself "impressed and bewildered." The salesman, Dave Mengle, is an avid hiker—and it shows. Dave talks about technical differences between products, discussing air-flow channels, webbing loops, and ratios. Bryson quickly learns that minimizing the weight of a hiker's load is important, and that hiking gear is *really* expensive. He finds it bizarre that he has to buy the straps for his backpack separately and cracks a joke about whether he needs to buy the pack's bottom too—though Dave doesn't laugh. Bryson ends up with an expedition-worthy collection of sacks, knives, waterproof matches, long underwear, and more. Then he goes next door and buys a pile of books about hiking and **bear** attacks.

As Bryson chats with Dave, he begins to realize how much of a commitment it's going to be to hike in the United States. He needs to prepare for total isolation and have all the survival tools he needs with him. It's already becoming clear that what he's signed up for is going to be nothing like any hiking he's done before. His purchase of the book on bear attacks foreshadows Bryson's developing fixation on bears, which represent his—and, more generally, humanity's—inflated fear of the wild.

Bryson sets up all his gear in his basement, trying to imagine himself like that in the wilderness, but he can't—he hasn't been in a tent since he was nine years old, and that was in his living room. Bryson notices the odd smell of the gear and starts to feel a bit claustrophobic in his tent. He tells himself it's not going to be so bad, but deep down he knows he's wrong.

Bryson reveals that he's never actually camped in the wilderness. It's becoming obvious to Bryson that his upcoming hike might not be as fun as he initially imagined, when he thought about himself leisurely exploring rural America. Even before he's embarked for his journey, Bryson's exaggerated fear of the wild is bleeding into his experience.

CHAPTER 2

On July 5, 1983, group of campers set up their tents by Lake Canimina in Quebec. They cooked hamburgers and suspended their food from a tree, out of reach from **bears**. That night, however, a bear came and ripped the bag down. A few hours later, the bear returned. Bryson imagines being in a tent, hearing growls and clatters outside, and suddenly realizing that he's got candy in his tent, knowing the bear can smell it. That night, 12-year-old David Anderson was in his tent when a giant claw ripped through the fabric, grabbed onto him, and dragged him into the woods. By the time the group found David, he was dead.

Bryson's fear of bears symbolizes humanity's fear of the wilderness more generally—and the more Bryson reads about bear attacks, the more his fear of the wild starts to magnify. Bryson subtly indicates that his fear is inflated by pointing out that the bear didn't come for David Anderson—it came for food, and Anderson was unluckily in the way. The attack also happened in Canada, where bears are far more populous. In obsessing about this one case, Bryson subtly shows that there's a conflict between his fear and the actual facts of the risks he faces from wild animals.

Imagine, says Bryson, reading a book full of similar accounts right before you take a camping trip alone in the wild. Bryson spends many sleepless nights imagining all the small mistakes he could make that will attract a **bear**, such as using aromatic gel or forgetting a candy bar in his pocket. In truth, it's highly unlikely to encounter a bear on the Appalachian Trail. The grizzly bear is more common in the western states, but it's still terrifying—not even arrows or bullets will stop it. Bryson reads about a professional hunter named Alexei Pitka, who shot a grizzly down and approached the bear, at which point the bear sprang up and grabbed his head between its jaws. Luckily, Pitka survived.

After focusing on his deep fear of wild animals, and bears in particular, Bryson highlights more facts that suggest his fear is exaggerated, such as that the most dangerous bears (Grizzlies) aren't even native to the East Coast, where he'll be hiking. Bryson also uses humor to expose his fear of bears as inflated, for example by describing bears as bullet-proof. Thirdly, Bryson makes it clear that human error (such as sleeping with food on his person) will probably be the actual cause of a bear attack. Lastly, despite the terrifying nature of this attack, Pitka survives—further showing that Bryson's fear is misplaced.

Bryson knows he's far more likely to cross paths with a black **bear**, and they rarely attack—there were only 20 fatal attacks between 1900 and 1980. Most attacks just result in "light bites," but this information alone is enough to terrify Bryson. In *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*, author Stephen Herrero writes that upon encountering a grizzly, one should back away slowly and climb a tree, but never run. Bryson thinks that this is easy to say when you're writing a book, but when you're in the woods, chances are pretty high you're going to panic and run. For black bears, the opposite advice applies: make a lot of noise and run toward it. Bryson can't imagine himself ever running toward a bear either.

Bryson continues undermining his fear of bears with more facts, such as the claim that black bears (which are the most populous in the area he'll be hiking) don't usually attack humans—and when they do, those attacks are rarely fatal. With this, he implies that humanity's fear of wild animals is largely misplaced.

Bryson thinks about other stories from Herrero's book, and he realizes that bears are unpredictable, and "nobody can tell you what to do," which doesn't reassure him at all. For months he lays awake at night, imagining himself hearing one outside his tent. Bryson also imagines the dangers of being alone while something bad happens. His organs could burst. He might fall off a ledge. He might get a concussion or drown in a puddle. Thinking it wiser to have company, he invites lots of people to join him on his trip. Only one person responds: Stephen Katz, an old friend he hasn't seen for years. Bryson is thrilled: he won't have to be all alone in the wilderness.

Bryson revisits his list of ways in which he could die, which starts to grow longer and increasingly ridiculous. Many of the dangers that Bryson associates with the wild could happen anywhere, such as drowning in shallow water. Bryson's list grows more comical as it gets longer—he uses humor once again to expose his fear of the wild as inflated. Meanwhile, at the first mention of Katz, it's clear that Bryson and Katz barely know each other, meaning that they might not get along. Nonetheless, Bryson's exaggerated fear of isolation pushes him to seek out a companion.


Bryson and Katz catch up over the phone and make plans to meet the next week. Bryson forgets to ask why Katz wants to come along, but he doesn't care—he's just happy to have company. Bryson's wife is less enthused. She wonders why Bryson's going on a long trip with someone who always got on his nerves. Bryson denies this, saying that they have lots in common, but Bryson's wife thinks it's going to be a disaster. Bryson sheepishly agrees.

Bryson's wife is often the voice of reason in his memoir. As she questions Bryson about Katz, it becomes clear that they're likely not going to travel well together, as Bryson doesn't actually like Katz much. But Bryson is so afraid of the wild that he's desperate for company—he's not thinking about what it's going to be like to spend months alone with somebody he doesn't really like.

A week later, Katz arrives. Bryson tries to remember the last time they saw each other; he recalls that Katz was a bit of a party animal before becoming sober. Bryson notices that Katz is a lot larger than he remembers, and he's limping and wheezing a little. Immediately, Katz says that he's starving and explains that he gets seizures if he doesn't eat every hour or so. A worried Bryson explains that there are no restaurants on the Trail, but Katz opens his bag to reveal that it's full of candy bars.

As soon as Bryson sets eyes on Katz, he starts to regret his decision. It's clear that Katz is unfit and ill-prepared for the trip, considering he can't walk very well and needs to eat so regularly. Bryson uses this opportunity to remind the reader that the American hiking experience is strenuous: there are few amenities like restaurants or inns along the route.


Bryson and Katz stop by Dunkin Donuts on the way home; Katz scarfs down five donuts and goes to lie down. Bryson's wife just gives Bryson a look. The next day, Bryson and Katz go shopping for camping supplies, but Katz mostly buys a lot of food until Bryson reminds him that he can't carry that much. They go home to pack, but Katz just lays around listening to music. The next morning, Katz emerges, lugging his pack with things tied messily all over it. On the way to the airport, Katz eats lots of donuts. The man at the check-in desk warns them about wolves on the Trail, and Bryson wants to cry. Katz seems gloomy because he knows that they won't serve food on the plane.

Bryson hasn't even left his home yet, and Katz is already getting on his nerves. Katz's lack of preparation, general procrastination, and hasty packing make it seem like he either isn't taking the trip very seriously, or like he has no idea what he's getting himself into. Either way, it's clear that Bryson is already starting to regret asking Katz along, as it seems like Katz is going to be more burdensome than supportive. Meanwhile, the desk clerk's comment reveals that, like Bryson, other people tend to exaggerate the threat that wild animals pose to humans.

CHAPTER 3

In 1921, a U.S. Labor Department worker named Benton MacKaye envisions the Appalachian Trail. He sees it as a way for urban workers to reconnect with nature and feel refreshed. MacKaye also proposes building villages along the route, subsisting on non-industrialized activities like farming and crafts, away from the pressures of "profit." In 1925, several hiking clubs join forces to plan constructing the 1,200-mile-long Trail, traversing the two highest mountain peaks in the Eastern United States. In 1930, a lawyer and hiker named Myron Avery takes over the project and begins constructing the AT, but he falls out with MacKaye's "quasi-mystical" vision. MacKaye then extends the Trail to 2,000 miles long and quietly completes it using entirely voluntary labor by 1937.

In looking at the history of the Appalachian Trail's construction, Bryson realizes that even before it's been built, there's a divide between urban life and wilderness emerging in the United States. The reader also learns that MacKaye actually envisioned the Appalachian Trail as a pastoral rural environment with farms and villages for people to enjoy along the way. However, it's already clear (from Bryson's claims that there are few such settings along the route) that MacKaye's vision was never fully realized.

The trail that MacKaye and Avery build has few historical roots—it doesn't follow any Native American trails or Colonial routes. MacKaye's proposed villages are never built along the route either. Today, volunteers maintain the Trail. To Bryson, the AT remains "gloriously free of commercialism." Parts of the Trail are often rerouted to make way for construction and logging. When Bryson and Katz arrive in Georgia, they don't know exactly how to get onto the Trail. They pay a man named Wes Wisson $60 to drive them to Springer Mountain so that they can get started. Approximately 2,000 people begin at Springer Mountain each year in the spring, though only 80 percent last past the first week, and only 10 percent actually finish the Trail in Maine.

Bryson continues unfolding the history of the Appalachian Trail's construction, making it explicit that many of the villages planned alongside the route were never constructed. This is an important detail, as Bryson will soon argue that the absence of such amenities makes the wilderness much less accessible and more difficult to enjoy. It bothers Bryson that he has to use a car to get to the wilderness—it implies that nature is something that people visit as a novelty, rather than something they experience as an integral part of their lives. Bryson also starts to expose some of the many ways in which humans damage the wilderness, notably logging. Meanwhile, the fact that only 10 percent of hikers who tackle the Appalachian Trail actually finish it reinforces the idea that the hiking experience is far less pleasant than many of them imagine.

Wisson tells Bryson and Katz about a man he drove to Springer Mountain who called at the first payphone after three days (only 21 miles into the Trail) to give up, saying that it wasn't what he expected. A week earlier, Wisson drove three Californian women to Springer Mountain, and they gave up after 4 hours (1.5 miles into the Trail). They also said that it wasn't what they expected—Wisson wonders if they expected escalators instead of hills and rocks. Six weeks ago, Wisson says, a man who completed the Trail in Springer after eight months cried all the way to the airport. Bryson wonders if he'll manage to complete the journey. Wisson doesn't sound confident about that.

Bryson builds further on the idea that in the United States, a lot of people want to engage with natural environments, but the infrastructure tends to work against them. It seems the natural terrain that's set aside for people to experience is so punishing that it's almost prohibitive. In mentioning all the people who abandon the Trail, Bryson starts to clue the reader into the fact that he and Katz aren't going to enjoy the trip very much at all—soon enough, they're going to be longing for the comforts of everyday life.

Bryson and Katz arrive at a comfortable lodge and agree to begin hiking in the morning. Bryson wakes early and is shocked by the cold. It's 11°F, the coldest ever recorded for this time of year in Georgia. Despite this, he's got a pep in his step and is surprisingly eager to get started. Katz also looks perky. He's eating pancakes and syrup and flirting with a heavy-set waitress named Rayette. Katz pleads with Bryson to stay at the lodge another night because it's cold out, but Bryson says they should get on with it. Bryson hauls his heavy pack onto his back, staggering from the weight before heading for the woods with Katz lagging behind.

As the duo approach the Trail, the bitterly cold weather shows them that what they've signed up for isn't an easy, relaxed walk in the woods. Still, Bryson's optimism prevails, although he loses patience with Katz before he's even gotten going, and swiftly outpaces him. The punishing environment will necessitate them bonding and working together—but so far, Bryson just finds Katz annoying, somebody that's going to slow him down. Bryson's lack of concern about the cold weather is also misguided—even though he spends a lot of time worrying about wild animals, his own foolishness about the weather will actually pose the biggest threat to his life on the journey ahead.

Bryson and Katz hike up a steep incline into dense woods. It's sunny, but everything is brown and frozen in the cold. Katz is already panting and Bryson feels horribly out of shape. The experience is hell. He keeps thinking the hill will flatten but every time he reaches a clearing, he realizes the summit is still impossibly far away. When he finally reaches high ground, Bryson falls to the ground, exhausted. When he stands up again, he realizes the view is majestic—but intimidating. Next, they have to hike through a staggeringly steep gorge and up another even steeper hill. That takes them 1.7 miles into the Trail. Bryson realizes that his plan to hike over 25 miles a day was woefully ambitious.

Bryson and Katz have barely embarked on the journey, and already the experience is miserable. The trials and discomforts of the Trail will feature heavily in the remainder of Bryson's account. Eventually, they'll teach Bryson to appreciate many of life's simple pleasures (like a warm bed) but at the moment, he just feels miserable.

At first, Bryson waits for Katz to catch up as they hike—but Katz is painfully slow, and stopping every few steps to wipe his brow and swear. Within the first couple hours, Bryson loses track of Katz. It's seven miles to the summit, which doesn't seem so far, but it's hard work with a heavy pack. Bryson muses that it's like hiking with two children—or a large box of textbooks—strapped to your back on a steep incline that climbs over 4,500 feet high. Bryson wonders why he's doing this voluntarily. He keeps thinking that he must have walked seven miles by now, but the hike seems endless. Eight hours after setting off, Bryson reaches the summit of Springer Mountain. He's completely spent.

Bryson stresses how impatient he is with Katz at the start of the journey. It's clear that at this stage, they're not really working together yet, and this makes the journey more of a struggle. Bryson's disdain for the heavy pack he has to carry underscore that hiking in the wilderness in the United States isn't the leisurely pastime he envisioned. In fact, the journey is so miserable that Bryson can't even enjoy the view when he reaches the summit.

At the summit, there's a notebook where hikers write encouraging notes. Bryson waits about 45 minutes for Katz before going to look for him. He walks downhill—through miles of Trail that he'll have to hike again—and eventually spots Katz, who's hysterical. He's been shedding food to lighten his pack, and he looks really mad about it. Bryson takes Katz's pack, and together they hike to the summit, where the campsite is buzzing with activity. Katz doesn't know how to put up his tent, so an exasperated Bryson does it for him, and Katz crawls in and passes out. Too tired to cook, Bryson does the same.

The notebook with encouraging notes indicates that there's a community ethos on the Appalachian Trail, in which people look out for and support one another. Katz and Bryson don't embody this yet, but the fact that Bryson goes back to look for Katz shows that he's starting to think of them as a team. Nonetheless, Bryson is still impatient with Katz, utterly annoyed by his lack of survival skills.

Bryson wakes up to find that his water bottle has frozen solid. Katz is moving around sheepishly outside, feeling bad for the way he acted yesterday. He makes Bryson some coffee to make up for it, and he promises to be better today. Bryson notices that Katz is filtering the coffee with toilet paper because he threw the filters out on the Trail, and Bryson can't help but laugh. They drink coffee mixed with toilet paper and discuss what to eat for breakfast. It turns out that Katz shed most of their food on the way, so they make do with a Snickers bar.

Bryson emphasizes the punishingly cold weather, though he doesn't quite realize yet that his lack of concern for the weather will be the biggest danger he'll face on his journey. Katz's ineptitude is almost comical, though he is trying to be helpful and supportive. The duo will need to lean on each other to get through the difficult journey, and they're both starting to realize that.

CHAPTER 4

To Bryson, the woods feel sinister. It's hard to get your bearings, and it feels like you're being watched. You think about **bears** and serial killers, and every sound makes you jumpy. Even Henry David Thoreau, who extolled the values of nature, found the Appalachians savage and terrifying. Bryson and Katz are hiking through the Chattahoochee Forest. When the first Europeans arrived in the Americas, the dense forest spread northward into Canada and westward to the Missouri River. Most of the forest is now gone, but what's left is still a foreboding 6,000 square miles large. Bryson and Katz walk on and on through seemingly endless ridges, valleys, and hills of dense, cold forest.

The isolation of the wilderness is clearly intimidating. Once again, Bryson emphasizes his fear of wildlife, which he symbolizes with bears. He mentions serial killers as well, though he doesn't know that they're a much bigger threat to him than bears are. In mentioning that most of the forests are gone, Bryson subtly implies that humans pose a far greater threat to the wild than the wild does to us. He'll revisit this idea several times throughout the memoir.

The United States has a lot of woodland; the forests in Maine alone are larger than Belgium. A wilderness so large sounds refreshingly serene, but in reality, the land is also used for mining and logging. The Forest Service—an institution designed to capitalize on the nation's forests—allocates a third of the nation's woodland for logging. It primarily builds roads to provide logging access for private timber companies. In fact, the roads in the nation's forests are eight times longer than the entire interstate highway system. Logging, in turn, washes away soil and disrupts ecosystems. By the late 1980s, the Forest Service was cutting down trees faster than it replaced them, even though 80 percent of its deals lost money. Bryson finds this utterly deplorable.

Bryson expands on the idea that humans cause a lot more damage to the wild than any other creature on Earth. Even the Forest Service, which oversees the nation's forests, is designed for the purpose of making money out of the forests through logging, rather than preserving the natural habitat for the creatures that call it home. Bryson emphasizes how much damage the Forest Service has done to the forests in the United States in order to emphasize how big of a threat to the environment human beings are.

In 1890, a railroad man named Henry C. Bagley all but leveled the forest that Bryson and Katz are hiking through for timber. By 1920, foresters in the South were logging 15.4 billion feet of timber a year before preservation action began in the 1930s. To Bryson, the forest seems like a "strange frozen violence." Downed trees lie in craters every 50 yards, and others lean ominously as if they're about to topple over. The woods are also creepily quiet in winter. Normally in March, the woods would be filled with flowers, insects, and life—but not this year. Everything is still frozen.

Bryson drops in more facts and statistics that emphasize the deplorably fast rate at which industry damages the Appalachian Trail's ecosystem. It's clear that a great deal of damage was done before preservation efforts even crossed anyone's mind. Meanwhile, Bryson's description of the forest as a creepy sort of "frozen violence" emphasizes how uncomfortable and out of place he is this remote environment.

Bryson and Katz fall into a simple routine: they wake at first light, make coffee, pack up their tents, eat some raisins, and hike about nine hours a day. Bryson is much faster, but he waits for Katz every so often. Sometimes, other hikers give him updates on Katz's progress. There are about two dozen or so hikers, young and old, trekking northward in the same area. Bryson bumps into three or four of them a day, often in the wooden shelters along the route. He feels like he's part of an informal crew of people from all walks of life who share both the motivation and the discomfort of hiking the Trail.

As Bryson and Katz spend more time on the Trail, they start to notice the way people look out for one another. They're even looking out for Bryson and Katz, as evidenced by the updates that various hikers give Bryson about Katz's progress. Bryson starts to embrace this practice of kindness, knowing that as annoying as he finds Katz, they're in the same boat. Bryson thus starts to display more patience with Katz's slower pace. Even at this early stage of the journey, Bryson is realizing that the experience is marked by discomfort.

Even though there are people around now and then, the woods provide Bryson with a profound feeling of solitude. Bryson leaves markers on the route for Katz and occasionally hikes back to find him. They sort of look out for each other, and it feels nice. Around four p.m. each day, they set up camp and boil noodles. Around six p.m., they crawl wearily into their tents. Katz always falls asleep instantly, but Bryson often reads by lamplight for an hour and hears sounds in the forest until he falls asleep. Each day they wake, shivering in the cold, and repeat the same ritual.

As the first week of the journey passes, Bryson and Katz fall into more of a rhythm and start watching out for each other. Bryson starts offering Katz more kind gestures—for example, backtracking on his progress and adding extra hours to his already-long days of hiking, just to make sure Katz is alright. The shared misery of the experience makes them empathize with each other, and they start working together to help each other through the journey.

On their fourth night, Bryson and Katz befriend a woman named Mary Ellen from Florida who talks incessantly. She monologues about how they overpaid for their gear and exaggerates how far she hiked that day. Even though she's quite plump herself, Mary Ellen tells Katz he's too fat to hike and he might have a heart attack. Katz gets up to pee and swears under his breath. The next morning, Katz and Bryson eat raisins while Mary Ellen stuffs herself with oatmeal, chocolate, and pop tarts. When they head off, she tags along. Despite Mary Ellen's bravado, she's nervous in the wilderness. Bryson finds her oddly amusing, so he doesn't mind. Mostly she just rattles off redundant facts, like what time it is.

Mary Ellen embodies the exact opposite attitude to the camaraderie among hikers tackling the Trail. Bryson highlights Mary Ellen's negative comments, patronizing attitude, and selfishness in refusing to share her food to illustrate the kind of behavior that demoralizes people and makes their journey harder. Although Katz despises Mary Ellen, Bryson is still keen to show her some kindness, as he doesn't want her to be alone and scared. Unfortunately, this grace doesn't seem to rub off on her the way other that hikers' kind behavior did on Bryson and Katz.

Bryson, Katz, and Mary Ellen hike laboriously over Blood Mountain (which is 4,461 feet high) and head toward Neels Gap, eager to reach the Walasi-Yi Inn, the first store along the Trail. They're utterly captivated by the sandwiches, juice, and cheese inside. Bryson starts thinking that the Trail's appeal is depriving you of things, so that something as simple as canned cheese can fill you with wonder. To Bryson, it makes all the discomfort worth it. Bryson and Katz feast on sandwiches, stock up on food, call home, and shower. Looking back, Bryson thinks he's never enjoyed a shower so much as when he washed a week's worth of grime off his body.

Bryson and Katz's first experience with civilization fills Bryson with a sort of mesmerized, wonderful joy. His fanciful descriptions of relatively ordinary activities— like showering and having access to soda—show that he's developing appreciation for life's ordinary pleasures in a way that he never did before he deprived himself of all these things. In fact, it seems like Bryson is learning to appreciate such simple comforts the way he thought he would appreciate nature.

Bryson and Katz chat with Justin and Peggy, the Walasi-Yi Inn's owners. Peggy is very encouraging and often tries to dissuade people from quitting the Trail. Indeed, Bryson feels refreshed and is eager to keep going. He's also starting to feel fitter. Even Katz looks happy. They learn than Mary Ellen already left them behind, and they feel like the day is just getting better and better. Bryson and Katz hike to a meadow to set up camp, and Bryson pulls out a pack of Hostess cupcakes as a surprise for a delighted Katz. They lie against a log feeling relaxed and happy. Suddenly, Katz groans: Mary Ellen is walking toward them.

Peggy's encouraging demeanor exemplifies the ethos of kindness and support that hikers embody to help each other with the journey. Mary Ellen's selfish behavior (hiking ahead without saying goodbye) throws Peggy's kindness into relief. Even though Bryson despises junk food, he uses the Hostess cupcakes to motivate and encourage Katz. It's clear that they are starting to treat each other with more kindness, and their warmer behavior toward each other is making the trip much more tolerable.

CHAPTER 5

Two days later, Mary Ellen is still tagging along with Bryson and Katz, asking annoying, irrelevant questions about their star signs and dreams. They've hiked 22 miles in two days, but they feel listless. Each day is the same rhythm of hiking through trees, not seeing many views, sleeping, and doing the same all over again. Bryson and Katz concoct a secret plan to hike 14 miles to Dicks Creek Gap, where they want to sneak off for dinner and sleep in a motel. The promise of television and warm beds motivates them to move at an alarming pace. To their relief, they lose Mary Ellen, who falls behind.

Although Bryson tried being kind to Mary Ellen, she seems not to have picked up on the fact that hikers look out for one another on the Appalachian Trail. She's blithely unaware of the negative impact that her obnoxious behavior has on others. Once again, Bryson discovers that the discomforts of the Trail don't really make him appreciate nature all that much (especially as he can barely see any views). What they are teaching him is that simple, basic aspects of everyday life (like television) can be sources of immense joy.

Bryson and Katz reach Highway 76 and try to hitch a ride to the nearest town. The cars seem unnervingly fast after days in the woods, and the experience is humbling. Then, miraculously, a baby blue car screeches to a halt, and a young couple (Darren and Donna) offer them a ride. Bryson thinks that this is "Trail Magic"—a phenomenon in which good fortune arrives just when all seems lost on the Trail. Bryson and Katz, thrilled, haul their packs into the trunk. The couple is drunk on bad liquor, but Bryson and Katz get in anyway. It turns out that Darren and Donna are getting married tomorrow. They swerve a lot, which terrifies Bryson and Katz.

There's a stark contrast between the isolation of the woods and the intimidating highway. This image highlights the fact that beyond the land sectioned off for hiking, the United States is predominantly characterized by highways, cars, and urban sprawl. Bryson finds the contrast between these two extremes quite jarring, and he'll ruminate on this more as the memoir progresses. Bryson reminds the reader once more that it's very difficult to walk in and out of natural environments in Appalachia. Despite the fact that getting into a car with a drunk driver is a terrible idea, Bryson and Katz are relieved to have a break from walking.

Darren and Donna drop Bryson and Katz off at the motel in Haiawassee and drive away, swerving at breakneck speed. Bryson and Katz are in Northern Georgia, which makes Bryson think about James Dickie's novel *Deliverance*. In the book, four men on a canoe trip are hunted and tortured by demented rural men. Before this, they ask directions in a small town which could well be Haiawassee. The book—like many historical accounts of the area—gives a disparaging picture of rural people from Georgia. Bryson feels vaguely unsettled—he isn't sure if he's just not used to being in towns, or if the book is haunting him.

Bryson's description of the creepy-looking town is meant to expose the towns in Appalachia further characterizes rural America as a place where human life and nature don't mix easily. It seems that here in Georgia, Bryson can't feel relaxed in the woods—but he doesn't feel relaxed in the towns either. Neither environment seems particularly appealing at the moment.

Bryson asks the lady at the motel's reception for two rooms, but she just grabs his hand and smiles without moving. Then, her son comes in and explains that she's mute, makes her let go of Bryson's hands, and shows Bryson and Katz to their rooms. Bryson's dilapidated room is covered in cigarette burns and stains, but it seems "like heaven" to him. Bryson and Katz shower with joy and head over to the town's bistro. The food is nothing to write home about, but it's cheap and deeply satisfying. When the waitress brings Bryson a slab of unnaturally yellow and saccharine-sweet pie, he's overjoyed. He's been craving pie for days, even bad pie.

In normal circumstances, Bryson would probably turn his nose up at the rundown motel room and below-average food. But after the deprivation of the Trail, the prospect of any warm bed and any hot food fill him with delight, and the experience is heavenly. Bryson underscores once more that as time passes, it's not nature he's falling in love with, but the simple comforts everyday life—such as pie—which he never appreciated in this way before.

Unexpectedly, Katz feels bad for ditching Mary Ellen. Bryson doesn't, reasoning that Mary Ellen went into the woods of her own accord and that it's not their responsibility to look after her. But as soon as he says it, he also starts feeling bad. He's been so preoccupied with food and a real bed that he didn't think about how terrified Mary Ellen might feel on her own in the woods. He wouldn't wish that on anyone. Katz imagines Mary Ellen trudging in the woods scared and alone. Although he realizes that if she dies, it'll be Bryson's fault, not his, because Bryson made the plan to ditch Mary Ellen. Feeling relieved, Katz reaches over and grabs the rest of Bryson's pie.

Even though Katz despises Mary Ellen, he starts to feel guilty for ditching her—and soon enough, so does Bryson. It's clear that the attitude of kindness on the Trail is starting to affect the way Bryson and Katz treat their fellow hikers, even people as unlikeable as Mary Ellen. Bryson slyly reminds the reader that Katz is no picnic either, as he's just made Bryson feel horrible and then taken Bryson's much-anticipated pie.

The next morning, Bryson and Katz feast on fast food at Hardees and head back to the Trail, facing a steep climb. The first day back after a break is tough going for Bryson, especially with a full stomach. For Katz, however, it's always tough going. They bump into a fit-looking, middle-aged man and immediately ask about Mary Ellen. It turns out that she camped with the man last night and spent most of the time complaining about how overweight and wimpy Bryson and Katz were. Katz wants to kill her. The man says that he'll have no shortage of people who also feel the same, as he found her incredibly annoying himself.

Bryson finds the first day back on the Trail after a break really taxing. He'll soon learn that he often longs for civilization again after a few days back in the woods. It seems like Mary Ellen's obnoxious behavior is starting to annoy other hikers on the Trail as well, meaning that it'll be hard for her to make friends (which she'll likely need as the Trail gets tougher).

The man warns Bryson and Katz that six to eight inches of snowfall are due shortly, and Bryson feels instantly disheartened. The man hikes on, and Bryson makes a face at Katz. Bryson warns Katz not to ruin a piece of pie for him ever again, and Katz sheepishly nods. Two days later, they learn that Mary Ellen dropped out and left the Trail after overzealously trying to hike 35 miles in two days and getting large blisters on her feet.

As Bryson suspected, Mary Ellen's impatient attitude got the better of her, and she wasn't able to continue on the Trail. Bryson underscores here that patience and kindness are necessary to help people pull through such a punishing journey. Though Bryson hasn't really thought of the weather as a threat to his safety the way he obsesses about wild animals, he's soon going to learn that making bad decisions in bad weather are far more likely to endanger his life than any animal would.

CHAPTER 6

Bryson notices that distance takes on a whole new meaning when you traverse the world by foot. The planet's vast scale is almost like a little secret among hikers. Life becomes simpler and oddly wonderful too: time doesn't mean much except for sunrise (when you get up) and sunset (when you go to bed). You're also free from obligations and commitments. The only thing you need is the motivation to keep walking—though there's no need to hurry, because you're not in a rush to get anywhere at any particular time. Walking becomes automatic and the woods start to feel like an endless, repetitive "singularity." Bryson and Katz walk on through hills, ridges, fields, and endless trees.

The hiking experience isn't much like Bryson imagined it would be—for example, he's never hiked in an environment where the woods are so dense that he can't see any views. He is, however, starting to appreciate certain aspects of life on the Trail. Nonetheless, the repetitive landscape is wearing on him, which he hints at when he describes the woods as a "singularity," meaning they feel like something that's endless but always the same.

Three days later, as Bryson and Katz approach Big Butt Mountain, it snows. At first, the snow is just a sprinkle—but before long, Bryson and Katz are battling a fierce blizzard. On a good day, the path around the mountain is difficult: it's basically a high cliff-edge that's barely a foot wide and obstructed with rocks, tree roots, and streams. Bryson and Katz stumble through with ice beneath their feet, blinding snow in their faces, while strong gusts of wind rattle through. The experience is "deeply unnerving." When they reach the base of the summit, they can't see anything except snow flying at them. They can't go up, and they can't go back—the wind is knocking them backward.

Although Bryson has spent a lot more time worrying about wild animals than about snow, he's about to battle for his life. Despite the fact that he or Katz could slip and fall to their deaths any minute, he still underestimates the severity of the storm and the risks he's taking by pressing on (he describing the experience as "unnerving" rather than terrifying or deadly). Soon, he's led himself and Katz into a dangerous situation.

Bryson looks for a trail map to get his bearings, even though he knows they're printed on such a large scale that they're practically useless except for marking the odd mountain. The only thing Bryson can locate on the map is a Forest Service logging road that appears go nowhere. He guesses that perhaps they can follow the logging road to shelter, but he's not optimistic. Katz looks up, longing for baked potatoes and Jacuzzis. They try the road and plod on through the merciless snow. They're not even sure how far they've wandered from the trail. Eventually, they spot a sign for Big Spring Shelter and cheer in delight that they won't die buried in snow.

Bryson shows that sheer human ineptitude—rather than a bear or any other wild animal—is often what leads hikers to their deaths, since he's using a poorly marked map and has wandered off the trail, meaning that he and Katz could easily get lost in the snow and freeze to death. They find their way to a shelter by chance, but they could have easily died at this stage of their journey. Katz, meanwhile, just thinks about all the parts of civilization that he misses, highlighting his perpetual misery in nature.

The shelter is just a crude wooden structure open to the snow, but at least it's something. When Bryson and Katz reach it, they meet a man named Jim and his teenage son named Heath. They're just hiking for the weekend, and they're prepared for bad weather. Katz enthusiastically helps Jim fasten a plastic sheet to the shelter to shield them from the snow. The wind pounds at it mercilessly, but they're definitely snugger than they would be on the other side of the sheet. Everyone puts on all the clothes they own and share their food. To Bryson's delight, Heath pulls out some chocolate cake. They settle in to a long night of howling wind and cold.

The fact that the shelter is so crude and open to the elements implies that it's not much of a shelter at all. Once again, Bryson highlights how human ineptitude endangers hikers' lives. The shelter was likely built with so few walls in order to save money. Luckily, Jim and Heath come to the rescue with characteristic kindness. They even share their food, highlighting how essential this kind of support is when people are isolated or stranded, as all four of them are now.

When Bryson awakes, the storm has passed and everything is eerily still and the snow is waist-deep around the shelter. Bryson is amazed by how stunning the woods are in their immense, snow-filled silence. The trail ahead is buried in snow, and Bryson knows it's going to be a slog. Jim estimates that they're seven miles away from the nearest campground. Bryson is intimidated, but he knows the snow won't melt for days, so they have no option but to try for it. He's terrified that another storm will blow in and bury them alive. After a hearty breakfast of coffee and oatmeal (which Heath generously shares with them), they all set off.

Even though Bryson and Katz survive the storm, it's clear that the next phase of their journey is going to be extremely tough because of the heavy snowfall. Bryson emphasizes here how much more punishing the Trail is than he ever imagined. Once again, Jim and Heath embody the attitude of mutual support and concern that seems to inevitably arise on the Trail. They share their food and work as a team with Bryson and Katz to get them out of this life-threatening situation.

A couple hours later, Jim and Heath want to branch off to take a side-trail back to their car. Bryson pleads with them not to try a side-trail in the snow, but Jim is confident that he knows his way around. As he's leaving, he brightly tells them that today is March 21st: the first day of spring. They part ways, and Bryson and Katz wade on through the snow. Soon—and to their utter delight—they hear a jeep coming toward them. Jim found his car and came to drive them the rest of the way to Rainbow Springs campground.

Bryson is clearly concerned for Jim and Heath despite barely knowing them. He indicates here how sharing difficult experiences on the Trail (like a life-threatening snow storm) fuels the ethos of care that many hikers share. Jim's thoughtfulness in driving back to help Bryson and Katz underscores this idea further.

Upon entering the campground's office, Bryson and Katz spot about 20 hikers sitting around a stove eating chili, some of whom they've crossed paths with already on their hike. They ask the campsite's owners, Buddy and Jensine Crossman, for a room. At this, Jensine laughs out loud: the cabins went days ago, and people are sleeping in the bunkhouse or on the floor. Reluctantly, Bryson and Katz head to the bunkhouse. Inside, there are 12 wooden bunks stacked above each other in threes with stinking, threadbare mattresses. They meet their bunkmates, who watch, fixated, while Katz hauls himself with difficulty onto a top bunk. When he makes it, the board cracks and sags beneath him, scaring the man below.

Buddy and Jensine aren't as kind as most other people Bryson and Katz meet, and it seems like they don't really care about providing a welcoming environment for the stranded hikers. There's a clear contrast between Jim and Heath's kindness and Buddy and Jensine's callousness. Even though Bryson is happy to be out of the snow, it's clear that the dirty bunkhouse is a far cry from a warm country inn. The absence of villages, farms, and human life along the Trail seems to undermine the experience for Bryson.

Bryson takes an ice-cold shower in the communal shower room and heads back to the office to eat chili and hang out with the other hikers. Buddy and Jensine chain-smoke and complain about how awful and filthy the guests are, though they think Bryson is nice. When they're out of earshot, a kid from Rutgers says that there were 15 of them in the bunkhouse last night, and they all got charged full price even though some of them were on the floor. Back at the bunkhouse, Katz is smoking cigarettes on his perch and making people pass things up to him.

Bryson reemphasizes how unwelcoming Buddy and Jensine are, and how much their negative attitude demoralizes the hikers. Once again, he underscores how the lack of amenities on the Trail undermines the experience. Katz, meanwhile, is settling in. His relaxed attitude reminds the reader that the simple pleasures of being indoors are proving more enjoyable than the Trail itself—even in such a dirty, run-down, and overcrowded place.

Bryson and Katz spend a rough night in the crowded room to a gloomy day, feeling low about facing a boring day at the campsite. Luckily, one of the bunkers offers everyone a ride to Franklin (the nearest town) and they pile in. There isn't much there except for a lumberyard. Bryson hears about massive snowdrifts and starts to feel restless about getting stuck in Franklin. Katz, on the other hand, is thrilled. He pores over *TV Guide*, planning what he's going to watch.

The town is little more than a glorified lumberyard, highlighting how lifeless Franklin feels. It's a lumber town, which reminds the reader that human beings cause a lot of destruction along the Trail, especially through deforestation. Katz, as usual, reminds the reader that even something as banal as reading TV listings seems pleasurable after the deprivation of hiking in the woods.

After three days, Bryson finds himself studying the employees' pictures in the town's Burger King, and he decides he needs to get out of Franklin. Katz is disappointed and tries to dissuade Bryson, but it's no use. The duo set off, and luckily, Bryson's gamble pays off. The snow is deep but not insurmountable (for Bryson at least—Katz keeps falling). Eventually, the weather warms, and everything starts to thaw. Bryson can even hear birds. Katz is miserable, but Bryson is very happy to be walking again.

Bryson reminds the reader that many towns along the Trail are designed for cars rather than people. Franklin has little going on besides the lumberyard, gas station, and Burger King, which is quite a letdown for Bryson. He longs for something in between the isolation of the wilderness and the dullness of highways, gas stations, and fast food chains.

CHAPTER 7

Katz is sullen for two days. The only time he talks to Bryson is to tell him that he has cream soda and he's not sharing because he could be watching the X-Files right now. The next morning, however, Katz seems to have settled down. Katz never quite gets into hiking—he seems hopeful that he'll have an epiphany about its value, but he never does. Not even the views interest him much. Bryson, on the other hand, is in a walking groove. He just wants to keep pushing forward, which Katz finds really annoying.

Katz's behavior reminds the reader that many people glorify the wilderness as a profound or pleasurable experience of sorts—but in reality, the remoteness and isolation of the Trail is far more punishing and unpleasant. Katz and Bryson's bickering reminds the reader that they don't actually like each other much: they've just been helping each other out because they're stuck in this situation together. Sometimes they still slip into old habits, as Katz does when he acts petulant about being back on the Trail.

One morning, Bryson is waiting for Katz to catch up when Katz emerges covered in twigs and some dried blood, swearing about getting around a fallen tree. To Katz's disbelief, Bryson didn't even notice the tree when he crossed it. A couple hours later, the trees part to reveal a majestic sight: they've reached the Great Smoky Mountains. Down below, in the valley, there's a colossal hydroelectric dam. They hasten toward it, anticipating a visitor's center—which means bathrooms and vending machines—but it's closed. Exasperated, they press on. They have 71 miles of steep climbing ahead before they reach another store. Bryson spares Katz from knowing that they're about to climb 6,000 feet to Clingman's Dome, the highest point on the Trail.

The reader learns that Katz finds Bryson's absentminded attitude as annoying as Bryson finds Katz's obsession with TV and junk food. By now, however, they've learned that they need to support each other to get through the journey, as Bryson does by periodically waiting for Katz. Yet despite getting into a groove on the Trail, Bryson still finds himself yearning for simple pleasures like bathrooms. The sparse access to amenities along the Trail is starting to wear on them both. Once again, Bryson subtly hints that he'd prefer to be hiking somewhere with a bit more life going on, as he'd enjoy the experience much more if there were pleasant stops along the way.

Bryson is excited, as they've reached their third state: Tennessee. He's excited about new and different terrain ahead, and it feels like spring is coming. To Bryson, the Smokies are "a natural Eden." The lush landscape is incredibly biodiverse and the atmosphere has a bluish tinge, after which the Smokies are named. The mountain range's north-south orientation made it fodder for many plant species (having traveled south on glaciers during the last ice age) that aren't found elsewhere in the world. The abundance of plants means that there are lots of animals too—especially **bears**. The bears have learned that where there are people, there are picnics, which means food.

Bryson emphasizes how rare and precious the landscape in Appalachia is. There's also an incredible abundance of rare plants and animals. It's clear that so far, human activity in the region has focused on logging, which emphasizes how much of a threat human activity is to this biodiverse ecosystem. Nonetheless, Bryson still obsesses about bears, even though it's clear that human activity is far more destructive than any animals are in this environment.

Bryson imagines bears thinking of people as silly, fat creatures in baseball caps who leave food everywhere and then run away. Sometimes, people like to film the **bears** and try to engage them. One woman even smeared honey on her toddler's hand so the bear would lick it, and the bear ate the toddler's hand. When this sort of thing happens, the park rangers shoot the bear with tranquilizer guns, carry it far away, and let it loose in the backwoods—which is where Bryson and Katz are. Bryson has heard many stories about hikers getting mugged by bears on the trail. He sticks close by Katz, who's bemused by Bryson's fear.

Bryson uses anecdotes and facts about bear attacks to show that often, humans behave carelessly around bears, and that's really why bear attacks happen. The woman who smears honey on her toddler's hand clearly illustrates this point. The conflict between Bryson's fearful feelings about bears and the unlikeliness of a bear attack exposes his fear as wildly inflated. Katz also finds Bryson's fear funny, which similarly confirms that it's irrational.

There are over 25 species of salamander in the Smokies, the largest of which grow up to two feet long. A third of the world's mussel varieties also live in the Smokies, and almost a half of those species are endangered. Bryson thinks that the National Park Service doesn't help—it has a history of driving species to extinction. Since its formation in 1923, seven mammal species have gone extinct. Bizarrely, it also allocates areas of the park for species that aren't native to those ecosystems. When its biologists tried to reclaim Abrams Creek for rainbow trout in the 1950s, they did it by dumping poison into the creek to kill the other fish, wiping out 31 species.

Bryson again highlights how diverse the ecosystem of the Smokies is. At the same time, he exposes human beings as the greatest threat to all this wildlife—even the National Park Service, which is supposed to preserve wildlife, is one of the biggest culprits when it comes to killing animals. In highlighting the Park Service's ineptitude at preservation, Bryson once again shows that human beings are a greater threat to the Trail's ecosystem than wild animals are to human beings.

Bryson thinks that today, the National Park Service's biggest crime is neglect. Only three percent of their budget is allocated for research, meaning there's little documentation of the species that are rapidly going extinct. 90 percent of the Smokies's Fraser firs are dying, but park officials just say they're watching the situation. To Bryson, it looks like they're just watching the trees die. There are also many meadows nestled between the trees that are unique to the Smokies. They house 29 percent of the Smokies's flora in the mere 0.015 percent of land they occupy. Within 20 years, there may be none of these meadows left.

Bryson reinforces his implication that humans are the biggest dangers on the Trail by showing how many plants are going extinct under our watch, even though we have at least some resources that we could be using for preservation. This seems doubly negligent because the wildlife in the Smokies is so rare—many plants exist in the meadows that may not be found anywhere else in the world.

Though it seems like Bryson has little admiration for the Park Service, the rangers he meets are cheerful and engaged (though most of them have been laid off). The Park Service is also chronically underfunded. Its budget is $200 million a year, but it has a repair backlog of $6 billion. Despite this, in 1991, it threw a $500,000 anniversary party. Bryson thinks that this is as moronic as dumping poison into a creek. In fact, he thinks that if the Park Service gets more money, it'll probably spend that on paving the meadows for parking lots.

Bryson emphasizes that the people who run the Park Service are really the most negligent ones, because they prioritize fundraisers and parking lots over responsible preservation. These facts reinforce the idea that the Park Service's ineptitude is more of an active threat to the ecosystem than might initially seem the case. It's clear to Bryson that no other creature is responsible for as much destruction to the natural environment of the Trail.

Bryson and Katz reach Birch Spring Gap Shelter at dusk. The stone (rather than wood) shelters look snug and inviting in the bluish atmosphere. Up close, however, they're dark, damp, and muddy; they still have one wall open to the elements. Bryson checks the shelter log where hikers leave notes for one another. Some notes mention **bear**-like sounds, but most warn about the rats. Bryson and Katz soon witness this themselves: at night, their sleeping bags are surrounded by rodents. A hysterical Katz flails around, trying to kill them.

Bryon is terrified of bear attacks despite having seen no wild animals yet. Yet the greatest animal threat he faces, in fact, comes from the rats who run rampant in the shelter—and they're at best a nuisance. Once again, Bryson emphasizes how irrational his fear of bears is. Additionally, the unforgiving shelters are a constant reminder of the absence of rural life in this area.

The next day is foggy and rainy. Bryson hates walking the rain—it's impossible to stay dry. They walk 9.7 miles to Spence Field Shelter, arriving wet and chilled to the bone. The clothes in Bryson's pack are also wet, and Katz's matches are too wet to light the stove. The Park Service enforces rules requiring trail hikers to keep moving and sleep in shelters, meaning that Bryson and Katz will have to spend the night crowded in with other people. Several other drenched campers arrive, and the small shelter soon feels overcrowded. Bryson fantasizes about MacKaye's vision of pastoral hostels along the route, imagining the well-kept hostels housing dinner tables and serving peach cobbler. His daydream is interrupted by a camper named Bob, who asks about his gear. Bryson hates talking about equipment.

Bryon draws attention to the sheer misery of hiking in the rain. The strict shelter rules mean that Katz and Bryson have to walk in this weather, risking hypothermia. Once again, it seems like human beings (here, the Park Service's bizarre rules) are posing a far greater threat to hikers than any animals on the Trail are. Bryson emphasizes how much more he'd enjoy the experience of being in nature if it was interwoven more seamlessly into human society. It seems he either has to be remote or urban, and it bothers him that there's no happy medium in between.

Bob launches into a monologue about the virtues of see-through bags. To Bryson's delight, Katz interjects, wondering why a hiker wouldn't have time to unzip a regular bag and just look inside. As Bryson and Katz continue on, they spend several rain-filled days and cramped shelter nights hiking on. The repetitive sound of rain on plastic raincoats irritates Bryson. He doesn't see any **bears** or salamanders—or much of anything except rain droplets on his glasses. When Katz and Bryson finally reach the peak of Clingman's Dome, they can't see anything but rain and fog. Feeling soaked and filthy, they head to Gatlinburg, the next town.

Even though Katz and Bryson still annoy each other, they've started to embody a chummy camaraderie. Katz immediately senses that Bob is irritating Bryson, and his cutting comment shoos Bob away. Bryson has read a lot about the views in the Smokies, but he can't see any—the rain obscures the entire surrounding area. Once again, the promise of exploration and adventure falls short, and the experience fails to hit the mark for Bryson.

CHAPTER 8

Gatlinburg is 15 harrowing downhill miles from Clingman's Peak. Luckily, Bryson successfully persuades a group of reluctant teens into driving them there. Bryson finds Gatlinburg appallingly ugly. It seems to thrive off people who say they want to see nature in the mountains but really just want to play miniature golf and eat bad food *near* the mountains. Despite this, Bryson and Katz are thrilled to arrive. They check into a motel and head to an overpriced burger joint. The town is full of overweight tourists with cameras; everyone eats junk food, piles into Gatlinburg's mini-malls, and plays mini golf. Bryson notes that the attractions will likely be replaced by similar nondescript ones, "for that is the way in America."

Having realized that the wilderness as something of a disappointment, Bryson now turns his attention to the urban sprawl that surrounds most national parks. It's abysmally ugly here, and it bothers Bryson that so many Americans treat nature as a novelty—it's almost like visiting an amusement park. Even when tourists do come here, it seems that they want to do the same commercial things in the same commercial places that they'd do at home, except with a nicer view. Bryson thinks this an endemic issue in the United States when he says "that is the way in America."

Bryson is astounded by the rate of commercial growth in the United States. In 1951, Gatlinburg only had one general store. By the 1990s, it has 100 motels and 400 gift stores. This is common in the United States. The next town over, Pigeon Forge, now houses Dolly Parton's theme park and 200 outlet stores. Meanwhile, in 1996—the year of Bryson and Katz's hike—the Appalachian Trail is 59 years old. Few highways have lasted that long.

In emphasizing the commercial sprawl surrounding the Smokies, Bryson emphasizes that there seems to be no happy medium between the extremes of ugly urban sprawl and the punishing Trail. Once again, Bryson implies that Americans are underserved by this situation, as it limits their opportunities to engage with nature in an enjoyable way.

Bryson spots a map of the Appalachian Trail in a shoe store. On the map's scale, the whole Trail is four feet six inches high. Suddenly, Bryson realizes that so far, they've only covered the first two inches. Both Bryson and Katz are stunned. They sit in silence thinking about their grueling days and weary evenings. It's immediately obvious that they're never going to hike the whole Trail—and strangely, the realization is liberating. Enlivened by the possibilities this opens up, they pore over their maps deciding on the parts of the Trail they *do* want to hike. At first, they decide to pick up the Trail a bit further on, past the Smokies.

Having discussed the ugliness of urban sprawl around national parks like the Smokies, Bryson now portrays the alternative to being in Gatlinburg: miles upon miles of grueling trekking in a remote, mountainous wilderness. Neither option seems particularly appealing at this stage. Bryson reinforces the idea that the choice between urban sprawl and punishing wilderness is disappointing. He would much rather enjoy some sort of rural life—say, a small village—but seems to be unable to find anywhere between the two extremes of wilderness and strip malls.

Bryson calls around to inquire about cab fare to Ernestville, 20 miles up the road, but he's dumbfounded when none of the drivers know how much that will cost. He grows irate as Katz warns him that his attitude won't help them get a cab. Eventually, one cab driver agrees to swing by later and drive them. Based on their conversation, Bryson thinks that the guy is an idiot. When they arrive at a motel, Bryson reads a newspaper as they wait outside the office. He learns about legislation to ban teaching evolution in schools and start teaching Creationism. Suddenly, Bryson decides that he doesn't want to be this far south anymore, and he suggests picking up the Trail at the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia instead. Katz is ecstatic about skipping a large slog of the hike.

In order to leave the hellish commercial environment of Gatlinburg and head back to nature, Bryson has to take a cab. This reinforces the idea that it's actually quite hard to have a spontaneous adventure in the woods in the United States. It really does seem to Bryson like he's surrounded by an uncomfortable mashup of urban highways and remote mountains. Feeling disappointed by the experience, Bryson and Katz happily agree to skip a large chunk of the Trail, hoping that other options will await them in the north.

CHAPTER 9

Earl V. Shaffer first hiked the whole Appalachian Trail in 1948 over 123 days, even though experts like Myron Avery thought this wasn't possible. Shaffer later published an account of his hike in *Walking with Spring*. What's more, many parts of the Trail were overgrown, unmarked, or wiped out by loggers. Back then, he saw small farms and cabins along the route, none of which remain today (they were since purchased and replanted as woodlands). Shaffer's journey revived interest in both hiking and the Trail. Even so, many parts of the Trail were subsequently rerouted to make way for commerce and private property.

Building on his argument from the previous chapter, Bryson stresses how strange he finds attitudes to rural environments in the United States. It seems like there were once plenty of farms and villages lining the Trail, but they were removed. This implies that Americans tend to think of nature as something to be sealed off and isolated from human society, rather than something that intertwines with human life more easily. Bryson is deeply dissatisfied with this picture.

In 1968, a government official named Stuart Udall passed the Trails System Act, protecting the AT by turning it into a national park. Since Shaffer, over 4,000 people have completed the hike—some in one go (thru-hikers), and others by tackling a bit at a time (section hikers). One person completed it in sections over 46 years. Leonard Ward completed it in 60 days in the 1980s, and runner David Horton beat Ward's record in 1991. A blind man named Bill Irwin even completed it with the help of his seeing-eye dog. Bryson's favorite hiker is Woodrow Murphy, who weighed 350 pounds. He hiked the Trail to lose weight, and emerged 50 pounds lighter when he was done.

Despite Bryson's growing dissatisfaction with the lack of easy rural environments where nature and human life mix easily, it seems that some Americans—in all shapes and sizes and from all walks of life—seem to be able to complete the Trail. In contrast, Bryson and Katz are realizing that life on the Trail is too uncomfortable for the both of them, and they'd rather be spending time in a less punishing rural environment.

It's curious to Bryson that some people complete the Trail, turn around, and keep walking. Bill Irwin also famously said that he didn't enjoy the hiking at all, he just felt compelled—as if it wasn't his choice. Horton said that he cried most of the way, and Shaffer ended up living as a recluse afterwards. Bryson wonders why people feel compelled to hike the Trail if the experience isn't pleasant. Bryson and Katz head to Virginia, passing back into urban life—with endless strip malls full of Wal-Marts, Kmarts, and Dunkin Donuts. The difference shocks Bryson. He's gotten used to the woods. Even Katz notices how ugly it all looks.

Bryson's anecdotes about other hikers underscores the fact that people don't enjoy engaging with nature when the environment is so grueling. At the same time, the alternative of highways and strip malls is equally unpleasant. Once again, Bryson emphasizes that the juxtaposition between car-friendly commercial sprawl and remote wilderness leaves little room in between for people like him, who want to spend time in nature in a more relaxing, comfortable way.

CHAPTER 10

Bryson recalls Asher Brown Durand's 1849 painting *Kindred Spirits*, which depicts two men staring into the majestic wilderness. Bryson wishes he could step into the untamed wilderness that the painting portrays. Nothing looks like that now—but perhaps it never looked like that. Artists wouldn't want to paint boring or ordinary landscapes. Still, Bryson thinks that if the Appalachians looked only a bit like that before industrialization, they would have been quite a sight to see.

Bryson acknowledges that his fantasies of exploring the wilderness are fueled in part by the romanticized imagery of 19th-century painters like Durand. The natural landscape has been dramatically altered by human industry, emphasizing once more that human beings have done a lot more destroying than preserving since the Americas were colonized by Europeans. This further implies that human beings are the greatest danger to the Trail.

Apart from Native Americans, botanists were the first people to venture westward upon arriving in the Americas, because exotic plants were a valuable commodity. The first was John Bartram (born in 1699), who started sending cuttings to London, discovering over 200 new species. By the end of the 1700s, so many botanists descended on the area that it's hard to tell who discovered what. John Bartram's son William even spent five years in the woods before reemerging to discover that the Revolutionary War was going on. Collectively, these botanists discovered species like the Fraser fir, poison sumac, and several now-extinct species, like the rare *Franklinia ahamaha* camelia.

Bryson offers more anecdotes, this time about botanists, to stress how people tend to take from the natural environment rather than contributing to it. By naming plant species that have gone extinct as a result of human activity, Bryson exposes how much of a menace human beings have been to Appalachia's ecosystem since the 1700s, implying again that we're a much bigger threat to the wilderness than anything in the wilderness is to us.

Bryson wonders how botanists managed the perils of the wilderness, such as bears, snakes and panthers. A **bear** even charged from a tree and mauled one of them—nearly all these botanists' journals describe violent bear attacks. They also faced hostility from Native Americans and risked diseases like yellow fever. The payoff was that they became extremely wealthy from their cuttings. Others did it for the excitement of finding new species. Thomas Nuttall was an uneducated traveler from Liverpool who self-funded two expeditions in the 1800s, donating all his cuttings to the Liverpool Botanic Gardens. He wrote that the most definitive botanical encyclopedia of American plants at the time and went on to become the curator of the botanical garden at Harvard University.

Despite the damage that human beings have caused to the natural environment in Appalachia, Bryson still fixates on wild animals. This conflict between his fear of bears and the clear evidence of human destruction reinforces the idea that we are a far greater threat to the ecosystem's living creatures than any of them are to us. Thomas Nuttall stands out as a rare exception to the many human beings who try to capitalize off of destroying the natural environment. It's clear to Bryson that our activity in nature is often reckless, and he wants the reader to take pause and think about this.

In Nuttall's time, many species were already nearing extinction and many first growth trees were felled for industrial purposes. Bryson thinks there was a reckless belief that the forests were inexhaustible. Back then, trees stood 20 stories high; most of that wilderness is gone now. Many diseases were also introduced to the Americas from trade, such as an Asian fungus that made American chestnut trees go extinct. Bryson notes that large trees lift hundreds of gallons of water from the ground into the atmosphere each day. They also produce cellulose, sugars, sap, gum, and various oils. All this activity happens in a thin layer under the bark, which makes trees particularly vulnerable to threats like fungi.

Bryson uses the imagery of trees that stood 20 stories high to show much we've damaged the natural environment. It could take centuries for trees to regrow to that height. Alongside this, we've brought diseases into this ecosystem from our global trade routes (such as the Asian fungus mentioned here), which have further endangered Appalachia's wildlife. Once again, it seems like human beings are the biggest danger in Appalachia.

To resist threats like fungi, trees secrete tannins to make their leaves taste worse. Oak trees even secrete chemicals warning other oak trees of a threat in the area. Despite such resilience, trees have been dying at an alarming rate. The forest that Bryson and Katz walk through is nothing like the forest of their ancestors—but at least it's a forest. As they trek northward in North Carolina, they notice that spring is kicking into gear, and it's delightful. In Virginia, each peak reveals beautiful views of sunny farms, woods, and winding roads.

Although many plants have natural defenses to threats like fungi, the rate at which human beings introduce threats to the forest far outpaces the defense mechanisms that plants have. Bryson implies here that human activity is throwing the ecosystem out of balance, once again reinforcing the idea that the most dangerous creatures in Appalachia are human beings. The beautiful views of farmland in Virginia are a rare treat for Bryson, and he wishes there were more environments like this along the Trail.


After a week of walking, Bryson and Katz meet a section-hiker who's been hiking the Trail piecemeal for 25 years. For two weeks each year, he drives a stretch of Trail, leaves a bike at the end, drives back and hikes that section before biking back to his car. He's always 50 or so yards ahead of Bryson and Katz, just edging out of view. Bryson and Katz don't see anyone else, and each night it's just the two of them sleeping in shelters. The shelters here are new, with picnic tables. One night, Bryson even spots a book that another hiker left behind, which thrills him. Bryson thinks that the Trail teaches people the value of simple pleasures like this.

Bryson introduces the idea of hikers who tackle the Trail by car, as he'll shortly explore what it's like to engage with nature the way most Americans do—by driving to it. Meanwhile, Bryson's sheer delight at finding a book to read by chance shows that the Trail is teaching him how to deeply appreciate the simple pleasures that he used to take for granted.


Bryson and Katz hike about 15 miles a day, and Bryson enjoys feeling trimmer and fitter—his belly all but disappears. He's still exhausted at the end of each day, but he's gotten used to the aches and blisters and barely notices them now. He doesn't feel anywhere near as hungry as he normally is either. Nonetheless, Bryson is mesmerized when, after a week of nature, they spot a town in the distance. He can almost smell the aroma of grilled steaks. Without much of a discussion, they decide to hike to town and refresh. They don't need to talk much these days, having fallen into an easy, united rhythm.

Even though Bryson is adjusting to life on the Trail, it's still tremendously uncomfortable. Even in his fitter state of health, he still longs for civilization after a few days in the woods. Bryson underscores that his experiences on the uncomfortable Trail aren't really giving him any profound epiphanies about the beauty of nature. Instead, they're teaching him to appreciate the simple pleasures of everyday life—like the smell of cooking meat.

CHAPTER 11

Every 20 minutes on the Trail, Bryson and Katz walk more than the average American walks in a week. Bryson thinks it's odd that Americans drive such short distances instead of walking them. He even knows a woman who drives to the gym to walk on a treadmill, instead of just walking outside. In many parts of the United States, there aren't even pedestrian sidewalks. The duo refresh in Waynesboro, where most commercial life has spread to strip malls, leaving most of the downtown area kind of empty. Bryson is looking for insect repellant and asks for directions to a store. The man he asks is shocked that Bryson plans to walk the 1.5 miles to the store and back instead of driving.

Bryson uses his experiences in Waynesboro to criticize how much the way of life in the United States is centered around driving. He stresses that the car-friendly sprawl of highways and strip malls have drawn life away from the town, leaving it empty and listless. He also stresses how uncommon it is for Americans to walk short distances, which bothers him immensely. Bryson lived in pedestrian-friendly Europe prior to moving back to the U.S., so this aspect of his home country is a bit of a letdown in comparison.

Bryson feels light and springy walking without his heavy pack, though the route isn't designed for pedestrians. He walks through parking lots, scrambles over concrete barriers, and inches along bridges to avoid cars. When Bryson finally gets to Kmart, there's no insect repellant. Feeling frustrated, he scrambles back to town. Katz, meanwhile, is clean, showered, and relaxing on a chair. Katz teases Bryson for looking like such a mess. Katz is excited because he met a hefty woman named Beulah at the laundromat. He helped her untangle her panties from the washing machine drum, and they have a date tonight at Papa John's Pizza. He's even bought her a pair of jumbo size panties to replace the ones that the washing machine shredded.

It's extremely difficult for Bryson to walk to a store in Waynesboro, even though the distances between stores are relatively short. The experience as a whole leaves Bryson feeling dejected that there seems to be no happy medium between the ugly spread of highways and malls and the remote, inaccessible Trail. Bryson thinks that Americans would be healthier and happier if these two disparate environments were blended together more seamlessly and were made more pedestrian-friendly.

Bryson goes out to eat by himself while Katz is on his date. It feels odd to eat with Katz around. Suddenly, Katz turns up, looking scared. Apparently, Beulah has an even larger husband, and he's on the hunt for Katz. Bryson suggests making a run for the motel, and Katz is dismayed that Bryson doesn't have a better plan. They make it back to the motel unscathed, and Katz locks himself in, pushing a heavy dresser against the door. He refuses to come out until it's time to leave for the trail.

Bryson's response to Katz's situation is much warmer than the last time Katz flirted with a woman in a town by the Trail, showing that their relationship is evolving. Katz's fear of Beulah's husband is amusing to Bryson, but Katz is actually being smart. Human beings are the most fearsome creatures on the Trail, and an angry man is actually more likely to hurt Katz than a wild animal is, even though Bryson makes light of the situation.


Bryson and Katz take a cab to Shenandoah National Park for their last stretch of hiking before a break to see family. The park is 101 miles long but only a mile or two wide, and Bryson is eager to see it. Shenandoah has even less funding than the Smokies. Many Trails are closed or deteriorating, and the remainder are maintained by volunteers. Many shelters and areas are closed for long stretches as well. The park rangers have all sorts of restrictions for hikers as well. Bryson bitterly reflects that they spend most of their money on park rangers to issue hikers with fines. The park is often overwhelmed with so many visitors that people have to form a line to get in.

Once again, Bryson have to take a cab to reenter the wilderness, showing that it's quite hard to walk into the woods and have a casual adventure. The restrictions on hiking activity and lack of shelters imply once again that the society is set up to discourage adventures in nature. In drawing attention to the crowds of visitors, Bryson reminds the reader that he disapproves of how Americans treat nature as a tourist attraction that's separated from their everyday lives.

Pollution and acid rain have also caused the park considerable damage and reduced visibility over the years. The American chestnut and American Elm are already extinct, and Bryson thinks the dogwood tree is next. Despite this, the park is really lovely—it's his favorite part of the Trail. They hike at a pleasant incline, and the weather is warming. Bryson sees owls and deer. Deer were almost hunted to extinction in this part of the country, but they were reintroduced into the park and now they thrive in the thousands. The park also has a lot of nocturnal animals like bobcats, foxes, and **bears**—and even rare accounts of mountain lions.

In Shenandoah, Bryson reflects bitterly on all the ways in which human beings have damaged the natural environment, including acid rain and pollution. Industry, it seems, is fast destroying the natural ecosystem—and hunting is also driving many animals to extinction. All this reminds the reader again that if there's any real danger in Appalachia, it's the human beings, not the wild animals (like bears) that Bryson obsesses over.

Bryson and Katz don't see anything too exotic, but they enjoy seeing signs of spring. Bryson even sees a wild turkey and her chicks. These are the woods he imagined, and they're lovely. They camp in a small clearing and enjoy the evening. That night, Bryson hears something rustling in the bushes. He immediately thinks it's a **bear**. He crawls out to his pack to get his knife and shines a flashlight around. In the distance, he sees two beady eyes looking at him.

Bryson is clearly terrified about running into a bear, despite the remote chance that such an encounter will actually be deadly. By the time he gets his flashlight out and shines it around, the animal—whatever it is—has already retreated to a safe distance. Although Bryson is terrified, it's clear that he's not in grave danger.

Bryson throws a stick at the animal and yells at it to leave but it doesn't move. Katz just makes fun of Bryson. Bryson moves his tent next to Katz and throws a stone at the animal, which growls. Bryson yells at Katz for not being more alarmed. Suddenly, he realizes there are two animals. At that precise moment, the battery dies and the flashlight goes out. Katz announces that he's going to sleep as Bryson freaks out. He hears the animals drinking. Bryson stands in front of his tent holding a stick for hours. Eventually, he nods off.

Bryson is terrified by the animal encounter, but his description here is intended to be funny. Bryson's use of humor in recounting the story underscores that he's overreacting, and he's not really in danger. Katz's calm reaction further stresses that Bryson is being irrational. All this is meant to show that Bryson fears wild animals, yet really, they're not much of a threat to him at all.

CHAPTER 12

In the morning, Katz is surprisingly nice—until he cracks a joke about carrying toenail clippers just in case another **bear** comes by. In the 1930s, Avery and MacKaye had an argument over a road that was being built through this part of the park. They never spoke again. Many people hate Skyline Drive, the road that runs through the park, but Bryson quite likes walking on it. The change is nice. They soon come upon some hemlock conifer trees, which are native to the region. They're all being killed by a foreign aphid, and a sign nearby says the National Park Service can't afford to treat them. Bryson wonders why they won't at least treat some of the trees.

Katz's joke about toenail clippers highlights once more that Bryson's fear of bears is deeply irrational. It's clear that human beings threaten the natural environment far more than it threatens us. We've damaged the landscape by building a giant road through it. We've also introduced threats that aren't native to the ecosystem (like the aphid) with our international travel lifestyles, and we don't allocate funds to preservation like we should.

In the 1930s, this stretch of land was mostly farmland. Poor, illiterate people struggled to farm on the unforgiving mountainous land. The government moved those people down into the valley to make way for Skyline Drive, along with restaurants and mini-golf spots along the way. The Great Depression halted the commercial plans, so the government built picnic grounds instead. Bryson thinks the result is quite charming—even the shelters along the Trail have a rustic charm to them.

Bryson stresses that many of the rural communities in Appalachia were displaced because of commerce and industry. This emphasizes that the threats they faced came from human beings, not animals. It saddens Bryson that the government doesn't seem to care about preserving rural environments where nature and people can mix more organically.

Bryson insists on sleeping in shelters following the animal encounter, though Katz thinks that Bryson is being ridiculous. Three nights later, they run into a group of Boy Scouts who comically struggle to erect their tents. Katz thinks that watching them is more entertaining than television. They also meet a few other hikers and enjoy sitting around the picnic table chatting with them. The hikers talk about how crowded the Trail has become over the years. Bryson is surprised, as he thinks that the Trail feels quite empty. Although four million hikers descend on the Trail annually, most cluster around various hotspots like the Smokies and Shenandoah National Park. Many of them only hike for a few hundred meters before driving off.

Bryson uses humor once again to highlight how irrational his fear of wild animals is. The deprivation of the Trail makes Katz appreciate things he wouldn't even notice before, like the comical hubbub unfolding before him. The friendly way the hikers chat with each other reminds the reader that this kind of camaraderie is common between hikers in Appalachia. Meanwhile, it saddens Bryson that many Americans treat the nature in Shenandoah National Park as a tourist attraction—it's like a curious novelty that they briefly visit before driving off.

It seems to Bryson that the real issue isn't the Trail, but the shelters, because there are too few of them. Shenandoah has only eight shelters. Over the whole Trail, there's a shelter every 10 miles or so. They can accommodate about 2,500 hikers in total (which is a tiny portion from the four million people who visit the Appalachian Trail). Bryson finds it odd that the hikers want some of those shelters removed to discourage others from hiking.

Once again, Bryson emphasizes that there are few amenities for people who really want to explore the woods, which makes them seem less accessible to people who might otherwise enjoy being in nature.

One of Bryson's favorite things about Shenandoah is the fact that it's easy to get cheeseburgers and cola throughout the park. Bryson, Katz, and Connolly (one of the hikers they've met) arrive at one spot where there's a lodge, restaurant, and store. They emerge from the restaurant happy and full. Two tourists gawk at Bryson and Katz's packs—they can't believe that people can hike 16 miles in a day and carry their food with them. This makes Katz feels proud. Bryson goes to the restroom, and when he comes back, Katz has drawn in a small crowd and is describing their adventures, looking very happy.

Despite the lack of resources for tourists, and despite his disdain for commercial sprawl, Bryson appreciates being able to easily have access to things that make him happy, like restaurants with burgers and a lodge to sleep in. At the same time, Bryson finds it odd that so many Americans he meets gawk at the idea of walking in nature, rather than driving to it. To Bryson, it really seems like they're missing out, though he understands that not everybody wants to go hiking in the woods for days on end.

Taking stock of the food options in the store, Bryson notices that it's mostly stocked with microwave food. This is fine for people in camper vans, but it's no good to hikers. Bryson and Connolly are both sick of eating noodles on the Trail, so they buy hot dogs, cookies, and soda instead. That night, they sleep in a beautiful shelter called Rock Spring Hut. The shelter even has a swing, and some volunteers have left canned food out for the hikers, which delights Bryson. They meet a hiker traveling south, who joins them for a feast of hot dogs and canned carrots.

Bryson is frustrated that many of the food options in the park are designed for people who drive there, as this makes life harder for people who want to explore the woods on foot. Once again, Bryson stresses his disappointment in the U.S.'s tendency to accommodate drivers over hikers or pedestrians. On the Trail, he's revived by the kind gestures of people leaving food out for hikers.


The next day, Bryson realizes that he's hiked quite far ahead of Katz and Connolly, so he stops to wait in a glade that feels enchanted. A month later, two young women, Lollie Winans and Julianne William are found murdered in this spot. Bryson has no knowledge of this yet, of course, so he just thinks about how beautiful the glade is. Bryson and Katz have lunch with Connolly, and then Connolly leaves them to hike back to his car.

So far, Bryson has emphasized how much of a threat human beings are to the natural environment. Now, he stresses that we're actually a much bigger threat to one another than any wild animals are. After all, in only a few short weeks, a murderer will brutally kill two people in the exact spot where he's sitting right now.

On their penultimate day on this stretch of the Trail, Bryson and Katz get caught in a ferocious thunderstorm, but they calmly hike through it. Bryson's pack gets soaked, and he realizes that he's misplaced his walking stick, a gift from his wife that he's grown quite fond of. Katz eagerly volunteers to go back and look for it. Bryson is touched, but he decides to let the stick go. They stop at a hut to wait out the rain, and six obnoxious people in designer gear stop by, annoyed that they have to share the shelter with Bryson and Katz. They push Bryson and Katz's stuff out of the way to make room for their own gear.

Katz's sweet and selfless gesture of volunteering to look for the walking stick show that he's looking out for Bryson. Katz clearly struggles in nature, but he doesn't hesitate to offer to traverse the woods to make Bryson feel better. In contrast, the six obnoxious hikers display the exact opposite ethos—they're selfish and rude. Bryson's juxtaposition here reminds the reader that hikers manage on the Trail through the kindness of others.

Half an hour later, Katz decides they should camp in a clearing to get away from the group. He announces this very loudly and jumps out into the rain. Bryson and Katz camp in the rain while the group gets obnoxiously drunk and grills food, offering none of it to Bryson and Katz. In the morning, still soggy, the pair set off. Katz confesses to Bryson that he stole all of the group's shoelaces from their boots while they were sleeping.

Bryson stresses the group's selfish behavior: they push Katz and Bryson out into the rain and don't share any of their food. These weekend hikers represent the exact opposite behavior to the kindness, encouragement, and mutual support that help hikers cope in the wilderness.

CHAPTER 13

The first part of Bryson and Katz's hike is almost over. They're separating for the summer and plan to reunite in August to hike part of the Trail in Maine. They've hiked 500 miles in total, and they're both really proud of their achievement. They hike their last 18 miles straight through and crash, exhausted, in a run-down motel in Front Royal. In the morning, Bryson buys each of them a new outfit from Kmart. Katz is thrilled to receive the present. They spend the day walking along the railroad tracks and chatting in the sunshine. Bryson thinks that it's the perfect way to end the first part of their adventure.

Bryson highlights the uncomfortable juxtaposition between remote wilderness and ugly strip malls, once again implying that he's disappointed by the lack of a middle ground where nature and human society can intermingle more organically. At the same time, he takes great pleasure in the new outfit, as does Katz, exposing that his time nature is teaching him how to enjoy things he previously took for granted.


In the morning, Bryson is excited to see his family, who are coming to pick him up. He's missed them desperately. They drive Katz to the airport and say a hasty goodbye. Bryson feels bad for the abrupt send-off, but he's too happy to see his family to mind too much. At the beginning of June, Bryson hits the Trail again, just for a five-mile walk. He's home by lunchtime, and it feels weird. The next day, he drives 50 miles to Mount Moosilauke near Dartmouth College. He hikes the mountain and drives home. Again, it doesn't feel right to hike the Trail and then go home and cut the grass.

Bryson begins exploring the Trail as most tourists would, by driving to it and visiting it for a few hours. He finds the experience disappointingly lackluster. Once again, Bryson stresses how strange he finds this car-centric approach to accessing natural environments in the United States.

Bryson sits with a map and wonders if he can make up the parts of the Trail he missed, but he realizes it won't be possible to complete the Trail in one season. In the summer, hikers have to worry about lightning storms, **bears**, ticks, rattlesnakes. Now that he's heard about the murder in Shenandoah, he's also trepidatious about murderers. He feels discouraged and guilty about people seeing him around town when he should be hiking the Trail. Bryson decides to tackle part of the Trail by driving back to Harper's Ferry, Virginia, parking, hiking a stretch, and then hiking back to his car. He does this for a week in June.

Bryson fixates on improbable death scenarios once more, this time pulling snake bites and lightning storms into the forefront of his imagination. It's clear, however, that he really should be worried about the danger from other human beings, especially as the murders have now taken place. Bryson's attempt to tackle part of the Trail by car proves somewhat disappointing. He struggles to connect with nature when he pops in and out of it like this.


Harper's Ferry is quite pretty—it's more polished than the other towns Bryson's passed through, so there are no Pizza Huts or Kmarts. But it doesn't feel quite real. Abolitionist John Brown attempted to seize the town, free all the slaves, and secede from the United States in 1859. His rebellion lasted three days before he was caught, though he effectively kick-started the American Civil War. When Bryson visits Harper's Ferry, the townspeople are cleaning up following a bad flood. Bryson notices that the park rangers carry guns here. Everything in town is closed because of the flood. The Appalachian Trail noticeboard is full of requests for information about the murder that just took place.

Harper's Ferry provides a welcome respite from the chain-restaurant-filled strip malls that typically line the Trail. Bryson exposes how much more easily he resonates with the rural environment when he can connect it to historical events. For example, he imagines all the Civil War soldiers traipsing through the Trail. The noticeboard also makes Bryson's focus on the murders, reminding him of the dangers that human beings pose to one another in the wilderness.


Bryson thinks about how—if the timing was different—the two women could well be standing at the noticeboard looking at pictures of himself and Katz. As Bryson continues along the Trail, he befriends a park ranger named David Fox. They talk about preservation and lack of funding. Harper's Ferry is also the headquarters location of the Appalachian Trail Conference, the organization that oversees the Trail. At the headquarters, Bryson spots a scale model of the Trail that's 15 feet long. He meets Laurie Potteiger, who explains that last year, 1,500 thru-hikers started the Trail. Sixty of them completed the whole Trail, which is more than usual.

The murders are at the forefront of Bryson's mind, and he's starting to realize that his riskiest moments on the Trail so far have arisen because of human activity—for example, getting lost in the woods because of a poorly marked map. Laurie Potteiger's statistics remind the reader that the Trail is a punishing and inhospitable environment, as so few people make it to the end.


Bryson asks Potteiger about the dangers on the Trail. She says that she's only heard of two snakebites and one person struck by lightning. She's upset about the murders though, especially as she thru-hiked the Trail herself in 1987, and she knows how hikers depend on one another. She acknowledges that there have been nine murders in total on the Trail since its creation, which is about the same as a small town would expect. Bryson buys a book about the Trail's murders and thinks about Lollie Winans and Julianne William.

Potteiger confirms, as the reader will likely suspect by now, that snakes and lightning storms aren't much of a threat to hikers at all. More people have been killed on the Trail by other human beings than by animals. Her facts reinforce the idea that human beings are the most dangerous creatures on the Trail—whether we're hunting animals, plants, or one another.

It's raining when Bryson emerges from the building. He thinks about the battle of Harper's Ferry, in which Stonewall Jackson captured 12,500 Union troops. Jackson was a quirky fellow: he was a hypochondriac and was known for falling asleep mid-meal. He frequently marched troops back and forth across the Shenandoah Valley without telling anyone why it was necessary. Jackson's victory at Harper's Ferry was the largest win for the South in the American Civil War. Bryson follows the Trail, noting where Jackson used to camp (it's marked on the noticeboards) and trying to imagine the battles. Eventually, he goes back to his car.

Bryson imagines Stonewall Jackson hiking and camping in the Trail, stressing once more that he has an easier time connecting with the Trail when he can associate the natural environment with events in human history, such as the Civil War. When Bryson returns to his car, he feels disconnected from the rural environment once more. This underscores how dissatisfying it is to have to drive around in order to enter and leave the wilderness.

CHAPTER 14

The next morning, Bryson drives 30 miles north to Pennsylvania. None of the hiker's he's met enjoy the stretch of Trail in Pennsylvania. The landscape, a remnant from the last ice age, is jagged and difficult to traverse; it's also where the meanest rattlesnakes are. The maps for this section of the Trail are awful too—Bryson's is so badly printed that he can't even read it. He feels like he should at least take a stab at a short walk in this part of the Trail, even though he's heard it's tough going. He walks for about an hour in the woods, but can't find the Trail. Giving up, Bryson drives on to Pine Grove Furnace State Park.

Bryson's illegible map stresses once more that human ineptitude—such as a badly marked map that could get a hiker lost in the woods—are a much bigger threat to his safety than rattlesnakes, though he still obsesses over dangerous wildlife. His inability to find the Trail shows once more how inaccessible the natural environment is to people like him who want to experience it, which leaves him disappointed.


At the park, there's a large dumpster in the picnic area that's been mauled by **bears**. The summit of Piney Mountain is the Trail's midpoint, exactly 1,080 miles in from either direction. Bryson can't imagine what it's like to hike this far and then realize you're only halfway through. He reads about a murder that took place here in 1988: a disturbed man shot Rebecca Wight and her partner Claudia Brenner eight times while they made love in the woods. Wight was killed, but Brenner survived. The year after, a drifter killed two people at a shelter nearby. Bryson has also heard about a couple that was killed in Maine by a deranged axe-murderer, but there's no record of their deaths in his book.

Once again, Bryson worries about bears, which symbolize his irrational fear of wild animals. Despite his fear, it's clear that human beings (like the murderer) hurt one another much more frequently than animals hurt us. In fact, the number of murders on the Trail far outnumbers the number of deaths caused by animal attacks. It's clear that Bryson's fear of bears is misdirected—he should be far more worried about murderers, and he's finally starting to realize that.


Bryson hikes the area where the killings took place. He's not spooked by the murders, but he feels uneasy and misses Katz's complaining. The woods are covered in dense, green foliage with little visibility. Bryson knows he'd be helpless if he saw a **bear**. Bryson reaches the summit of Piney Mountain, and the moment is anticlimactic—it feels pointless to hike the Trail piecemeal like this. At that moment, he hears something rustling in the distance. He stops, alarmed. The noise gets closer and he bolts, sprinting away. Looking back, he realizes it was just a deer. Bryson feels disconnected from the Trail and hits a low point, returning dispiritedly to his car.

Despite finding Katz annoying, Bryson misses his companionship. The isolation of hiking alone is both more tedious and more terrifying. Bears continue to symbolize Bryson's misplaced fear of wild animals, even though he knows better by now. Bryson struggles to enjoy the natural environment when he dips in and out of it by car, the way most Americans do. Bryson hints here that the absence of rural life along the Trail does Americans a disservice. He thinks that people would enjoy nature much more if they didn't have to drive to it for a few hours or hike through it for days.

The next day, Bryson presses on driving through Pennsylvania, through sad-looking half-abandoned mining towns. Pennsylvania's anthracite belt used to be a hubbub of mining activity in the 1800s; Pennsylvanians also discovered oil in the region. A retired railway conductor named Col. Edwin Drake drilled 69 feet down and discovered the first oil gusher in the region. The oil industry made many people in Pennsylvania rich, although it also claimed many lives. Between 1870 and 1911, 50,000 people died in mines. Bryson also passes through Centralia, where in 1962 the anthracite the town sat on was set alight and kept burning underground for decades. In 1981, the ground started spontaneously caving in. Eventually, the government evacuated the town and bulldozed it.

Bryson's drive through Pennsylvania shows how much destruction human activity has caused alongside the Trail. Oil and zinc mining have been responsible for tens of thousands of human deaths, and even more animal and plant deaths. The reckless way in which human beings abuse the natural landscape and endanger one another bothers Bryson immensely. It's becoming more apparent to him that we are the worst creatures to set foot in nature—far more dangerous to one another than wild animals could ever be.

When Bryson pokes around Centralia, it appears to be abandoned. There's smoke rising up from the ground. He comes across a vast cavity emitting giant plumes of smoke and the ground feels warm. Along the abandoned Highway 61, he sees a deep, jagged gash in the ground. He walks along it, and a gust of wind almost makes him lose his footing. Suddenly, he realizes that walking around in a town that's on fire underneath the ground isn't too smart. It's weird to Bryson that the town isn't surrounded with barriers. Stranger still, there are still a few houses where people appear to live. He knocks on some of the doors, but nobody answers.

Bryson carelessly puts himself in danger by exploring a town that's essentially on fire beneath the ground. His recklessness shows that he's as much at risk in the urban environment as he is in the woods. Once again, the threats that human beings regularly pose to one another with mining activity is made palpable. This reckless approach to the natural environment is a big part of why there are so few farms and villages along the Trail, implying that our own predatory activity stands in the way of our ability to integrate more seamlessly with natural environments.

Bryson drives five miles north to a bustling, old-fashioned town called Mt. Carmel. He pops into the town's library to look at their files on Centralia. He looks at old photographs and newspaper clippings, trying to imagine Centralia as a bustling town but he can't. Bryson reads a newspaper article saying that there's enough coal under Centralia to keep it burning for 1,000 years.

Bryson appeals to statistics once more to reinforce the idea that human beings are a tremendous danger to one another and to the natural environment. The damage we've caused in Centralia alone far outstrips any damage a bear could cause.

Near Centralia, there's a mountainside that's been destroyed by zinc mining. Bryson drives through Palmerton, which is full of abandoned factories. Eventually, he spots the bald mountainside, stripped of all vegetation. A man in a uniform, Luther, yells at Bryson for trespassing on private property, even though there are no signs. Bryson tries to talk with the man about the mountainside, but the man is suspicious. They get into an argument, and Bryson tries to drive off, but the man blocks his path. Another man approaches and pulls Luther out of Bryson's way. Bryson says that he just stopped to ask for directions to the Appalachian Trail and drives off, watching the two men argue in the rearview mirror.

Having highlighted the damage caused by reckless mining to the towns and villages that used to line the Trail, Bryson now stresses that the same mining activity has decimated the local landscape—it's even stripped mountains bare of all vegetation. It seems like Luther's job is to stop other people from finding out about how much damage the mining industry has caused to the mountains. This seems like a shame, since Luther's time could be better used trying to restore or improve the mountainside, rather than keeping the damage a secret.

Bryson drives to Little Gap and goes for a hike along a ridge across a vast expanse of barren terrain that's been decimated by mining. It looks like the remnants of a battlefield. As Bryson is getting into his walking stride, he comes across Lehigh Gap—it's 1,000 feet to the bottom of the valley. He doesn't want to hike all that way just to hike back up, so he abandons his walk, deciding that that it's really unsatisfying to dip in and out of the Trail like this. He vows to never try and hike the Trail with a car again.

The damage to Appalachia caused by mining remains at the forefront of Bryson's mind as he explores this barren landscape. It's clear that no other creature has caused damage on this scale to the region's mountains. Bryson concludes that he doesn't want to dip in and out of the natural environment by car since he can't get entrenched in it this way. Once again, Bryson hints that he wishes there was a middle ground between driving around and looking at nature and trekking for days in it. Neither approach seems to satisfy him.


CHAPTER 15

Countless millennia ago, the Appalachians rivaled the Himalayas. They're one of the oldest mountain chains on Earth, though now they've been worn down to a third of their original height by erosion. They're so old that they existed when sea life first evolved enough to crawl out of the sea. About a billion years ago, the Earth's land masses were joined together. A period of intense tectonic activity caused the continents to separate, and about 470 million years ago, two of them gradually smashed into each other to create the Appalachians. Land that originally would have been attached to Europe, Antarctica, and Africa flanks the Appalachians, which were formed in three long phases that shuffled the land like playing cards.

Bryson has just exposed how much damage mining has caused to the local environment in Appalachia. This is disheartening considering how old the mountain chain is. The fact that Appalachia is so old makes it quite rare—land masses from all over the globe have wound up here, meaning that the flora and fauna must be incredibly diverse. This exposes the careless damage of the mining industry as even more thoughtless. It's hard for Bryson to imagine how many species must have gone extinct from human activity that we don't even know about.

Geologist James Tefil estimates that the average mountain stream carries away 1,000 cubic feet of mountain each year as sand granules—that's about as much sand as a dump truck would hold. Lichen and other organisms also wear down mountains. Each year, the Appalachians shrink about 0.03 millimeters. Speculation about the Appalachians' formation is spotty at best. They may even have formed, eroded, and formed again several more times than scientists speculate.

Bryson stresses that we don't actually know all that much about the geological history of Appalachia. Our lack of knowledge of the region's early history reinforces the idea that we cause reckless damage to the wilderness without knowing what we're killing. It could well be the case that we've killed species that we never even knew existed, and the thought deeply saddens Bryson.

Bryson approaches the Delaware Water Gap, where Kittatinny Mountain exposes a cross-section of the mountainous land, one side of it having been eroded away by an ancient river. About 100 years ago, people compared the view to the Alps. Artists like George Innes painted the Delaware Water Gap. Right after the American Civil War, it was a popular holiday destination. Nowadays, most people just take a brief look and drive on; between Pennsylvania and New Jersey, a lot of the terrain around here is eaten up by highways. Bryson decides that Kittatinny Mountain will be his final hike before he heads home.

Bryson emphasizes the difference in landscape between Delaware as it would have looked a mere 100 years ago compared to how it looks now. Back then, it was a beautiful place where people picnicked among vast trees. Now, it's a bulldozed mess of land wedged between endless highways. It's clear to Bryson that the damage human beings have caused to the natural landscape is reprehensible, especially because so much of this damage was unnecessary.

Bryson has good maps for this stretch of the Trail, which makes him happy. He thinks that knowing where he is will make him appreciate the hike more. He hikes to Sunfish Pond, meeting two other day-hikers along the way. He thinks about the crowded urban areas of New Jersey and New York wonders why people complain about the Trail being overcrowded. Sunfish Pond is a remnant of glaciers from the last ice age. Technically, we're still in an ice age, since snow and ice aren't typical climates for planet Earth. Scientists know little about the Earth's ice ages beyond the fact that they happened. Scientist Gwen Schultz thinks that ice sheets start gradually from snow lingering on the ground.

Bryson reminds the reader that having some context about the environment he's exploring makes the experience far more enjoyable to him than blindly wandering through a thicket of trees just for the sake of it. Bryson starts to explore ideas that he'll raise in his later book A Short History of Nearly Everything, in which he explores the Earth's early geological history. In discussing the Earth's ice ages here, he reminds the reader that the land he's standing on would have all been wilderness at one time. These facts emphasize how much damage humans have caused to the wilderness, even outside Appalachia.

Leaving his car by the Garvey Spring Trail, Bryson strolls along the Delaware River, which frequently floods. In 1955, heavy rainfall caused the river to rise 43 feet, wiping out most of the land around it, and killing 400 people. The army planned to build a dam to prevent this happening again, evicting 80,000 people in the process. After years of protests, the project was put on hold. It was too late for the 200-year-old farming villages surrounding the river, which had already been bulldozed. Although the land is now protected for the Trail, Bryson thinks he'd prefer to see old farming villages.

Bryson raises yet another example of human destruction. The planned construction of the Delaware dam caused countless mass evictions and ruined many historical environments that would have been a treasure to somebody like Bryson, including many historical villages along the Trail. It saddens Bryson that this kind of pointless industrial activity ruins the natural environment. It bothers him that the government doesn't seem to care about preserving historical rural environments like old farming villages. It seems to him that this attitude underserves Americans because it erases the historical rural environment, something that would make engaging with nature far more palatable.

Bryson thinks the United States has a strange attitude toward nature. He remembers hiking in Luxembourg, where trails and paths carried him on foot to various villages and inns. Here, nature seems designed for people to drive to it. People either completely exploit nature, or render parts of it—like the Appalachian Trail—as a sort of holy wilderness. This sort of "either/or" thinking bothers Bryson. He thinks farming and wilderness could coexist in an easier relationship. He tries to look on the bright side: at least there's no dam.

Bryson has been building up to the idea that the United States thinks of its land as "either" remote and rugged wilderness that can't be touched, "or" ugly industrialized land that can be completely exploited, with no middle ground. Now, he makes his argument explicit. He compares his experiences on the Trail to his experiences in Luxembourg, where the middle ground—rural environments like farms and villages—has been preserved. He decides that such environments are far more hospitable to people who want to enjoy nature. They allow people to explore natural environments that blend more seamlessly with everyday life, and Bryson thinks that this approach makes a lot more sense. He's disappointed to find nothing like this approach the Trail.

CHAPTER 16

In the 1980s and 1990s, people started reporting mountain lion sightings—in Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire—for the first time in almost a century, even though people had assumed they were already extinct. Bryson is walking in the same area now. He wants to hike as much of New England as he can before Katz rejoins him in seven weeks to tackle Maine. Three days into his hike through the Berkshires, Bryson recalls a newspaper article about a mysterious mountain lion that stalks and kills hikers. There's a lot of woodland around for them to wander in undetected, so they might still exist; he imagines himself being mauled by one.

Though Bryson is afraid of being attacked by a mountain lion, he acknowledges that his fear is misplaced. Human beings are the ones hunting mountain lions, and not vice versa. In fact, for many years we thought we hunted them to extinction. Once again, it appears that we are the most dangerous mammals in the Appalachian wilderness.

The Eastern United States tried to wipe out many large mammals (including the mountain lion) in the 1940s, deeming them a nuisance to society. Pennsylvania even offered hefty rewards for hunting owls and hawks to protect crops. The timberwolf and woodland caribou were wiped out around 1900, and the bear population neared extinction. Many songbirds have also gone extinct, including the Carolina parrot, which was considered a pest because it ate fruit crops. In 1939, hunters killed the last Bachman's warbler. Between 1940 and 1950, songbird populations dwindled by 50 percent, and they keep falling. Bryson thinks sadly about how much quieter the woods are these days.

Bryson informs the reader that human beings actually tried to drive many animals to extinction, because we considered them a nuisance to local farmers. It's clear that animal attacks on humans are nowhere near as calculated or cruel. Bryson laments all the native species that have gone extinct in Appalachia within the last century. All this reinforces the idea that human beings are by far the biggest threat to living creatures in Appalachia. With all of this in mind, Bryson hints that we should be doing a lot more to preserve the natural environment.

In the afternoon, Bryson wanders across a disused logging road and bumps into a famous thru-hiker who goes by the name Chicken John. Bryson is really excited to meet him; he recalls hikers who garner fame for peculiar reasons (like a kid who supposedly had a self-erecting tent). Bryson wonders why people call this man Chicken John—but even Chicken John himself has no idea why. It turns out he's been hiking since January, and it's taking him so long because he keeps getting lost. Bryson recalls another famous hiker, Grandma Gatewood, who also spent much of her hiking time lost. Chicken John isn't sure how he keeps getting lost, but he's met lots of nice people along the way.

Bryson's run-in with Chicken John reminds the reader that beyond our outright exploitation of the natural environment, even well-meaning people often endanger their own safety. It's quite dangerous to wander off the trails in the woods, so it's surprising that Chicken John's made it this far. It seems that the kindness of other people along the Trail has helped Chicken John a lot. Bryson suggests here that humans are paradoxical creatures—we have kind impulses alongside destructive ones.

The next day, after a night in a motel, Bryson hikes on to Cheshire. It's only nine miles, but the blackflies viciously torment him by flying into his ears, mouth, and nose. He's relieved when he gets out of the woods and arrives in Cheshire: a friendly town with a free hostel for hikers. Bryson doesn't feel like sleeping in a bunkhouse, so he hikes on to Adams, where there's a motel. He spends a pleasant afternoon idling in Adams's thrift stores. Tomorrow, he's hiking Mount Greylock, and he's excited for the trek.

As Bryson approaches wilder and more remote territory, he starts to struggle in woods that are inhospitable and full of flies. He's reminded of how uncomfortable it is to live on the Trail, even though he's only day-hiking. Meanwhile, the pleasant environment in Adams shows that other towns surrounding the Trail could have been equally as charming, had they not been bulldozed to make way for miners or dams that never got built.

Mount Greylock has something of a literary pedigree—for instance, Herman Melville wrote *Moby Dick* while gazing out into Mount Greylock from his window. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edith Wharton also set many of their stories at Mount Greylock. By 1920, Mount Greylock's landscape was all but destroyed for logging. The landscape recovered by 1960, when state officials decided to build a ski resort there. Luckily, that plan didn't materialize. Bryson thinks that Mount Greylock is stunning. It's a steep climb, but he enjoys it in the sun. Oddly, there's a lighthouse at the summit, though there's no coast nearby.

Bryson enjoys his visit to Mount Greylock immensely, partly because he can connect it with little snippets of cultural history. Once again, Bryson suggests that people might enjoy natural environments more if they didn't tend to think of nature as this remote curiosity that has nothing to do with human society. He's relieved that the plans to build a ski resort fell through, as this part of the Trail could have easily become overrun by ugly commercia activity. As usual, Bryson thinks that this would have made exploring this part of the Trail far less pleasant.

After lunch, Bryson hikes along a ridge connecting Greylock and Mount Williams. The views of rolling hills are amazing, but it's stiflingly hot. When Bryson reaches Williamstown, he realizes that he's been hiking in 97°F heat. He heads into Burger King, where he enjoys the cool wash of air conditioning and orders a Coke, feeling very happy with himself. He's hiked 17 miles today.

As much as Bryson deplores the rapid spread of highways and strip malls along the Trail, he's soon reminded that a punishing day in the woods makes him long for their comforts—he's likely never appreciated air conditioning more. Once again, even a brief excursion in nature reminds him of how much he appreciates simple aspects of civilization, like air conditioning.

Around 1850, 70 percent of New England was forests—now, only 30 percent is. Farming used to be very popular in the area, until railroads and the invention of the mechanical reaper (which was too large for the New England landscape) drove the farming industry into the Midwest. Bryson walks up Stratton Mountain in Vermont, which used to be covered in orchards but was abandoned to nature. This is where Benton MacKaye formulated his vision for the Appalachian Trail. This part of the route also coincides with the Long Trail, which leads to Canada. The summit is underwhelming in the dull weather, and everything looks flat.

Bryson reveals more facts that explain why pastoral environments—in which villages and farms blend more easily with nature—have disappeared along the Trail. Once again, the culprit is industry, notably the development of railways and industrial farming equipment. Bryson also highlights once more that bad weather often impedes his ability to enjoy nature by obscuring the views, which leaves him deflated.

Bryson spots another hiker who proudly shows off an expensive device that measures all sorts of weather readings. Unimpressed, Bryson asks if it bakes cookies as well. The man cautions Bryson that a device like this could save his life. Bryson notices the man has no waterproof gear and no pack, meaning that if the weather turns, he'd be in trouble. Bryson hates technology on the Trail. He recalls a newspaper article about one man who hiked to the summit of Katahdin and then called the National Guard for a helicopter because he was too tired to hike back down. Another hiker did the same because he was late for a business meeting.

Bryson discusses people who increasingly rely on technology to survive in nature, and he bemoans people who treat the Trail like a mere tourist attraction. Once again, Bryson reveals that people often endanger their own lives far more frequently than other creatures endanger them—for example, when they go hiking without proper survival gear.

Bryson hikes across Vermont with packed lunches and his car. He remembers how many times he and Katz would have killed for proper food on their hikes. He hikes through several summits, past the for er location of Happy Hill shelter, the oldest and prettiest shelter on the Trail until it was torn down by officials. Bryson recalls Alden Partridge, who was born in Norwich in 1755. He set up a military academy, coined the term "physical education," and he would take his students on hikes through Vermont. He'd regularly hike 100 miles in a few days. Bryson wishes there was a plaque commemorating him to inspire hikers on the Trail, but there isn't one.

As Bryson makes his way across Vermont, he recalls how many times he and Katz would have appreciated the simple comforts of food when they hiked through the southern part of the Trail. Bryson reminds the reader that he finds the environment more approachable when he can connect it with the history of human activity—which is harder to do when the only things to look at are trees or strip malls. Bryson continues lamenting the way Americans tear down historical environments that he thinks we should be preserving.

Norwich and Hanover, which are a mile apart, used to be connected by a beautiful leafy backroad, but highway officials replaced it with an ugly six-lane wide freeway. Of course, this entailed clearing a lot of woodland. Bryson estimates it saves people about 8 seconds of time on their drives. Bryson walks along it, imagining it was the leafy road it used to be.

Bryson is disappointed by the tendency to build highways in the United States, even where they don't seem to be necessary, such as here on the short stretch of land connecting Norwich and Hanover. He thinks that this sort of human activity damages the natural environment.

CHAPTER 17

Hypothermia is one of the most "catastrophic deaths" a hiker can meet on the Trail. David Quammen writes about them in his book *Natural Acts*. In 1982, four canoeists died after taking a dip in the water at Banff National Park. People tend to associate hypothermia with frigid weather, but it can happen anywhere. A spot of cold rain, inadequate equipment, or getting lost in the woods for too long can easily trigger hypothermia. Richard Salinas, an experienced hiker, died from it in 1990 when he wandered off the Trail in search of a shortcut.

Bryson discusses hypothermia to show that human beings are often responsible for their own deaths on the Trail. Hypothermia is one of the biggest risks to hikers, which Bryson emphasizes by using the word "catastrophic." Despite this, he hasn't actually thought about it much at all. He's been far more worried about bear attacks, even though hypothermia is responsible for more deaths than bears are.

Hypothermia takes hold gradually; you get more disoriented as your body temperature drops, often making irrational decisions (as Salinas did). The night Salinas died, it wasn't even that cold. If he'd kept his jacket on and stayed out of the water, he would have been fine. The first symptoms are shivering, followed by a warped sense of time and distance, confusion, hallucinations. Then, a person will feel too warm, which often makes them foolishly shed their clothing, just as Salinas did.

When people get hypothermia, they often act in ways that endanger our their lives. Salinas, for example, took off his jacket even though his body temperature was dropping. That Bryson is describing these symptoms foreshadows his own imminent experience with hypothermia. Through this upcoming anecdote, Bryson will show that one of his riskiest encounters on the Trail has nothing to do with wild animals.

Bryson is now in New Hampshire. He finds Vermont's antique stores, rolling hills, and dairy farms much quainter and more pleasant. New Hampshire is much more rural—over 85 percent of it is forests—and it's full of hunters. It's tough territory for hikers to traverse. Bryson feels uneasy tackling it solo. He's relived when his friend Bill Abdu, who's an experienced hiker and a surgeon, offers to join him on some day hikes. They tackle the White Mountains together, which are steep, and nearly all granite. They have to climb 2,000 feet in just two miles. The weather is lovely, although the weather in this area is notoriously unpredictable.

Vermont approximates the rural environment that Bryson enjoys spending time in much more closely than New Hampshire does. There's more natural wilderness in New Hampshire, and it blends less easily with the urban environment, which is full of hunters who drive around in pickup trucks. The challenging landscape—comprised of slippery granite and changeable weather—reminds Bryson that hiking in the United States is harder than he anticipated.

When Bryson and Abdu approach the summit of Little Haystack Mountain, it suddenly turns damp and gusty. Bryson quickly looks for his waterproofs, but he's forgotten them. Bryson decides to press on instead of hiking back to the car, and the weather gets chillier as they ascend onto higher ground. Soon, he's soaked through. He's also wearing blue jeans, which are a disaster in bad weather. He's basically inviting death. The wind grows so strong that it pushes them backward. Fog rolls in, and they can't see the edges of the ridge. Just half an hour ago, it was warm and sunny. Now, Bryson is shivering and feeling lightheaded.

Bryson realizes that he's ill-prepared for the environment. He's forgotten his waterproofs, and he's wearing jeans, which protect him from ticks but not from the weather. As Bryson gets colder and wetter, he starts to feel unwell. Once again, Bryson puts himself at risk because of his own bad decisions—he's more of a danger to himself than wild animals are.

Bryson feels like he's on top of things, but he's quickly getting confused. He feels like time is passing too slowly. He's too embarrassed to tell Abdu—who's hiking a bit farther ahead—that he's feeling weird. It feels like 100 years pass, and Bryson barely notices the summit when they pass through it. As they descend down the other side, the weather grows eerily calm. Luckily, Bryson starts to feel better as they approach Greenleaf Hut, an old stone lodge. It's beautiful but expensive. Bryson is happy to be able to warm up there.

As Bryson's hypothermia sets in, he starts to lose his sense of time passing. He also makes the situation worse by not communicating that he's in trouble; Bryson effectively endangers his own life with his foolish behavior. This situation reminds the reader that human ineptitude tends to be the biggest threat to hikers on the Trail. Luckily, the weather improves, and Bryson makes it to the Greenleaf Hut before he gets seriously ill.

Taking a look around the lodge, Bryson realizes that the bunks are austere and military-like. He thinks that if MacKaye had been able to realize his vision, the Trail would be lined with lodges like this. Until now, Bryson had imagined the Trail being lined with cozy, comfortable inns—not bootcamp-style barracks. As Bryson and Abdu set off down the mountain, the weather warms up. Bryson is almost dry by the time they reach the car.

Bryson thinks the lodge is beautiful from the outside, but inside, it's unpleasantly bare. Until now, Bryson assumed that the Trail is curiously inhospitable because MacKaye didn't get to build all the amenities that he wanted to make the Trail more accessible. Now, he realizes that even with lodges along the way, the experience might be more like army training than a pleasant adventure in the woods.

CHAPTER 18

In 1934, a meteorologist named Salvatore Pagliuca recorded a wind speed of 231 miles an hour on the summit of Mount Washington, nearly dying in the process. Mount Washington is also known for experiencing the lowest windchill factor, which is unmatched even in Antarctica. Mount Washington's geographical location, at the boundary of several weather fronts, is partly responsible for the extreme conditions. In the winter, the average temperature is a brutal 27°F, and in the summer it's only 52°F. Curiously, people still try to go up there in the winter.

Bryson reveals some facts about the weather in Mount Washington, exposing the natural environment on this stretch of the Trail as harsh and unforgiving—it even rivals Antarctica. The fact that many people attempt to ascend the mountain in dangerously cold weather shows once again that human beings are often responsible for their own difficulties in the wild, even though we tend to think wild animals are more of a threat to us than we are to ourselves.

In 1994, two hikers named Derek Tinkham and Jeremy Haas tried to pass through Mount Washington while the weather was -32°F. Tinkham stopped to camp partway through, while Haas managed to make it a couple miles further to the weather hut. By morning, Tinkham was frozen solid. Another woman, who tried to ascend the mountain in 1855, got lost in fog and died not knowing that she was just 150 feet from a hotel. One hundred twenty-two so far have died on Mount Washington, making it the second deadliest mountain in the United States. When Bryson and Abdu arrive to tackle it, Bryson double checks that he has all the gear he needs.

Bryson reinforces the idea that human beings endanger ourselves more than wild animals endanger us by citing the example of Derek Tinkham and Jeremy Haas, who died after attempting to ascend the mountain in frigid temperatures. Similar stories of human recklessness in dangerous conditions account for the high number of deaths on this part of the Trail. Once again, wild animals have very little to do with its dangers—they're smart enough to take shelter from the punishing weather at the summit.

It's a clear day, so the parking lots are full, and the crowds are arriving in droves. Without a pack, the hike is easy for Bryson. The first thing they see when they approach the summit is a "nightmare" of a giant parking lot and several concrete buildings. One of them is a museum, and it has a hilarious video of a man trying to eat breakfast in a blazing storm. Bryson loses Abdu in the crowd. This been a tourist area since the 1850s—in its heyday, there were many giant hotels and casinos. Those have all disappeared now, as tourism epicenters shifted to the beaches by 1900. Bryson calls this the age of "fickle" tourists.

Bryson's experience on Mount Washington is all but ruined by the droves of tourists who, once again, treat the summit like some kind of amusement park. Bryson exposes how thoughtlessly humans clear away forest to make way for parking lots and buildings. It disappoints Bryson that people are so eager to destroy the landscape but are notoriously "fickle" about where they'll vacation.

CHAPTER 19

Two weeks later, Katz travels to Maine to tackle the last stretch of the Trail with Bryson. Katz is dreading hiking with a heavy pack, so he's decided to try using a newspaper delivery bag instead—he even has one for Bryson. Bryson thinks that Katz is being idiotic. Katz continues that they should tackle this stretch without tents and food and do it like real "mountain men." Bryson tries to reason with Katz, pointing out that the bag is already chafing at Katz's neck. Katz sheepishly gives up on the idea, but he insists that they pack light this time.

Although Bryson has missed Katz on his hikes through New England, he remembers almost immediately that Katz's dimwitted ideas about hiking are a bit of a burden. Bryson and Katz want to think of themselves like "mountain men" who can survive in nature. But it's clear that Katz has few survival skills, given that his bag is already chafing at his neck before they've started hiking.

Bryson insists that they take sleeping bags and tents, but he agrees to leave behind the stove, pots, and pans. They're going to get by on candy, raisins, and beef jerky. Katz is thrilled to lose the extra weight. The next day, Bryson's wife drives them to Maine, which contains one of the most intimidating forests in the United States. In pictures, it looks tranquil and pleasant—but in reality, it's one of the toughest stretches of the Trail, partly because it's so remote. Katz and Bryson are planning to cross it in two weeks. They have three days of hiking, one break to get supplies, and then the Hundred Mile Wilderness, which is completely isolated from civilization.

Maine is notoriously remote, and the forest that's been set aside for Americans to enjoy is almost impenetrable. Although Bryson didn't like visiting the Trail by car, he's about to remember that he finds hiking in the wilderness equally unpleasant. The land is difficult to hike through, and there are few resources available to Bryson and Katz if anything goes wrong.

Wearing a pack for the first time in four months is brutal for Bryson. It's even harder for Katz, who ate a lot of pancakes for breakfast. He's out of breath and moving slowly right from the get-go. Within the first 45 minutes, Katz is covered in sweat and looking desperate. They hear children playing in a pond nearby, but they can't see anything through the trees. If they hadn't heard the children, they wouldn't have even known there was a pond nearby—it's a "joyless" experience in the heat. Soon, Katz falls far behind.

Bryson emphasizes the discomfort of hiking almost immediately: his pack is heavy, and he can't see anything through the claustrophobic trees. It's a swift reminder than being traversing the woods is not as easy as Bryson thinks. In fact, the experience is so unpleasant that it's entirely "joyless." Bryson also uses his descriptions of the stifling heat and Katz's painstakingly slow progress to reinforce how uncomfortable long hikes can be.

Bryson sets up camp near Baker Stream. He waits for Katz for a while, but Katz doesn't turn up. Feeling a bit worried, Bryson goes looking for Katz. When Bryson finds him an hour later, Katz's eyes have glazed over, and his pack looks half-empty. Bryson shoulders the pack and asks what happened. Katz tells him that he threw out nearly all of his clothes and most of the food, thinking that they can restock in Monson. Bryson dejectedly tells Katz that he has no idea if they'll even have food supplies in Monson. It turns out that Katz threw away their drinking water too.

Even though the landscape is punishing, Bryson doesn't hesitate to search for Katz. He knows they're going to have to look after each other to get through this. As before, Katz has made a foolish decision by throwing out nearly everything the duo needs to survive in the woods, including their drinking water. Nonetheless, Bryson remains cordial, knowing that it won't help the situation to berate Katz.

Bryson puts up Katz's tent and goes to filter some water from the pond in Baker Stream, a nearby river. Suddenly, he feels something looking at him. He turns around to realize there's a moose in the foliage, about 15 feet away. Apparently, it's also after water. Bryson finds it strange to be so close to such a large wild animal. They just stare at each other, and Bryson feels as if they're acknowledging each other's presence in a primal way. It saddens Bryson that people are hunting moose these days—Moose hunting is so popular in Maine that they have a lottery for permits.

Bryson's response to the moose is markedly calmer than his last encounter with a wild animal in the woods. It seems that everything he's learned about the damage that humans have caused to animals is starting to affect his disposition, and his fear of animals is starting to dissipate. Instead of being afraid of the moose, Bryson focuses on how much hunting endanger wild animals.

Hunters describe moose as "ferocious," but to Bryson, a moose is just like a cumbersomely large cow with awkward legs. They're not too bright, either—they're actually known for running out of the woods and into traffic when they hear cars. It's an ancient creature, though, having out-survived mastodons, saber-toothed tigers, and even camels, which were once native to North America. Moose numbers dwindled to near-extinction in the 1900s but then multiplied again, which is why officials encourage moose hunting. Bryson thinks that this is a dumb idea because nobody knows exactly how many they are, and they're being slaughtered in high numbers.

Bryson recognizes that human beings often demonize animals like moose as dangerous (captured in the description of moose as "ferocious"). But by now, it's clear to Bryson that human beings are more of a menace to animals than they are to us. It saddens Bryson that such menacing attitudes toward animals persist—he realizes that thinking of animals as fearsome only contributes to their endangerment.

Bryson creeps off quietly to get Katz. When they return, the moose has moved upstream and is drinking water. Katz and Bryson are thrilled—now they *really* feel like they're in the wilderness. That night, they eat dried salami and raisins before jumping swiftly into their tents, as the mosquitos are attacking them. Katz remarks that he's forgotten how hard this hiking business is. Bryson agrees, though he thinks that tomorrow will be better—but it turns out he's wrong. They wake on a hot day, and the hike is stifling. It almost feels like the woods are steaming.

Bryson is keen to share his moose encounter with Katz, and his eagerness to do so indicates that their relationship is far closer than when the memoir began. Meanwhile, the mosquitos and the stifling heat remind Bryson that hiking in the woods can be really unpleasant. It's only their first day back in the wilderness, and already, both of them are missing the comforts of civilization.

Two hours into their hike, they reach a murky lagoon full of rotting logs, and there's no way around it. They wonder if they've gotten lost. They retrace their steps, check their maps, realize the forest is too dense for them to go any other way, and they're going to have to wade across the lagoon. There's a marker for the Trail on the other side, about 80 feet away. They cross gingerly on moss-covered logs. Suddenly, Katz trips and falls into the murky water. The pack is dragging him down, and it looks like he might drown. Bryson leaps toward Katz, but suddenly, Katz's hand comes up out of the water and grabs hold of a log.

Bryson and Katz's inexperience in this terrain proves to be the biggest risk to their safety once again. Bryson isn't hiking ahead any more—he's hiking alongside Katz, because he realizes that they have to work as a team to get through this punishing forest. With each passing hour in the wilderness, the experience gets worse, which reminds Bryson and Katz that perhaps they aren't really cut out for the wilderness after all.

Just as Katz stands up, Bryson falls in. Bryson frantically reaches up as his pack drags him down but he can't get hold of anything. Suddenly, Katz is on top of him and pulling him out of the water. Bryson gasps out a thank you, and they reach the other side, covered in rotting vegetation. Bryson doesn't remember hiking being this bad anywhere on the Trail so far. Two experienced hikers emerge, lift their packs above their heads, and deftly cross the lagoon. They warn Katz and Bryson that they're going to get a lot wetter up ahead. Katz sighs and tells Bryson that he's not trying to be negative, but he really doesn't think he's cut out for this. Bryson agrees but doesn't say anything.

Like Katz, Bryson's inexperience with murky, boggy terrain is a threat to his own safety—far more so than any animal could be. Luckily, they work as a team and help each other through the lagoon. The more experienced hikers expose how dangerous it was to attempt crossing water with heavy packs on their backs, since it's easy for a hiker to drown like that. The discomfort of the woods making them both feel like they're out of their depth in this environment.

Looking back, Bryson thinks the Appalachian Trail is the most difficult thing he's ever done, and Maine is the hardest part of it by far. The heat and claustrophobic foliage are stifling; no matter how much water Bryson and Katz drink, they're always thirsty. They drink sparingly because they don't have much water left after Katz dumped half their supply. Katz somehow forces himself to get through it. The next day, they have to cross several rivers, the first of which is Bald Mountain Stream. It's full of boulders and has a fast current. Bryson decides not to tell Katz that Maine's streams can be dangerous to cross.

Bryson emphasizes how uncomfortable Maine's woods are by writing about the heat, the dense foliage, and his unquenchable thirst. Katz's foolish decision to dump half their drinking water once again endangers them more than any animal could, but Bryson doesn't lose patience with Katz. In fact, it seems like he's looking out for Katz more than usual. Katz, similarly, isn't complaining. This kind of consideration for each other helps the duo handle the unforgiving forest.

They wade into the icy water, over sharp but slippery moss-covered stones. Bryson immediately falls three times, swearing viciously. The experienced hikers pass by again, carrying their packs over their heads, and Bryson swears again. Bryson goes back to shore and tries crossing again with his shoes on this time, which is a little easier. In the meantime, Katz makes it across over several boulders but gets stuck by a nasty patch of current. As he tries to cross it, he falls in. The current carries him swiftly downstream before he emerges, coughing and spluttering. It's been two days, and Katz has nearly drowned twice.

Bryson and Katz struggle again when they have to cross water. The juxtaposition between their own ineptitude and the deftness of the more experienced hikers exposes their behavior as a danger to their own safety. Bryson continues to stress that being in this forest is incredibly uncomfortable, unpleasant, and difficult. He's longing for civilization already, and it's only been two days.

On the third day, they find their first road and happily tumble out of the woods to walk along it toward Monson. They arrive at Shaw's Guesthouse, the last stop before the Hundred Mile Wilderness, and decide to stay the night and refresh before tackling the next stretch. Bryson showers, does laundry, and feels blissfully happy as the smell of sizzling food floats out to the lawn. Keith Shaw, the owner, comes out to sit with Bryson. Keith warns Bryson not to pet the dog—it goes for the balls and doesn't let go.

The forest is so punishing that Bryson and Katz leave for a break the first chance they get. Bryson's brief encounter with Maine's forests does nothing to make him like nature more, but it does make him appreciate things that he wouldn't otherwise pay much attention to—such as laundry, showers, and the smell of food cooking.

Dinner is a generous affair involving platters of meat, mashed potatoes, and lots of butter. Katz looks extremely happy for the first time in days. The food is amazing. Bryson meets a pair of thru-hikers, and he's astounded that they've made it this far. He asks them if they ever felt like giving up, and the girl says that they had some low moments, but Jesus helped them through it. Bryson immediately gets uncomfortable, so Katz cheerily steps in, thanking Allah for the mashed potatoes.

Bryson and Katz enjoy their dinner immensely, savoring the experience after being deprived of proper food in the woods. They also seem to be thriving in their camaraderie: Katz steps in to ward off people that Bryson doesn't like talking to, his comment about Allah scaring the couple who seem to put more stock in Jesus.

After dinner, Bryson and Katz head to the grocery store to pick up supplies for the Hundred Mile Wilderness. Katz is acting strangely and suggests getting a six-pack, even though he's been sober for years. Bryson tells Katz to stop it, but Katz just grabs more beer. Katz asks Bryson for money to buy the beer, and Bryson gets worried; he realizes that Katz has been drinking. Bryson warns Katz that he shouldn't be drinking, but Katz just grins, telling Bryson to calm down. Bryson is furious at Katz and feels betrayed. He refuses to pay for the beer. Katz swears at Bryson and walks out.

When Bryson notices that Katz is drinking again, he steps in to intervene. It's clear that Bryson thinks of Katz as a friend by now, and he's worried about Katz's welfare. The kindness and consideration they've shown each other on the Trail is evolving into a deeper concern for each other. Unfortunately, Bryson's concern triggers an argument, which doesn't bode well for the duo.

CHAPTER 20

The next morning, the mood between Bryson and Katz is tense, and they barely talk. They stand in awkward silence as they wait for Keith to drive them to the Trail. They enter the woods by a sign that marks the beginning of the Hundred Mile Wilderness. The sign has a long warning that hikers shouldn't enter unless they have at least ten days' food supplies with them. The woods here feel "ominous, brooding [...] darker, [and] more shadowy." Disney's *Bambi* was set in Maine, but this forest looks nothing like a Disney cartoon. Bryson thinks about snakes, wolves, and unknown beady, glowing eyes. The foliage is impossibly dense. Looking back, Bryson thinks "it was hell."

As usual, Bryson and Katz can't walk into the woods—they have to be driven there. Even in Maine, where there are fewer signs of commercial industry, the wilderness seems somewhat cut off from everyday life. The warning signs fill Bryson with a sense of foreboding, which he expresses in his description of the tall, dark, and "shadowy" trees. Once again, it seems like the reality of the woods is much more intimidating than Bryson imagined. In retrospect, Bryson admits that the experience was awful. He refers to hiking as "hell" here, just as he did at the start of his journey. His discomfort in nature hasn't eased, despite the amount of time he's already spent in the woods.

Within the first hour, Bryson and Katz approach a giant rock across the trial, about 400 feet high. They crawl up it, struggling in the oppressive heat. Bryson feels faint, and he has to stop every 10 feet or so from exhaustion. This is the first of many climbs like this. In between, there are bald patches of granite with sweeping views of endless forest. The views are stunning, but the heat is too oppressive for them to stop and enjoy them. The day is a tough slog, and there are no streams to refill their water—Katz runs out, so Bryson shares his. The energy between them still feels off.

Bryson reinforces the misery of the duo's experience in Maine by emphasizing the heat and the unforgiving granite terrain. It's not only unpleasant here—it's downright dangerous, especially as they are inexperienced in this territory. Once again, the difficult environment prevents them from enjoying the view or anything else about the woods. Despite their argument, Bryson and Katz are looking out for each other, having learned that they need to be considerate to survive in such taxing terrain.

Bryson and Katz set up camp near the first river they see, and they eat in sullen silence. Bryson can't believe they have 85 more miles of this before they reach Katahdin. There're nothing—no stores, phones, lodges, or roads—for miles around. Bryson looks around listlessly, knowing that it's going to be 10 days before he sees civilization again.

The forest is so intimidating that Bryson is quickly growing dejected. The tension between himself and Katz is also souring the mood. Bryson has barely entered the wilderness, yet he's already fantasizing about comforts of civilization like stores and roads.

The next day, Bryson and Katz cross the river in silence. They soon run out of water, and it takes them hours to make it a mere four miles. Bryson makes it to the next clearing before Katz. Bryson gives Katz some water and encourages him to drink, knowing that Katz has none left. In return, Katz gives Bryson half of his candy bar. Katz cracks a bad joke to clear the air, and Bryson laughs. Katz apologizes for drinking, and Bryson apologizes for being difficult about it. Katz explains that staying sober is hard—he's lonely a lot, and he misses drinking. Bryson nods uncomfortably. Katz explains he went out with colleagues one night, caved into peer pressure, and started drinking again.

Bryson and Katz act kindly toward each other, sharing their food and water, which eases the tension between them. The deep conversation they share about Katz's drinking troubles shows that their relationship is evolving into a much closer friendship. Katz is deeply lonely, which explains why he'd be willing to trek in the woods with Bryson despite his clear disdain for being in nature.

Katz continues, saying that he's aware he shouldn't be drinking—he knows that he can't just have a couple beers like other people. He really, really loves being drunk, and he missed it all these years. Somehow, the future seems low and empty without drinking to look forward to. Bryson reaches over and gives Katz an affectionate fist bump. Katz smiles ruefully and says that as much as he hates TV dinners, he'd kill for one right now. Bryson understands. He looks around, wondering what they're doing here.

Katz's heartfelt admission of his troubles with alcohol and Bryson's gesture of affection clear the air. It's becoming clear to both of them that as boring as everyday life can be, it's still infinitely desirable to being in the woods. Both of them are starting to lose their desire to continue on the Trail because the experience is so unpleasant.

It's a mile to the next watering hole. Bryson decides to hike ahead so that he can filter the water by the time Katz arrives. Cloud Pond, where Bryson's headed, is about a quarter mile off the Trail. Bryson leaves his pack at the spot where he veers off the Trail, as a marker for Katz. Bryson returns to the pack about 40 minutes later with water, but there's no sign of Katz. Bryson waits about an hour, and then he goes looking for Katz. Bryson climbs to the next summit, but he beings to worry when there's no sign of Katz. Maybe Katz fell and hurt himself. Bryson remembers a story about a hiker who fainted in the heat and fell, before baking to death in the heat.

Bryson and Katz continue to look out for each other, knowing that they need each other to survive in this terrain. Bryson doesn't hesitate to search for Katz when Katz doesn't show up. It's clear to Bryson now that his ruminations about wild animals were foolish—they're the biggest danger to themselves as inexperienced hikers in this environment.

Bryson shouts into the forest, hoping to hear a response, but he only hears the lonely echo of his own voice. He thinks of Katz wandering, lost and without water, and he starts to get really worried. Bryson leaves his pack on the Trail with a note for Katz, and he heads into the thicket calling Katz's name. He searches for hours, but sees no sign of Katz. Bryson wonders if Katz got confused and went to a different pond. There's another one two miles away, but the undergrowth is so thick that it's easy to become lost and disoriented. You could easily die out there and never be found.

Bryson grows more frantic and afraid as more time passes. His fear is entirely rational here—Katz could very well disappear into the woods and never be found, especially in the dense, suffocating underbrush. The experience is growing more miserable, dangerous, and isolating by the minute. Now, separated from each other, Bryson and Katz's desire to become "mountain men" seems altogether reckless.

Bryson hikes back to his pack, and tries another direction, circling back to the pack every now and then. Eventually, not knowing what else to do, he leaves another note for Katz and then hikes back to Cloud Pond, where there's a shelter. It's a beautiful shelter, but Bryson is too worried to really enjoy it. He wants to go for a swim, but he doesn't have the heart for it without Katz. He tries not to think about Katz feeling disoriented and scared in the woods. Feeling dejected, Bryson watches the sunset and just waits.

Bryson is so worried about Katz that he can't enjoy the one patch of beauty in the terrifying forest. It's clear to Bryson by now that he's not cut out for the isolation of the woods, and neither is Katz. In fact, their desire to tackle the wilderness might well end up causing Katz's death. The thought leaves Bryson utterly demoralized.

Bryson watches a group of migrating birds for hours, but he can't really enjoy it because he's so worried about Katz. Loons, the birds Bryson is watching, are disappearing because their habitats are being destroyed by acid rain. By morning, Katz still hasn't shown up, and Bryson doesn't know what to do. He doesn't want to venture farther into the wilderness in case Katz is nearby, but he also knows that Katz might have hiked ahead. He could go back to Monson to get help, or hike ahead to Chairback Gap (a couple hours north) and see if there's another hiker there. He decides to try for Chairback Gap and presses on, feeling nervous.

Despite Bryson's worries, he pauses to reflect on the disappearing bird habitats, stressing once more how much of a threat human activity is to Appalachia's natural ecosystem. Meanwhile, Bryson has to rely on his wits to find Katz. The isolation starts to feel oppressive, but he's more concerned about Katz than about himself, showing how far the two have come in their relationship over the course of this journey.

Bryson hikes ahead for four miles and sees a trickling stream. There's an empty cigarette pack pierced on a branch nearby, which Bryson recognizes as a sign from Katz. He starts to feel better, knowing that Katz is still on the Trail. Four hours later, Bryson spots Katz, sitting on the ground and looking disheveled. Katz breathes a sigh of relief when he sees Bryson. He explains that he was thirsty and disoriented, so he stuck to the Trail. He's extremely proud of himself for leaving the cigarette pack as a marker—he stole the idea from a TV show.

Bryson is relieved to find signs of Katz's presence and to finally be reunited with him. Although Katz says that he stuck to the Trail, his disheveled appearance suggests otherwise. It's clear that Katz is the biggest danger to himself in this environment because he's so inexperienced in the woods. Nonetheless, that his survival skills have improved—the cigarette pack marker certainly helped to reunite the pair.

Katz explains that he stopped to camp near water, and he's been waiting there ever since. He knows that Bryson would never leave him behind, but sometimes Bryson daydreams and doesn't realize how far he goes without Katz. Bryson asks Katz why he's bleeding, and Katz sheepishly admits that before he decided to stick to the Trail, he wandered off it and got lost. He'd spotted a lake in the distance and tried to head for it before getting utterly lost. He thought he could find his way back, but the woods all look the same. He'd tried to retrace his steps but couldn't find the Trail no matter which way he went.

Even though the duo were separated, they were both thinking as a team and anticipating the other's moves. The situation proves to them that teamwork is essential for survival in the wilderness. Katz's foolish decision to veer of the Trail could well have killed him, as the woods are dense and disorienting, and he quickly got himself lost.

It turns out that Katz only found himself back on the Trail by chance, at the stream where he left the cigarette pack. Katz has been worried about Bryson too, and he's never been happier to see anyone in his life. Bryson pauses and looks at Katz, before asking Katz if he wants to go home. Katz thinks for a minute, and then he says, "Yeah. I do." Bryson agrees. They decide to stop pretending they're "mountain men" and get out of there, hiking four miles to the nearest logging road. They don't know where it goes, but they follow it anyway, knowing it'll lead to other people. Soon enough, a pickup truck comes trundling along. Luckily, it stops. The driver asks Bryson where the duo is headed, and Bryson replies, "anywhere."

As the duo reflect on their harrowing night, it becomes clear to them that the discomforts and dangers of the Trail trump any desire they have to remain on it. They wisely abandon the effort, deciding that they're not "mountain men" after all. If anything, their brief excursion in Maine taught them that they just want to get back to civilization as soon as possible—they don't even care where. Bryson realizes that as much as he despises urban sprawl, he'd rather be in it than out of it.

CHAPTER 21

Bryson and Katz never make it to Katahdin. They just bounce along in the back of the pickup truck next to a mess of chain saws and get off the truck in Milo, the nearest town. It's disorienting. A few minutes ago, they were in the wilderness, a two-day hike from civilization—and now they're at a gas station. It feels weird knowing that they're back for good. From now on, they'll always have soda, beds, and showers. There's no motel in Milo, but there's a boarding house there. A sweet old lady named Joan Bishop welcomes them in warmly, and they smell baking pastry as they enter.

Although Bryson and Katz are happy to be out of the woods for good, it's oddly jarring to be back in civilization. Once again, Bryson emphasizes that there's no happy medium between nature and highways in this environment, which still bothers him. Nonetheless, he's utterly relieved to be out of the woods and is already focusing on how much more he enjoys the smell of pastry in the oven.

Katz, who's covered in blood, can't wait to shower, and he accidentally calls the old lady "mom" on his way upstairs. Bryson and Katz each emerge from their showers feeling utterly refreshed. Bryson assumes that a lot of hikers come through here, having abandoned the Hundred Mile Wilderness, but they're the first ones Joan has seen. She says most people make it through fine but gently tells Bryson and Katz that it'll still be there if they want to try to tackle it again another time.

Katz and Bryson relish the simple comforts of having a roof over their head and a nice old lady around. It's clear that if the wilderness showed Bryson anything, it showed him how to appreciate simple things he didn't notice before. Katz, too, seems to be taking a newfound appreciation in the comforts he's enjoying after his harrowing night in the woods.

Bryson and Katz dine in town. Katz asks Bryson if he feels bad for giving up. Bryson pauses, feeling conflicted. He's tired of the Trail but still fascinated by it. He enjoys the break from civilization but also longs for it when he's in the woods. Reflecting on all this, he replies, "Yes and no." Katz agrees before deciding they still *did* hike the Appalachian Trail—it doesn't matter that they never made it to Katahdin, since all mountains look kind of the same. Bryson objects that they missed a lot of it, but Katz dismisses Bryson, telling him not to quibble about details. After a pause, Bryson agrees.

Reflecting on his perception of the Trail, Bryson realizes that he has, in fact, developed more of an appreciation for nature. He wouldn't say he enjoys being in the wilderness, but he definitely has a much healthier respect for the woods than he did before. Ultimately, the more time Bryson spent in the woods, the more he realized he belonged in civilization. It's clear that Katz thought this all along, though he probably appreciates the comforts of his life more than he did before.

Back at the gas station, Katz decides to get them some cream soda to celebrate the end of their trip. Bryson grins and hands over some money (Katz has none of his own). Katz looks happy knowing he can watch TV tonight. They mark the end of their hike by cracking open the six-pack in Milo, instead of at the summit of Katahdin.

Fittingly, the duo calls the trip quits over a ceremonial six-pack of cream soda in a town rather than in a forest. This symbolizes their realization that they appreciate civilization far more than the taxing and terrifying forests in Maine.

Katz returns to Iowa. He calls sometimes, saying one day he'll come back out and tackle the Hundred Mile Wilderness again—but Bryson doubts that Katz will ever go back there. Bryson hikes on and off through the end of summer and into the fall. He decides that his final hike will be Mount Killington in Vermont. The weather is crisp and clear, and the view is stunning. For once, Bryson can enjoy it. From the summit, he can see many of the other mountains he climbed. He thinks that this is a good time to officially end his hiking adventure. One afternoon, Bryson sits down and calculates that he covered 870 miles of the 2,200-mile-long journey. He has no idea how people manage to hike the whole thing.

Bryson's final hikes in Vermont give him a taste of what he'd longed for all along—nice weather and good views—so he decides to part ways with the Trail here. Looking back on all the discomforts he endured in the wilderness, Bryson can't fathom that all of that amounts to under half of the Trail's total mileage. It's clear to Bryson that he's much more suited to towns than to the wilderness, but he's fine with that, now that he knows how fearsome the wilderness can be.

Bryson still goes on little hikes now and again, especially when he's stuck on something he's writing. He decides that he doesn't need to hike up mountains or sleep in blizzards to get the most out of hiking. He has some regrets, though: he wishes he'd made it to Katahdin. He even regrets having never seen a **bear**. He wishes that he'd had a more impressive brush with death to boast about. Still, he's learned a lot. He respects the forest and discovered an America that he knew little about. He decides that Katz was right and that he doesn't care what anybody else thinks—he hiked the Appalachian Trail.

Bryson eventually finds his happy medium in little hikes that don't stray too far from civilization. His romantic visions of the wilderness seem to have pushed him farther into it than he needed to go. But despite the challenges Bryson experienced, he's happy to have learned about nature, the United States, and the way human beings interact with nature. Bryson concludes that the experience ended up being highly instructive. It taught him to enjoy things he didn't really appreciate before (good food, showers, his friendship with Katz), so he's proud of himself for tackling the Appalachian Trail.

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