

# HELLO MY NAME IS SHARKBAIT

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A 2,000-MILE ADVENTURE ON THE  
APPALACHIAN TRAIL

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*It's my life*  
*It's now or never*  
*I ain't gonna live forever*  
*I just want to live while I'm alive*

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## PROLOGUE

“**H**oly sh—!” I shot up in bed with a rush of adrenaline, clutching the book I’d been reading like my heart had just been jump-started with a thousand volts. Clamping a hand over my mouth, I glanced at my roommate, Max. Arm flung off the side of the bed and mouth hanging open, he remained blissfully unaware of my outburst as he slept off last night’s expensive bar tab.

I placed the book on my bedside table and lay facing it, staring at the spine. A narrow glimpse of trees, sky, and trail hinted at the contents within. I was 21 and in my senior year of college. You know, the year when unlimited possibilities lie ahead of you, and everyone, including the drive-through lady, is asking for your plans after graduation. So far, I’d avoided exposing my uncertainty with the general line, “I’m just taking classes I enjoy.” I knew there was too much life to experience before jumping into a career, and although I’d always been organized, I wasn’t sure yet what that path looked like.

I had, in fact, been pondering this very question as I sat down for lunch with my mom the day before. I stopped by, as I usually did on

weekends, for a free meal and load of laundry. As we sat discussing my latest term-paper woes over lunch, she suddenly tilted her head at me. “You okay, honey? You seem a bit distracted.”

Maybe I wasn’t giving fresh cold cuts the attention a starving college kid should, or perhaps I couldn’t fake interest in my Irish history thesis as well as I thought. But a mom never misses a chance to call out when her kid isn’t paying attention.

“I’m fine, Mom.” I adjusted quickly, then swallowed another bite. “I guess I’m just thinking about the trip again. Hard to focus on anything else these days. I still can’t believe Dad is letting me go backcountry this year.”

All my life, I had watched my dad obsess over his annual backpacking trip to Glacier National Park in Montana. Leading these recreational trips out of Minneapolis, where months of teaching ended with two weeks of hiking in the Rocky Mountains, was a high point of his career. These trips had long been woven into the fabric of our home, with framed mountain backdrop photos lining the walls, folk songbooks scattered around his guitar, and endless stories hanging in the air whenever guests came to visit. Backpacking in the mountains was something special to him—to many, it defined him. So imagine how that invitation came across to a young boy who worshiped his father.

It was like entry to the Garden of Eden. We’d visited Montana a few times as a family, taking the train out to meet him after the work trips ended. But, for all the majesty I saw, I had never been allowed on the group backcountry trip he led. I yearned to trek through the wilderness with him for days on end, with nothing but the items on my back for survival. Our family trips were always day hikes. No sleeping in tents, no cooking on tiny stoves, and no digging a hole to crap in the woods. So, for all it meant to my dad, backpacking in the mountains was still the forbidden fruit that I was too young, inexperienced, and naïve to taste.

Until now, that is. After months of discussion, I finally convinced him I was mature enough to handle traversing Montana,

and he agreed I was old enough to join the official trip. I'd even invited my roommate to join, who had enthusiastically accepted.

"What's that you've got there?" I gestured to the small plastic bag my mom had set on the table between us.

"Oh, this?" She asked as she pushed it to me. "It's for you. A gift from work."

My mom worked at the public library. She was one of those wonderful people who embodied the spirit of librarians. She loved introducing people to new authors who might spark curiosity or adventure, and handing that gift to those who would truly appreciate it.

I glanced down at the title of the book I'd pulled from the bag—*A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson. I looked up to see a sly smirk stretch across her face, her way of saying that she already knew what was on my mind. Intrigued, I opened the first page to see a map with a line crossing fourteen states. I turned the page to Chapter One and read, "Running more than 2,100 miles along America's eastern seaboard, through the serene and beckoning Appalachian Mountains, the AT is the granddaddy of long hikes."

With those words, the seed of an idea was planted. I couldn't quite see what it was yet, but I knew I needed to find where it would lead. Neither of us knew it then, but my mom had just handed me the book that would lead to one of the biggest treasures of my life. I could hardly wait to head back to campus and devour the rest of Bryson's journey on the Appalachian Trail.

As I sat in bed later that night, mental wheels spinning uncontrollably, I stared at the spine, which was noticeably more creased and worn than when my mom handed it to me. That seed was already a sapling, growing into a strong oak tree of a promise to myself. Maybe after I proved myself on this summer's Montana trip, the Appalachian Trail could be next. *What if the longest continuous hiking path on the eastern seaboard could be my Glacier National Park?* The thought thrilled me with the shiny newness of its possibilities. Plus, I'd finally have something to tell

Helen at McDonald's the next time she asked about my plans for life.

"What were you dreaming about last night, Neiman?" Max asked in the morning, as we readied ourselves for a full day of classes.

"Huh?" I glanced at my roommate, brow furrowed.

"I woke up at some point and saw your legs thrashing around while you slept. If you were upright, you probably would have walked right across campus in your boxers."

Had I been sleep-backpacking the Appalachian Trail, the granddaddy of hiking trails? I laughed before replying, "Probably. I don't remember dreaming anything, but that reminds me, my dad sent a packing list for the Montana trip. I don't want to be caught unprepared, but it's... well, you could probably call it hefty."

I scratched the morning stubble on my face as I read the paper titled *Glacier Park Backpacking Equipment List*. A short disclaimer at the top read:

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*The following list of items is a guide for what you could anticipate bringing for hiking or backpacking. This is not a required list etched in stone. You should modify it as necessary to accommodate your plans. Some similar items are duplicates to choose between; others can be shared among people in your group.*

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I had read the pages several times already, and it looked like all the items listed would be necessary for our trip.

Max strode over and plucked the list from my hands just as I was making my way through the towel section. He scanned it from bottom to top and handed it back to me seconds later with a shrug. "I think I'll just wing it. You know, pack what feels right."

I stared at him incredulously as he turned back to his morning ministrations. Wing it? On a multi-day backpacking trip? And who works through a list from bottom to top? I narrowed my eyes. Was I going to survive in the backcountry with this guy? *Just to be safe*, I thought, *I better bring a spare box of granola bars*.

I placed the list carefully back on my bedside table, secured safely under *A Walk in the Woods*. There was no way I was winging anything. This would be my first backpacking trip, but it wasn't just that. All my previous hiking adventures had been leading up to this one, and now I would get the chance to show Dad that his faith in me this year was justified. But I also knew I needed to spill the beans on this idea about the Appalachian Trail, even if premature. For as long as I could remember, he had been my barometer for decision-making, and this one was no different.

Thirty minutes and four rings later, Dad picked up the phone.

"Hellooooo?" he said in his usual cheery way. I always loved the way he greeted every caller as if it were his duty to make their day brighter.

"Hi, Dad. It's me."

"Pride!" he belted out heartily. And while I rolled my eyes at the nickname, I couldn't keep a grin from breaking out.

"Yes, Dad, the pride of the Neiman household, at your service."

"Always! What's going on?"

"So, I've got a plan after graduation," I said slowly. Dad, always an avid storyteller, appreciated the art of a dramatic buildup.

"Uh-huh. I'm listening."

"I think you're really going to like it."

"Okay..."

And with the appropriate amount of flair, I announced, "I'm going to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail."

Silence.

"Dad?"

“Yep, still here. I was just checking my Chinese dictionary for the translation because I could have sworn you just spoke Mandarin.”

I let out a deep, quiet sigh as I shook my head.

“You’ve heard of the Appalachian Mountains.” This was delivered as a statement because I knew for a fact that Dad, who had countless geology books and rock samples lining his bookshelves, had most certainly heard of this very large, very well-known topographical landmark.

“I’ve heard some call them mountains.”

I groaned inwardly, knowing where this conversation was headed in three, two, one...

“Of course, that’s probably because they haven’t seen the Rockies.” He sighed wistfully. “Now, those are mountains!”

Dad’s love of mountains and backpacking was singular in its passion for the Rockies. He had never wavered since first discovering them as a young adult, and the recurring work trips to Montana had only strengthened that admiration.

“Don’t you want to try out Glacier first?” he added.

“I was thinking this would be after. It would have to be planned out. It’s expensive. Plus, it takes a pretty long time.”

That captured Dad’s interest. “How long?”

“From what I’ve read, most people take about six months.”

“Six months?! What do they eat? Squirrels?” I could hear the concern in his voice, even while he joked.

“I think the idea is to restock supplies along the way. It’s more than 2,000 miles long, but it walks through many towns.” I spoke gently, responding to the fatherly concern I could still feel radiating from the other end of the phone.

There was another long pause. “So, the plan is to hike 2,000 miles over six months, relying on gas stations in Virginia to carry freeze-dried meals?”

“Yes. I think.” I had to admit, I didn’t know, but somehow that excited me more. “So that’s the plan. I’m going to do it.”



Another long pause.

“Michael, if anyone can achieve what they set their mind to, it’s you. But have you really thought this through?”

I did stop to think for a moment. Mom had just given me the book, but I had consumed it in just one day and felt certain I needed to hike the trail. So, I replied with confidence, “Yeah, Dad, I have. By this time next year, I’ll be hiking the Appalachian Trail.”

Oh, those famous last words.



*My overstuffed pack in 2002 at Glacier National Park, MT*