

A loosely-related group of hikers seek answers and grounding on the Appalachian Trail. Section tells their entangled stories of adventure, reconciliation, romance, justice, and hope and all paths lead to and through the Thirdway Lodge.

SECTION

By Mark A. Moore

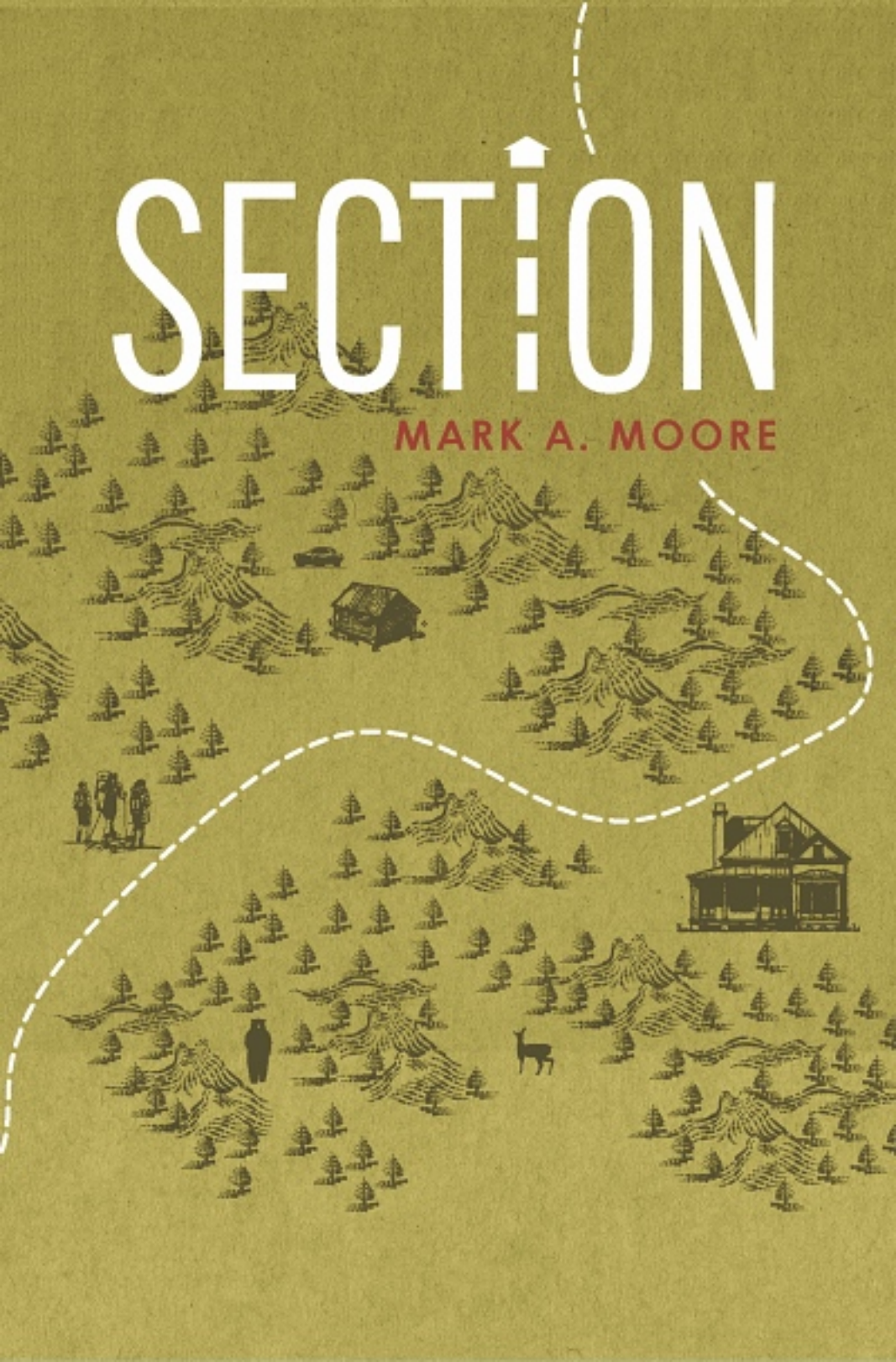
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New Year's Fray

"Damn it, Katie, we shoulda left fifteen minutes ago. You know Charles doesn't like waiting for the kids."

Katie sighed. "Yeah, I know, Nick. I married him." She tried brushing out the last of her dirty-blond tangles and wondered what the use was. She smiled. "Their father can wait."

And so will I, thought Nicholas Crowley. He wished *he* was spending the day with the kids, but, after all, Charles Owen was *their father*.

The kids. Jazmine was ten and Phillip eight. Their birth parents, Katie and Charles, had broken up five years ago when Katie found Charles cheating. Well, when she finally saw the noisy, sweaty proof with her own eyes after a long period of suspicion. And when she had confronted them in the bedroom, *her* bedroom, by God Almighty, she had entered calmly, addressing only him: "Charles, this confirms what I've suspected. But don't worry, your cheating stopped about thirty seconds ago, because you can't cheat on someone you're no longer in a relationship with. And this relationship ended when I walked in through that door." Then she walked out through that door and had not been in *that* room since. Truth be told, she had been relieved. The kids had been the only bond between them for some time. While she thought him a passable father, he was a lousy husband. And don't get her started on his antiquated views.

Now, Nick and Katie had been together about three years, married nearly one, and had plans for a trip to the Outer Banks in February to celebrate their first anniversary. Ocracoke Island beckoned and the off-season beach was a draw. Katie wanted to stockpile shells for whatever projects would later pop into her creative mind.

Jazmine and Phillip split time with their biological parents, spending school nights with the single Charles and most weekends with Katie—and Nick. The kids toyed with the idea of calling Nick "Dad," trying it on for size, but it seemed too big for all of them. Maybe they would grow into it, perhaps by Father's Day. For now, just Nicholas or Nick worked. Or Mr. Nicholas if Charles was around.

Nick was getting very attached to them and trying not to be jealous of the essential parenting confabs between Katie and Charles. To the kids, Charles's house was still home. It was where they had lived and got picked up for school before, during, and after the divorce, a constant in their evolving family equation. A constant that Charles's high-priced attorney

emphasized in the divorce hearing. That and Charles's steady, high-paying job as a back-office manager in a big-box store. Those factors had played well with his fraternity connection on the bench, who granted him primary custody, a prize Charles savored.

In the socioeconomic caste system of southwestern Virginia, the Charleses of the world were born into wealth and connections and wore white collars. People like Nick, a mechanic who had to claw for what he got, wore the blue. Charles was taking the kids to the annual Christmas display at the Hotel Roanoke—dozens of trees and tons of decorations—and today, New Year's Day, was the final hurrah. The display, then lunch, then a 2:10 p.m. blockbuster movie—a tight schedule, followed by a little playtime with the expensive Christmas toys that Nick and Katie could never afford.

Nick and Katie had their own plans, a relaxed walk in the woods on the Appalachian Trail up by Thirdway Lodge, but that part of their day could not start until the kids were picked up from their sleepover and dropped off at their father's. Looking at his watch, Nick forced the issue, as though he could, in their small white clapboard house by calling out, "They're waiting. I'm waiting." He huffed out the front door, hunching his lean shoulders into the cold, and let the screen door slap shut in sync with his frustration. He knew Charles would blame him if they were late, an indictment independent of evidence. He crunched, stumbling to the car through the shallow snow, ignited the engine to warm up the car, and leaned back, trying to let his mind drift to a better time. Just last night, in fact. He reveled in the memory. The dance. And after. And the note he wrote this morning. He patted his front pocket. *Dearest sweet Katie*. He relaxed.

Three minutes later, he awoke as Katie opened the car door. He sought comment on her pursed lips, but they revealed neither concession nor challenge. Soon they were off with a lurch and swerve, as though they could make up time by spinning faster sideways through the snow. Then they were on the sun-thawed road and purring smoothly along. Nick liked the sound from the recent tune-up of the classic Chevy SS. He turned slightly, one eye on Katie and one on the road. He touched her arm. "Sorry I was impatient. You all right?"

"I'm good, Nick." She looked straight ahead, her small homemade silver star-shaped earrings glinting. "I don't want them late again either. If so, I'll be clear it's my fault." She reached across for him, their hands

drifting together forming a tent, like the snow covering the split-log fence on their right.

She smiled. “How do you feel after last night? New Year’s Eve and all.”

“Good.” He nodded. “I might call Zeke later to ask how late old Mr. Gator-dance stayed and see if anything crazy happened after we left.”

“Crazy like what?” She squeezed the tip of her nose. “A run with Emily to Star General Hospital for AA converts?”

He smiled at her, “Very funny, but New Year’s Day does tend to bring out some newbies.” He tilted his face toward the side window and took a quick peek at the blue sky. “Looks all clear. The kids will have fun with the drones later.”

“Yeah, they will.” She squeezed his hand and kept it there, a thumb caressing his. “I love the job you did on this car.” She knew that would warm him up.

He smiled again and looked at the two black stripes on the white hood. His finishing touches. The sun sparkled on the new paint, freshly waxed.

They were quiet and content as they held hands, entering the on-ramp to I-81. The road was clear, the early sun doing its work. Hoping to make up time, they sped to enter the freeway, merging just behind an 18-wheeler.

“Looks like only one lane much fit for travel,” said Katie, craning to see around the truck. The big rig suddenly lurched to the right as though making a quick exit, but there was no ramp.

Nick Crowley could not process the rapid sequence of events fast enough. The silver-gray side of the truck looked bigger than normal, like the left-field wall at Fenway. Are big-rig lug nuts that large? *Is Katie screaming?* And although Nick was just barely starting to comprehend how the truck’s cab could now be facing them, he could not mistake the terror in the driver’s eyes.

Thirdway Lodge: Home for the Holiday

“Mitch?” Becca rolled over, looking at his flannel pajama-draped back. She turned to the green numbers on the nightstand and moaned when she read 5:42 a.m. “You up?”

“Barely.” He walked around to her side of the bed and nuzzled her cheek with his nose. She squirmed in contentment and pulled insistently on his arm.

He stood. “Guests, remember? Gwendolyn and Adam. And then, company for breakfast.”

“Not *real* guests, boo. Just visitors.” She still grasped him and stretched her other arm over her wavy brown hair. “Aren’t you cold out there?” She opened the covers.

He laughed. “You know I’m too old for that.”

“As if,” she pouted. “Sixty is hardly too old.”

He allowed himself to be led into her embrace.

“Happy Virginia New Year!” she whispered.

When Mitch Carson finally descended the stairs into the great room of the Thirdway Lodge, he was surprised to see Adam and Gwen already sitting at the long main table, coffee in front of them.

“Good morning,” he said, and the two guests turned and raised their mugs.

“Good morning,” said Gwen.

Mitch pointed to the half-full pot. “It’s my job to make the coffee.”

Adam smiled. “Too late. And just a few months ago it was my job.” He looked over Mitch’s shoulder. “Good morning, Becca. Have to say I don’t remember Mitch getting downstairs after six before.”

Becca stretched with a groan and reached for a mug. “He’s old. I had to practically push him out of bed.”

Mitch smirked and poured milk into his coffee. Adam looked amused; he’d missed these two since he finished working at the lodge last September.

Gwen was confused by the tableau but had questions about the lodge. “Why is the lodge named Thirdway?”

Adam raised his hand, military politeness intact. “It’s a third of the way from Georgia to Maine on the Appalachian Trail. If you’re walking.”

Section

“Oh, makes sense,” she replied and turned to Mitch. “How many guests do you get during hiking season, Dr. Mitch?”

Mitch had given up on encouraging the polite young lady to call him Mitch, or even Mr. Mitch, but at least she had stopped saying Dr. Carson.

He sat down with his coffee and pushed forward a tray of cranberry bran muffins, made the night before. “It can be over thirty per night, and now with the cabins, we can have over forty. The most we had during the bubble season last year was forty-two, but a lot of them tented in the side yard.”

“Bubble season?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered, placing a muffin on a white glass plate. “A lot of the hikers on the Appalachian Trail start in Georgia in March, give or take. So, they move north in a loose group they call a bubble, even though it gets spread out. Some go faster or slower.”

Her face worked on the logistics.

“It’s like size-exclusion chromatography of a protein mixture,” said Mitch. “Hikers go at different speeds.”

Her face lost all pretense of work.

He tilted his head. “I thought you had a master’s in biochemis—never mind. That’s old technology anyway. Yes, we can hold over forty.”

She was back on solid ground. “That’s a lot.”

“Yep. We have six bunkhouses and four cabins. We owe Adam our gratitude for helping with the cabin wiring last summer.”

Gwen wagged a finger. “Dr. Mitch, I’m finally catching your drift on the chromatography. I read about how they used glass columns for that in the last millennium.” She smiled at Mitch’s grimace, then laced an arm in Adam’s. “And about the wiring, he seems handy to have around.”

“He sure is,” chimed in Becca. “We’ve missed him, but understand the need for a steady paycheck, and benefits. But Richmond’s only a few hours away, so you’re always welcome to pop up.”

“Thanks, Becca,” said Adam. “We may come up in the spring for some day hikes.” He looked at the side door. “Speaking of cabins, are Zeke and Emily up yet? I hope we get to see them before we head out.” He looked out the large front window of the lodge. “I hope it’s good driving weather.”

“I don’t know when they got in from the dance,” said Becca.

“So,” Gwen cocked her head, “they stay in the same cabin, father and daughter?”

Adam cleared his throat and frowned.

Becca waved him off. “Sure, Gwen. Zeke’s my brother and has worked here for several years. Emily passed through last year on the AT, surprising

us all by showing up. After her thru-hike, she's been here helping out, at least for now. They have a big cabin with two bedrooms, separate bathrooms, and even a full kitchen. The cabin has a separate entrance to a two-room suite for paying guests. It was the main house before the lodge was built."

"Zeke taught me a lot last year, Gwen," said Adam. "I was right out of the service, with a lot to learn about life—and carpentry. And don't tell him or the Navy, but he may be a better electrician than I am."

"I knew it!" They wheeled and saw an uncharacteristically shaven Zeke walking toward them from the side door.

"Damn," said Adam, standing to hug Zeke, "I can't even hold that over you now."

"Ha," said the wiry-built Zeke. He had the appearance of someone who had been aged an extra decade by a rough life. He'd shaved before the New Year's Eve dance and wasn't sure if it made him look younger or older.

Zeke broke the quick embrace. "Since you don't have that whole *better electrician* angle anymore, maybe you'll just have to stick with younger, Navy-trained, better looking, better educated, better paid." At the last comment, Zeke looked at Mitch's raised eyebrow. "No offense, boss man." He looked back at Adam. "Better girlfriend. Well, you have a girlfriend, so that's a twofer. I'll stop there."

Gwen looked up at Zeke. Since they arrived the day before, she was unexpectedly taken with this man, reminiscent of her late uncle who hadn't run faster than his demons. Zeke seemed like what her uncle might have been if he hadn't chosen the dead-end option at his last fork in the road. Zeke selected a green Thirdway mug and poured a cup, adding a heaping spoonful of sugar to the rich, dark liquid.

Mitch approached the table with a sheet of paper. "Any guess what this is? It was attached to an email yesterday from Raleigh, North Carolina."

"An *Attorney Journey*?" cried out Emily, who had just walked in. She gave a little wave at Adam and Gwen and turned expectantly to Mitch.

Adam snapped his fingers. "Tip of my tongue."

Mitch bowed slightly. "Yes, Emily, and you are featured, once again, in the latest edition of," he held up the sheet, "*Attorney Journey*."

Emily smiled and reached out. "Gimme."

"I thought I'd read it. I got the email."

"You just opened it first," retorted Emily. "I hiked with him for two months."

Her hand was still out and Mitch handed it over.

Section

“What’s an attorney’s journey?” asked Gwen.

“I got this,” said Emily. “So, last year, when I was doing my thru-hike—”

“Thru-hike?” asked Gwen. “Sorry, I’m remedial.”

“Yeah, it means you do the whole AT in the same year. Over two thousand miles.”

Gwen’s eyes grew big and she nodded. “Were you in the bubble?”

Emily laughed. “Well, sort of, before, well, my bubble burst, but that’s another story.”

Gwen nodded, recalling part of the story that Adam had told her about Emily’s downfall last year.

“So, on my thru-hike, I met this guy named Jaxson hiking along the trail. He was this forty-something lawyer from Raleigh. Kind of a midlife crisis thing, but he was cool. Anyway, I didn’t see him for a while when I went off the rails and relapsed, that was my bubble popping, maybe it was my young-age crisis, anyway, but then he caught up to me here at Thirdway when I was sobering up. I was like, holy crap, it’s Jaxson. Anyway, we decide to get our asses up to Maine to flip-flop and we start hiking back with this girl Sarah, but Jaxson didn’t quite make it back here. So, he, Jaxson—”

“Gwen,” Adam interrupted Emily, “a flip-fop is when you hike a part of the trail in one direction, then ‘flip’ to hike another. Some hikers will start in Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, and go north to Maine, then ‘flip’ back to Harper’s Ferry and go south to Georgia. It’s a way to break up the hike and avoid some of the bubbles.” Gwen nodded in comprehension.

Adam continued, “And Jaxson had kind of a joke deal with his law firm that he could go on leave to hike the trail, but he would have to send back reports. He called them *Attorney Journeys*, and it caught on with his law partners and family and friends like us.

“Ah,” said Gwen, pointing at the sheet in Emily’s hand, “so this one just came in. Is he still hiking?”

“Nah,” said Emily. “He stopped Labor Day weekend. Had to get back to the grind.” She looked at the page, a sad memory in her expression.

Becca reached and gently pulled the paper from Emily. “These two have to leave pretty soon, Em, and you can digest this later. It’s a long one. But let me go over a few highlights.” She looked at the page, ignoring Emily’s look of protest. “It’s his first installment since right after he left the trail in September.” She looked at Gwen. “He didn’t do the whole thing but did hike for five months and completed over fifteen hundred miles.”

“Wow,” said Gwen. “That’s impressive.” She turned to Adam. “Did you know him?”

“Sure did. I was the one that drove him and Emily, I mean Scorpion, that’s her trail name, up to Maine.”

“Trail name?”

“Adam,” interjected Mitch, “you did a poor job of educating Gwen on the ins and outs of trail life.”

Adam laughed. “Guilty.” He turned to Gwen. “A trail name is a nickname that hikers go by. Emily was, or is, Scorpion. Jaxson was Red Squirrel. Sarah who hiked with them was Pebble. On the ride home, I’ll tell you how they got those names.”

Becca rattled the sheet to gain attention, a technique she used to gain a class’s attention while a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University—and more recently at her community education center, called CenterEd, in Jefferson. “It says that this is his...fortieth *AJ* of the year. At the end, he hints that there may be more this year.”

“If he hits the trail again, I’m there in a heartbeat,” said Emily. “I miss it.” She looked out the window. “It’s a little cool today, though, but the sky is clear.”

“Cool?” said Zeke. “The roads have ice on them and no telling what the trail is like.”

Becca persisted. “Jaxson talks about a number of the people he knew on the trail, but I’ll read the parts about us: *Scorpion (Emily) is staying at the Thirdway Lodge in Virginia. She’s helping her Aunt Becca with some classes in nearby Jefferson. Emily’s short-term plan is to work there and at Thirdway. She’s posted a sign at Thirdway advertising an informal AA meeting for hikers or guests (she told me I could mention this). Her Uncle Mitch, of course, still runs the lodge. His old company asked him to come back for two weeks over the winter to give newer employees a historical perspective on their technologies and products. History can be a valuable teacher. Emily’s also helping her father, Zeke, fix up Thirdway’s cabins. My daughter, Laine, drove up to see Emily earlier this month and they had a good visit and a few short hikes. Laine is thinking of entering law school after college. What can I say? You try to raise your kids right and can’t really control the crazy decisions they make.*”

Becca paused at the laughter.

“Did he mention Sarah?” asked Zeke. He looked at Gwen. “Sarah, Jaxson, and Emily hiked a lot of the trail together, but Sarah broke her leg before she finished.”

“Oh, no,” said Gwen.

Emily looked irritated at the memory of the assault, as she preferred to think of it.

“Next paragraph,” said Becca. *“Back to the trail names. You may be surprised I didn’t list Pebble (Sarah) as a finisher. You will remember her from many of the AJs in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Sadly, she broke her leg descending southbound into Hot Springs. Actually, someone else broke her tibia by tumbling into and over her. A clear case of hiker negligence and personal injury, which I will not pursue—although I offered.”*

Emily laughed. “Good for Jaxson.” Her face clouded. “Still can’t believe that fucking guy bowled her over. Then he just kept going. Bastard. I want to get to Hot Springs and kick his ass. Whoever he is.” She looked at Becca who was ready to continue. “Sorry. Potty mouth.”

“As for completing the trail, I think I will someday, but I’ll take it as it comes. Laine and I are talking about a weeklong hike together next summer to knock out a chunk, starting at my last southbound white blaze in Pennsylvania.”

Becca put down the page. “There’s a lot more, but those are the highlights.” Emily snatched it up and went to a comfortable chair in the game corner, forgetting her newly poured coffee.

“Thanks for reading that, Becca,” said Adam. “I’m on his mailing list and I’ll look at the rest when we get back.” He glanced at a fidgeting Gwen. “And we should leave soon.”

“Yeah.” Gwen stood. “We need to head home for the holidays. Parents await.”

“Be careful out there,” said Mitch, “I got a text from Rick about a bad accident in the middle of the night. It’s cleared up, but I bet the roads are still slick.”

“Thanks,” said Adam, standing. “Zeke, did you have any trouble last night?”

Zeke spoke through a mouth filled with muffin, a cranberry clinging to his lower lip. “Not a lick, but it *was* a little icy.”

“We came the back roads,” called out Emily. “Fewer crazies, especially on New Year’s Eve.” She stood and rejoined the group.

“We left Roanoke right after dinner,” said Gwen. “Say, it was good meeting your friends Katie and Nick. We tried to find you again at the Christmas display. It’s called the Hotel Roanoke, right?”

“Yep. Easy to lose touch in there,” said Emily. “It was sardines.”

“How was the dance?” Gwen looked curiously at both Emily and Zeke.

“It was a blast!” Emily perked up.

“And no drinking? Not even before?”

“Not that I know of,” said Zeke, “but we don’t breathalyze. It’s a safe place for alxies on New Year’s Eve.”

“You wouldn’t believe how fun it was,” said Emily. “I loved sober dances back in Texas. And Dad can cut a rug, but not sure about that gator thing he does.”

“Don’t demonstrate!” Becca held out her hand as a grinning Zeke rose. “These two have to get going even though I tried again to get them to stay for the big breakfast later.”

“I’ll try to hit the monthly feast in the spring,” said Adam. “But please tell Rick, Marilyn, and Mrs. Olsen hello for me.”

Becca nodded.

Adam, grateful for the clear road, reminisced as he and Gwen descended the hill from Thirdway. He switched to a local bluegrass station he’d come to like last summer. *What would my homies think?* He looked at an incredulous Gwen. “What?”

She started laughing. “My God, a summer in the country and you’re a black hillbilly.”

He grinned and tapped on the steering wheel in time to the music. “I’m feeling a blood relationship to these hills.”

She cocked her head. “Do tell.”

“You go back a ways and some of my slave ancestors, like my great-great-grandparents, might have been owned by the grand-somethings of some of these country folk.”

“Grand somethings, like wizards?”

He chuckled. “That came later after we got all uppity and wanted human dignity and the vote. Imagine.”

“So, you think you’re related to some crackers, like me?”

He laughed. “It happened. A lot more than people think. Look at Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Not sure what that was. Seemed like some real feelings and not rape like most all the other...um, encounters. But well, maybe it can’t be called love since she was still an enslaved person.”

“Yeah, if you can’t refuse, then I can’t call it love.” Gwen looked serious. “Are you upset about maybe being related to whites?”

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“No. I mean, there were atrocities no doubt. Reprehensible. And I was just joking about being related to hillbillies. Sure, I might have some Anglo blood. A little cream in the coffee. I don’t care.” He looked at her. “And I don’t want to dig too deep and find out I’m related to you.”

“Oh, Daddy would have even more of a cow! But he’s grown to like you. Wiring his shed was brilliant.”

“I like him, too. And he said we’re having black-eyed peas, cornbread, cabbage, and corned beef today.”

“He likes to keep his cultural-tradition bases covered. And that was even before we met. Although he might be trying a bit too much.” She rested her hand on his thigh.

Adam’s thumb kept time with the banjo music and Gwen bobbed her head, admiring the stark beauty of the defoliated Blue Ridge Mountains. They turned on Route 11 and soon were on the entrance ramp to I-81, heading north toward Lexington and Staunton to catch I-64 east through Rockfish Gap, past Charlottesville, and finally home to Richmond.

Gwen was still looking out her window when Adam whistled in surprise. She turned and her eyes widened.

Adam slowed reflexively, staring at the southbound traffic, if parked cars counted as traffic. “Hope it’s not serious.”

Five minutes and three miles later, Gwen glanced over at the still backed-up cars inching along and crossed herself. “What a way to start a year.”

Doddering Duo

“Do what? Hike the AT?” Isha looked incredulous. “Mom, Dad, that’s crazy. Sorry, but you’re how old?”

“You know perfectly well how old we are,” said Hilma. “And we’re not hiking the whole AT, just a section.”

“Oh.” Isha seemed placated. “Maybe like a day hike?”

“Maybe a hundred miles,” added Tim with a smile.

Isha looked across the table at her parents, pulled the fork from her mouth, specks of egg clinging to the tines, and pointed it at her father. “And you. What is this, a midlife crisis to prove you don’t need that hip replacement? And aren’t you even too old for a midlife crisis?”

“Maybe so,” he shrugged. He leaned back, cradled his mug of coffee, and smiled at his wife. “Maybe I just want to prove I can keep up with her.”

“Ha,” Hilma scoffed, ruffling his gray and black hair as she stood. “I’ll be lucky to keep up with you—mister five-mile-a-week runner.” She went to the stove and used a spatula to scoop a pile of scrambled eggs onto her plate. She offered a second helping by gesturing with the spatula toward the pan and then at both her husband and daughter, who shook their heads no.

Isha looked concerned and was trying to form her worry into more convincing words.

Hilma sat and picked up a butter knife to apply a layer on her whole wheat toast. She pointed the utensil at her daughter, a common gesture in the Gundersen-Singh household in their Boston suburb. “Ishaana,” Hilma drew out the Punjabi name, sounding like Tim’s father, emphasizing the long *e* sound of the first syllable and the silent *h*. “Eees-ah-nah, while you’ve been busy with work and JJ, you may not have noticed our long daily walks in the greenbelt and long hikes on the weekends. We’ve even gone on two fifteen-mile overnight hikes at the Blue Hills Reservoir.”

Isha humphed and took a bite from her banana. “Fair play, Mom, but I see how you both hobble around after those little forays, and now you’re talking about a lot longer hike. Are you up for it?” She angled the fruit toward her father. “And you, Dr. Orthopedically Challenged?”

Hilma and Tim looked at each other and laughed.

Isha started to grin. “It’s all a joke, isn’t it? Nice one, although you’re three months early for April Fools’.”

“No, Isha,” said Tim, pronouncing her name as they normally did, in rhyme with Keesha. “We’re laughing because I predicted you would dust

off the Dr. Ortho-challenged label when we told you.” It was a five-year-old joke. Hilma Gunderson was a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine and operated as an orthopedic surgeon. Isha referred to her as Doctor Orthopedist, so when Timothy Singh, with his doctorate in mathematics, started having hip problems, Isha called him Doctor Orthopedically Challenged.

Isha was not deterred. “So, you, the doddering duo, are serious? It’s not just a New Year’s Day resolution that will be forgotten tomorrow?”

“Serious as a femoral head collapse, my dear.”

“Not funny, Dad. If that thing goes while you’re climbing up a rock face, it’ll be bad news.”

“What’s a female head claps, Grandpa?” came a young voice behind a granola-filled spoon pointed at Tim.

Jamaal Jr. had been busy eating and reading his cereal box.

“Femoral head collapse,” said Tim slowly, enunciating each syllable. He waited for the reply he knew would come. It was their learning pattern.

“Fem-oh-rawl head co-lapse.”

“JJ, the ten-year-old orthopedist,” said Hilma.

“You want to take his question about the co-lapse, Mother Orthopod?” asked Isha with a smile.

“JJ,” said Hilma as she stepped to the counter beside their stove and pulled a polished wooden ladle out of a ceramic jar. She bobbed the ladle and got his full attention. She flipped it so the bowl was on top. “The handle of this ladle is like your thigh bone. It’s called your femur.” Jamaal Jr. stood and grabbed his thigh, feeling the bone, and looked at Hilma for the next lesson. Hilma smiled and Isha glowed at the interaction between her son and mother. Tim sipped coffee, content.

“Now,” Hilma cupped her hand on top of the bowl, “this is like your hip joint.” She kept her cupped hand steady and moved the ladle’s shaft back and forth, rotating the bottom of the bowl in her palm. JJ started stepping in place. “That’s right,” she said. “The long handle of the ladle is moving like your thigh bone and where my hand meets the bone is called your hip joint.”

Isha, remembering the same lesson twenty years earlier, stood and grabbed a hip, a thumb on the front of her upper thigh, and moved that leg up and down. Jamaal mimicked his mother. Tim didn’t join the march.

“You got it, Jamaal!” said Hilma. “That’s your hip joint, and this,” she let go of the ladle bowl and pointed to the handle, “is the part of your femur that is called your femoral shaft.”

He smoothly repeated “fem-oh-ral shaft” and grabbed his leg mid-thigh.

“It’s also called your thigh bone,” said Isha, who then sang, “Thigh bone’s connected to the hip bone!”

JJ smiled and nodded, but his eyes stayed on his grandmother.

“And this,” Hilma pointed at the upside-down bowl, “would be your femoral head. It’s round, like a head.” He moved his hand up to the top of his thigh and looked at her, confused.

“You can’t feel the head,” added Tim. “The hip is a ball-and-socket joint, so the femoral head is the ball, and your grandmother’s palm is the socket.”

“Ball and socket,” JJ repeated. “Where’s the co-lapse?”

“Well,” Hilma pointed the bowl at Jamaal Jr., “it’s like if termites got to this wood.”

“Yuck.” He wrinkled up his face.

“Exactly,” said Tim, tilting the lip of his coffee cup at JJ. “Grandpa’s got termites.”

At the look of horror on the child’s face, Hilma laughed. “Not actual termites, JJ.” He looked relieved.

“But his femoral head, like this bowl. is eaten away a little. If it gets eaten away too much,” she put her palm back over the bowl and pressed, “then it could collapse.” She flattened her hand and pressed onto the ladle bowl. “And then this wouldn’t move smoothly anymore. It would be all rough inside and hurt, too.”

“Could he walk?” asked JJ.

“Good question, and it depends. If it happened suddenly, it might hurt a lot, but he could probably still walk. Enough to manage until we got help.”

“Unless you’re in the wilderness, Ma,” said Isha. She sat down and shook her head. Ever since her husband, Jamaal Sr. died, she felt overly protective of her parents and son.

Tim stood up, flexing his legs. “That’s why we chose Virginia. The AT crisscrosses Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway a lot, all the way from Front Royal to Roanoke. Never too far from an ambulance.”

Isha mouthed “ambulance.”

“We’ll be fine,” said Hilma. “Worst case is that I call some of my old med school colleagues who are still at UVA to come get us.”

Isha looked doubtful. “I’m sure Charlottesville is still far from the trail.” JJ also looked dubious.

“Isha, Jamaal,” said Hilma. “We’ll be fine. We’re training and there’s good cell reception. And we’ll be there in warm weather.”

Section

“Yeah, you guys act like I’m ready for the rocker on the front porch,” said Tim.

“Are we getting a front porch?” asked JJ in earnest.

“It’s a euphemism,” said Tim.

“You fem...?”

“Tomorrow’s lesson, young man,” said Tim, reaching over to ruffle the tight black curls on Jamaal Jr.’s head. *So much like his dad. Damn Afghanistan War. Never even got to meet his son.* “What I’m saying is that I feel healthy. Yes, I have some osteonecrosis,” he saw JJ’s puzzled look. “Next week’s lesson. But I can do this and, more importantly, I want to feel like I can. Midlife crisis or not, it’s a goal.”

“I’m just concerned,” said Isha, slightly abashed.

“And I appreciate it. We’ll be careful and prepared. And if we get cut short, so be it.”

“When are you going?” asked Isha.

Hilma pointed her butter knife at a wall calendar. “Summertime. Maybe you can meet us; bring us some food.”

JJ looked hopeful.

Isha looked skeptical. “Well, I don’t want to enable you.”

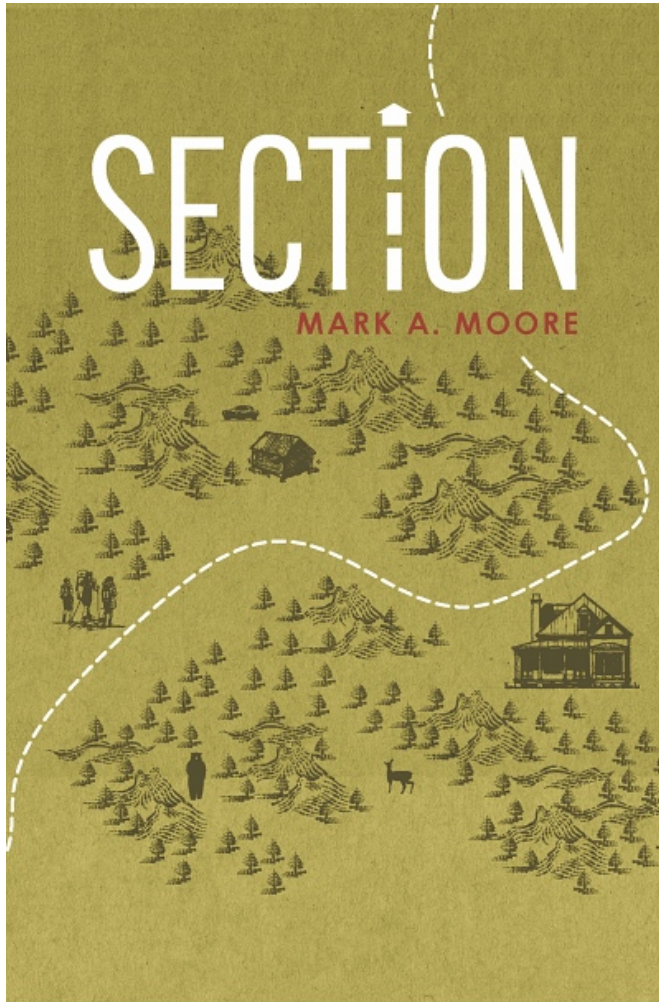
“Sweetheart,” said Hilma, “we’re going regardless, so you’re not enabling.”

Isha was all too familiar with that tone of resolve from her mother.

“And I already have a lodge picked out on the Blue Ridge that’s run by an old friend, so you can meet us there. It’s called Thirdway, and they have rocking chairs on *their* front porch.”

Isha got up, resigned. “Okay, Jamaal, we have some laundry to do before watching the Rose Bowl parade. Let’s clean this table and get going.”

Hilma looked at Tim. “And we have a brisk walk to take, with full packs. This doddering duo is in training.”



A loosely-related group of hikers seek answers and grounding on the Appalachian Trail. Section tells their entangled stories of adventure, reconciliation, romance, justice, and hope and all paths lead to and through the Thirdway Lodge.

SECTION

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