

## The Mountain Man

Damn it, the beeping of my alarm was going off, and it felt as if I had only begun to fall asleep. It was 3:45 am, and what was I doing – going hiking, that’s what, like a crazy person. I let out a slow moan as I begrudgingly rolled myself out of bed. I could hear the sound of my roommate grumbling as she was rolling out of bed with me, there was no way I was going to do this alone.

Everything was dark and quiet. Not just the normal darkness that accompanies the end of a day, somehow, this had a fresher feeling to it. Almost as if I had woken up not knowing the time, I would know that it was morning, just by the smell of the air. It was as if nature just hits a reset button every time the clock strikes midnight.

We were all wide awake as we parked and began to walk towards the trail, probably due to a mix of not getting enough REM sleep and just general excitement. Doing a sunrise hike at MacAfee’s Knob, which is part of the Appalachian Trail (AT), is one experience that any Hokie should do before he or she graduates, and we figured that we had better get it done!

We decided to take the fire trail, (aka the “easier” one), just because we all consider ourselves fairly clumsy and didn’t have much of a desire to clamber up rocks with only a headlamp to guide us. Our adrenalin was pumping and we were on an adventure. Pretty soon, the birds started to wake up, as we were trying to race the sun to the top of the mountain. We might not make it.

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As we neared the top, we could see the sun starting to shine through the trees, blinding us in the process. Even though our hike up the mountain had us sweating, the heat felt good on our skin. Our excitement pushed us to pick up the pace for the last 500 yards, hearts pounding and skin dripping with sweat. I could feel myself starting to smile as I pushed off the last rock on the trail, before hitting the overlook, and just feeling so accomplished.

That feeling of feat was soon diminished by the astonishing sight that was right in front of us; the utter beauty of the New River Valley. There was so much color, seriously, so much color that it didn't even look real. The sun was rising right over Roanoke, so you couldn't see much of the city, but man could you see the mountains. Mountains, on mountains, on mountains, and in between them were rolling hills, some of which even had cute little houses on top, just like the fairytales.

We were not the only ones on top of the mountain that morning, there was a heavily bearded and lean man with a blue Osprey hiking backpack next to a rolled out mat; clearly he had slept here, right on the rock, over night. But boy was he chipper, much perkier than I would have been in his situation. But you could tell that he was just as marveled at the way the light touched the mountains as we were.

"I am so glad I didn't skip this," he said, with a crooked smile on his face as he held up his iPhone to take a picture.

"Would you mind taking a picture of me?" he asked.

"Of course not," I replied.

As I handed the phone back to the mysterious man, I began asking him questions about his time on the AT. Turns out, he was from Germany, which I had figured out from his accent, and he just randomly decided to sell everything he owned and fly out here to hike. Apparently, he just woke up one morning and decided that he didn't love the life he was living anymore, so he decided to commit to figuring out how he could live a life that he would love. The first step in that process was leaving everything familiar behind.

Now, I distinctly remember him specifying why he needed to sell everything that he owned, which of course was one of my first questions.

“If I didn't sell everything, I would have a way out – an escape. I wanted to commit to doing something that would change my life forever, and to do that, I needed to leave behind everything that I had once known. I needed a change, so I sold my house, and here I am.”

This man was smiling during our whole conversation, and you could tell that he enjoyed talking with people and sharing his story, which is why I felt so insignificant when he asked me what my story was.

“I am just a student” I heard myself say, as I continued to explain how we were all Virginia Tech students just enjoying a local hike.

“You are all so young, you have time. Just don't be afraid to take a leap of faith and sell everything you own to become homeless on purpose!” he said with a laugh. I couldn't help but be utterly inspired and in awe of this incredibly courageous young man.

You could see in his eyes that he had seen some tough times; whether those things happened to him personally, I am not sure, but not many people would have the guts to travel

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half way across the world just to figure out who he was, and I couldn't help but to feel proud of him.

I remembered leaving that conversation with one main feeling: I absolutely envied his freedom. He had no obligations, socially or monetarily, and he was just taking his time to see God's creation and figure out his purpose in life. One day, I will have that time to figure out those same questions, and just spend some quality alone time with the trees and the mountains.