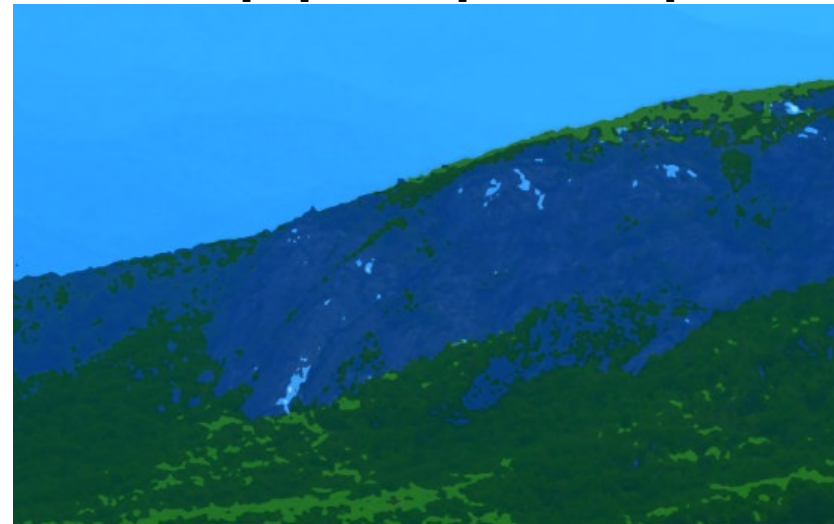


*A NOVELETTE BY MIKE BOZART*



**LOST IN  
LOST COVE**

**an extra-pspatial pSecret pSociety tale**



**Lost in Lost Cove** a novelette by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | June 2018

## **Lost in Lost Cove**

by Mike Bozart

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[[ Convention for the thoughts of the characters in this novelette:

*Adrian's thoughts are in this color/shade.* / *Linda's thoughts are in this color/shade.* / *Daryl's thoughts are in this color/ shade.* / *Wondering man's thoughts are in this color/shade.*

Adrian and Linda were a Caucasian, actively fit, not-that-much-out-of-the-ordinary American couple now in their mid-20s, who had met in 2012 at UNCC (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) in a needing-three-science-hours-to-graduate, elective, fun-fundamentals-of-‘gee-geology?’ class during their senior years. When Adrian whispered to Linda something about not knowing schist from Shinola during an assistant professor’s talk on metamorphic rocks, he won her heart via wry-dyed humor. She guffawed uncontrollably in the two-overhead-fluorescent-lamps-blown shadows, and eventually had to excuse herself from the 222-seat lecture hall on that cold, cobalt-blue-skied February day. The two were now living together in the Kilborne Park area of east Charlotte. They were tentatively thinking about getting married in May of 2017, some 13 months away.

On Friday night, April 15<sup>th</sup>, at 9:29, Adrian’s cell phone lit up and began playing the original Star Wars theme (his annoying-to-Linda ringtone). He answered the call.

“Hey Daryl. What’s up, buddy?” *Wonder what he’s doing now. Simply no telling. Hope he’s not calling from jail wanting bail money.*

“Oh, not much, man. Same old thing up here in the major metropolis of Pineola.” [a tiny town in the northwestern North Carolina mountains, located at the southern junction of US 221 and NC 181] *Adrian probably just got through screwing Linda. No, I bet that she just got through screwing him. She’s a horned-saddle rider all the way. Probably left the lucky boy sore. Bet they’re still going at it like rabbits. No, that frenzy probably ended years ago. / Same old thing? Not sure what the most recent ‘old thing’ was. Lost track. Oh, wait ...*

“Are you still working in real estate?” *Why would he ask such a question? Guess he thinks I’m still flighty. / God only knows what he’s doing now. Hope he’s not trying to recruit me into some pyramid scheme. No, not another MLM [multi-level marketing] scam. Please, dear God, no.*

“Yep, I’m still selling cliff faces to flat-thinking Floridians, Adrian. I price the craggy parcels by the vertical acre.” *Vertical acre. He’s still got his loony, glue-sniffing-induced sense of humor.*

Adrian half-chuckled and then coughed. “Careful there, partner. Real estate fraud will put you in a new home – prison.” *Woah! He really thought I was serious. Apparently my stock with him is still in the crapper.*

“Don’t worry, Adrian; your cautionary advice will be heeded going forward. But, all cliffing [sic] aside, how would you two like to come up tomorrow and do some hiking? The weather will be splendid. Highs in the mid-60s [Fahrenheit; 18 to 19° Celsius] with no rain.” *Did he really say ‘cliffing’? A mountain hike would be great. Could use the exercise. Wonder if Linda will want to go. Probably not.*

“Uh, that sounds very enticing, Daryl. I’ll run it by the better half and get back with you by ten o’clock. Oh, where did you want to meet?” *Wow! He seems genuinely interested.*

“Little Lost Cove Trailhead. It’s south of Roseboro Road near Linville, but on the southeastern side of the Blue Ridge Parkway. It should come up on your map app. I’m looking at it right now on Google Maps.” *Is there a Big Lost Cove, too? There it is. Why is it called Lost Cove? How does one lose a whole cove? What nonsense I’m thinking. Man, I’m still high from that single*

*hit. [of marijuana] Wonder if Daryl still tokes. I bet he does. Early and often, I would wager.*

“Ok, man. Got it. I see that spot now. I’ll be getting back with you shortly to let you know if we’re in. Thanks for calling.”

“Sure. Later.” *What are the odds of them both coming up here tomorrow? 4:5? Nah, probably more like 50-50.*

Adrian walked to the master bedroom, where long-black-haired, 5’-5” (1.65 meters tall), busty, jeans-and-T-shirt-clad Linda was lying on their king-size bed listening to her new, just-received-in-the-mail CD (compact disc): *The Puzzle Master* by The Man from RavCon. *This music makes me feel like I’m in another realm as a nonhuman entity, navigating a hyper-dimension. It’s some kind of surreal game, and the prize is continuance.*

“Get a phone call, honey?” Linda asked as she turned her head to the left to look at dark-brown-haired, 5’-11” (1.80 meters tall), somewhat-bill-nosed Adrian. *Wonder whom he was talking with. Such a strange time for a call. Was it his ex? No, he can’t stand her. Why’d I even think that?*

“Yeah, sure did, hon,” Adrian replied as he took a seat on the side of the wide mattress. *Just maintain a casual tone.*

“Who was it?” she enquired with her penciled eyebrows raised, showcasing her cocoa-brown irises. *Hope she doesn’t flip out when I tell her. / Don’t think it was a female. Maybe just an old drinking buddy. Or, maybe it was his dad. Or, maybe that kooky uncle. Hope not. Jack always gives him crazy ideas.*

“Daryl,” Adrian answered in a relaxed voice. “He invited us to go hiking with him tomorrow. It’s somewhere really cool up in the mountains. It should be fun and interesting. It’s a great, picturesque area of Pisgah National Forest, honey, and the weather will be perfect for hiking tomorrow: not too hot, and not too cold.” *Get ready for the ‘Nah.’ / Who in the world is Daryl? Never heard of anyone named Daryl except for the Daryl Hall of Hall & Oates. ‘Oh-ho, here she comes, she’s a maneater.’ Sally’s song. I should call her this weekend. I bet I forget again.*

“Daryl? I don’t remember ever meeting a Daryl. Who is he?” *Good, she forgot about that crazy night. Oh, that’s right; she was passed-out before Daryl showed up and started acting nutty. Whew! / Hope he’s not some weirdo. Some of his old friends from the west side [of Charlotte] are certifiable, first-order wack-jobs.*

“Oh, just a longtime friend from the old neighborhood,” Adrian calmly stated. “He moved up to the mountains a few years ago. He’s a cool guy. You’ll like him.” *Anticipating a big, fat, juicy Yes vote now. / Maybe. Maybe I won’t.*

“Does he have a girlfriend?” Linda asked out of a sudden wave of curiosity. *Where did that come from? The unfathomable female mind. Oh, it was probably triggered by that sexual psychology course she took her junior year.*

“You know, sweetie, I’m really not sure.” *He’s not sure? Men can be so incurious about each other.*

“Has he ever had a girlfriend?” *Commence the interrogation. I feel like I’m Daryl’s court-appointed attorney.*

“Yeah, I believe so.” *He ‘believes’ so. Whatever!*

“If he’s gay, bisexual, asexual, or pansexual, just tell me. You know that any inclination is fine with me, dear. I’d just like to know. That’s all.” *She’s really missing her calling.*

“I’m pretty sure that he’s heterosexual, hon.” *Hope that satisfies her. / He’s being a coy boy. I’ll let him off the stand.*

“You guys are so damn oblivious, hon. We girls know everything about our female friends.” *Everything?*

Adrian cleared his throat. “So, would you like to go?” *Loverboy really wants to do this. It’s so obvious. Oh, why not? Nothing’s planned for tomorrow. My period is over a week away. It might be fun and adventurous. Might even discover something cool. Why, who knows? Hopefully we don’t cross a mama black bear! Being slowly eaten by a bear. Gosh, that would suck! Oh, just relax. Probably have a greater chance of being struck by lightning. [Statistically, such is the case.]*

After an approaching overdramatic, seven-second pause, Linda smiled. “Ok, I’m game. When do we leave?” *Yes! My strategy worked. For once.*

“I’ll text him now for the details, honey.” *Details. Ha.*

The next, brisk-to-chilly, patchy-radiation-fog morning; they were exiting their two-bedroom, 1½-bath, 1,001-square-foot (93 square meters) house’s taupe-colored side door at 8:13 with knapsacks in hand. They had a 115-mile (185 km), two-hour-and-thirty-three-minute drive in front of them. The agreed-upon meetup time was 11:00 AM sharp.

Traffic was light as they cruised out of the Queen City. Linda quickly fell back asleep. Adrian thought about the day ahead as the white lane-dashes passed by on US 321. He inserted his self-burned CD that he black-felt-tip-pen-titled *Crown Town Cronies*. A novelty-sounding song by The Gamblers Band, *My Neighbor is a Kudzu Vine*, was soon playing. Adrian noticed a wide and tall, tree-devouring patch of the tune-referenced, non-native plant on the right side of the four-lane highway as he heard: ‘It grows three feet [almost one meter] about all the time.’ *Why, it sure does. That invasive eastern Asian vine sure loves the piedmont of the southeastern United States. It’s crazy for the warm, humid climate. Hope Daryl doesn’t get too crazy. Hope he’s not planning on getting totally wasted up there. A little buzz [slight inebriation] would be fine, but I don’t want to be ozoned. [extremely intoxicated] Hope no one gets hurt. Could use a medical situation like another hole in my head. [Adrian had a shunt behind his left ear.] Bet it would take forever to get an ambulance up there. Where would medic even respond from? [Jonas Ridge VFD]*

They had planned to stop at a convenience store for gasoline, drinks and energy bars; and they did so in the sleepy, almost vacant, foothills town of Morganton. It was now 9:55 AM.

“How much farther?” Linda asked while sipping on a chilled, bottled, creamy, vanilla-flavored-coffee concoction.

“Exactly thirty-four miles [54.7 km] and sixty-three minutes. We should be right on time, honey.” *63 minutes!*

“It will take over an hour to go just thirty-four miles?” Linda asked with a disappointed expression.

“Mountain roads, sweetie. Curvy mountain roads.” *I sure wish that he would drop the ‘sweetie’ bit. Maybe I’ll mention it to him later. Don’t want to ruin the vibe. He could get irritable in a flash, and stay that way for the rest of the day. It’s just not worth it. Best to wait until we’re back home.*

They were soon crossing the tea-colored Catawba River on North Green Street (NC 181). After passing the Oak Hill community, the road became a median-less, two-lane highway. The shiny-facets-glimmering-like-mini-mirrors-in-the-still-chilled-though-now-sunlit-asphalt, state-designated, NC DOT (Department of Transportation) scenic byway whipped back and forth like an old, flattened, gray salamander snake. Then at the intersection with Brown Mountain Beach Road, they entered the Pisgah National Forest area. A string of stream-side campgrounds passed by on the left. One of them (Steele Creek) had a tall, light-blue-colored waterslide. *I could see Frank scaling that on his off-road motorcycle. Sure could.*

“Would you slide down that, hon?” Adrian asked his sleepy-once-again, one-quarter-Maltese fiancée. *Woah!*

“No, I don’t think so,” she responded dispassionately. *I sure hope that her energy level picks up for this hike. Most of the trails in that area are rated as strenuous. How can she go back to sleep after drinking all that coffee? Is she immune to caffeine now? / I’ll just close my eyes, and maybe he will stop talking. My anxiety level is rising. I can feel it. Not so sure about this now. Think I should have just let him go alone. Hope we see some other people – decent people – on the trails. Don’t want to be the only ones in the middle of nowhere. And then hear ‘Dueling Banjos’. Yikes!*

As they passed milepost 14 (actually a green metal sign), the highway started to climb more steeply. Dense deciduous woods were on both sides of the winding road. The song titled *Bridge in Amsterdam* by Douglass Thompson was now playing. ‘And the sun is now rising up from the rooftops, and I can’t remember where the hell I am.’ *Ah, that trip to Amsterdam. Wandering around stoned out of my mind in the cool mist. Getting lost. Getting on the wrong tram. Twice! Wonder whatever became of that Slovenian girl in that coffee shop. What was her game? And, what was her name? It began with an ‘S’. Was her name Stephanie? Her impeccable English. Did she stay? Or, did she run off with that spy-like Austrian dude? Did she get her poetry published? Or, did she lose her mind in the thick of it? Well, we’re really getting into the thick of it right here. What a day for a mountain hike. Wonder if Daryl will be on time. I sure hope so.*

Just after milepost 17, there was a gravel road that quickly descended on the right. Adrian studied it closely as the bluesy-to-spacey instrumental *Euler’s Dream* by Tom Montefusco

warbled through the speakers. *Those seven, cross-me-just-once Prussian bridges. Königsberg in the fall. Before the fall. Before the decline. Before Sovietification. [sic] An eerily decaying chord ripples the old, seen-about-it-all Pregel River. A fabulous Baltic ride. A rising Baltic tide. Yeah, that identity equation truly was [Leonhard] Euler's grand slam. He touched all the bases with that one. I read that somewhere. Almost could imagine seeing the ghost of Euler on a day like today, lurking behind a tree with his right eye closed. Wow! That looks like where wild-man Sam and I went hiking. It is. Was it in 2007? Or, was it in 2008? Sure was a cold day. Almost got frostbite. Wonder what Sam is doing right now. Probably his fifth bong hit. [an inhalation of water-pipe-filtered marijuana smoke] Such a consummate stoner. [habitual marijuana smoker] He sure is a good guitarist, though. Wonder what his sister is doing right now. Probably Steve. Or, her oh-my-dear John. Someday I should try to write my thoughts down. Maybe make poems out of them. Or, song lyrics! Yeah, that's it. That might be right up Daryl's alley. He could lay down an ambient drone and I could recite the words with some kind of effect on my voice. Maybe a slight delay and/or echo. Need to run this idea by him. Maybe add loops of bird calls. And ...*

"How much farther?" a very-well-known-to-him-by-now female voice blasted in his right ear, instantly ending his mental meandering, as their black 2009 Jeep Grand Cherokee passed milepost 20.

"Twelve miles [19.31 km] and thirty-one minutes, princess." *Gosh, this is taking forever. The constant curves are nauseating. It might be nice to be an actual princess. 'Ladies and gentleman, I present to you, Linda, the baroness of Baronne.'* [a made-up place] *Though, is Adrian aspiring enough to be my prince? I can tell that he is content to be working indefinitely at his cousin's warehouse for \$48K a year with small bonuses that barely offset inflation. Yeah, he's quite fine with that modest salary and our small starter home. But to him, that's our end house. At least for our working lives – probably four decades – in Charlotte. Yeah, I can tell that he doesn't want more. In his mind, he's set. He's got me, a house next to a park with a disc-golf course, and a job where he can goof off half the day. He doesn't seem to want to have kids, either. But, I want at least one. Not sure if we'll make it. I think I want more. I know I do. Maybe I can encourage him. Motivate him. Change him. Push him. Harder. We'll see.*

"What an insane road!" Linda exclaimed twenty-three seconds later as Adrian negotiated another tight bend. *What did she expect? There's no straight route up any mountain. Well, maybe if on a funicular. Yeah, like the ones in Pittsburgh. [the Monongahela Incline and the Duquesne Incline in southwestern Pennsylvania] Sure would hate for that thick cable to break. Surely there are safety redundancies. [There are.]*

"Up the Blue Ridge Escarpment we go!" Adrian announced eight seconds later with a generous heap of gusto. *He's really looking forward to this. Wish I were, too. But, I'm not. I'd give anything to be back in bed in Charlotte. Asleep. Dreaming. Oh well, maybe it won't totally suck. Low expectations can easily be exceeded.*

"What's that over there on the right, hon?" *Wow! It's already crowded. 'Wrong time, folks! Nothing luminous to be seen until after dark. Come back after sunset.'*

Adrian continued looking to the southeast at the long, flat-crested, plateau-like, tree-covered



mountain's observation area. "Oh, that's a popular Brown Mountain overlook, my love. Have you ever heard of the famous Brown Mountain Lights?" *The famous what?*

"No, I sure haven't. What kind of lights are they?"

"Orb-like ghost lights," Adrian answered. *Ghost lights? Now, this sounds interesting.*

"What's the source?" Linda promptly asked, eager to know.

"Now, that's the million-dollar question, Linda [pretty in Spanish] Linda." *Linda Linda? Repeating my first name. Why? Don't even ask. Just don't even ask.*

"Have they ever been investigated?" Linda was intrigued.

"Yes, honey, scientists and amateur sleuths have investigated this localized phenomena over the decades. The eldritch, ridge-hoovering lights were first reported over a century ago – way back in 1913." *I bet that there weren't any street lights then. And, very few cars in this area.*

"Well, what do the real scientists have to say?" *The 'real' scientists. Love it.*

"Just ordinary sources of light, like headlights and campfires, refracting off of pockets of fog and/or rising swamp gas. It seems to be reported more often after a rainy day."

"Any chance of rain today?" Linda asked, hoping that Adrian would answer in the affirmative.

"No, none, honey. There's a zero percent chance of precipitation today." *Darn. / I just know that she wants to come back to that overlook and look for those lights tonight. I guess we could stop for a few minutes. Why not? Might even see something. No need to rush back. Nothing to do on Sunday, and Charlotte isn't going anywhere. Wonder where that elderly gent, who I met back in 2009 on that vista point, is right now. Is he still alive? No way of knowing.*

The conversation fizzled out. Soon they were passing a dirt road on the right that led to the Upper Creek Falls parking lot. *That sure was a fun time. Those beer-drinking Asian girls in bikinis that Sam and I met on the rocks. Where are they now? Didn't I hear something about the taller one going back to China? Maybe she's happily married now in Hong Kong. The shorter one said that she was having boyfriend trouble in Glen Alpine. [a small township just west of Morganton] Was that a possible green light that I blew? Or, was it a STOP sign that I wisely obeyed? And, that swing over the upper-upper waterfall. That redheaded guy and his presumed Amerasian son on that swing. Howling and joking. And then laughing when the rope broke. They were lucky to hit the cold water – and not that big, hard, slanting rock. Wait. Did the rope really break? Or, did they almost wait too long to release from the rope as it swung back? No. The rope partially broke near maximum height, and they bailed. Wow! My memory is already half-shot. And, that three-generation, oh-so-harmonious, Vietnamese-American family all gathered around that hand-built, stones-cobbled-together pool. Had they already corralled an inattentive, sandy-bottom-resting catfish? Were they going to cook and eat it right there? A scene in every section of the river that day. Such a bizarre life this is. Humans are some mighty strange creatures, and I don't exclude myself. / *What in the world is he thinking about now? Something flaky on the edges, I'm sure.**

“Two spectacular waterfalls over there, hon,” Adrian finally informed. “I hiked them with Daryl six or seven years ago.”

“You never told me that,” Linda retorted. *Huh? Her mood is not good. I think that she’s worried about the upcoming hike. Yeah, I can feel her anxiety.*

“Well, you never asked, hon. It was just the two of us. Some majestic hiking, but nothing remarkable happened. Just a day hike – an up and back.” *Nothing remarkable. Up and back. Hmmm ...*

“Who did you ‘up and back’, Romeo?” *What in the world?*

“No one, honey. Sheez.” *Got him.*

“Just checking your reaction. You can relax now, hon. You passed the test.” *Why is she digging at me so much? Hope she’s now done with the inquiry.*

“You know, honey, maybe you should be looking at law school.” *Ah, yes, if we only had the money.*

“Why do you say that, Mr. Dravonowski?” [Adrian’s last name] *Yeah, I could see her strutting around in front of the judge and jury in her form-hugging, bright-red skirt and white blazer. Is she going to be happy with me long-term as a purchasing manager? I’m not a corporate-ladder-climber type. Well, she probably already knows that. ‘Women just know these things.’ That’s what Janet said. God rest her soul. She should have known better than to get mixed up with a raging cokehead. [cocaine addict]*

“You would make a great prosecutor, or a rapier-witted defense attorney,” Adrian replied after an awkward pause. *Damn straight I would. What is really on his mind?*

“No, honey, I’m not a lawyer type. Courtrooms give me the creeps.” *Sweet little lies keep the world going ‘round. And keep our relationship intact.*

Soon they were passing a freshly painted, wooden, green sign with white letters on the right, next to an unlined, gate-closed-and-padlocked asphalt road.

“Ah, Upper Creek Acres,” Adrian announced. “Still some good lots in there for not a whole lot of money, hon. Could you live up here someday?” *No fucking way!*

“No, dear, I’m not cut out for that much isolation and solitude. I’m afraid that I’d go nuts.” *And, he would, too. He just doesn’t know it. Yet. / Not me. I’d love to move up here when we retire, if not sooner. Maybe we are not really that compatible after all. Should we really be getting married? ‘If you have any doubts, don’t do it, son.’ Dad’s wise words. He should know. Probably why he never remarried. I can tell that he is a marriage skeptic. Oh, but no one woman will ever be a perfect match. Linda’s ultra-cool, attractive, and smart. If we make it to our early 30s, we should be fine and settled. Maybe push the wedding date out further. Yeah, just delay it. Delay, delay, delay.*

A few minutes later they were passing through the Jonas Ridge community, which primarily

consisted of a Marathon gasoline station/convenience store, a stamp-size post office, and a snow-tubing slope that had closed for the season over a month ago.

As NC 181 began to run parallel with the Blue Ridge Parkway (just off to the left, well within eyesight), the maundering instrumental *Beyond the Gate* by Pax Imperium arrested the sonic attention of the vehicle's two occupants. *Hope we get way beyond the gate – the gate of tedium – today. Hope I get new ideas from this upcoming hike. This song is already giving me some. Spaces and places. Spaces in places. Odd paces with old shoelaces. / Hope we don't get stopped by a locked NFS [National Forest Service] gate like we did down in the Brevard area last summer. Hope this Daryl dude did his homework.*

Adrian then slowed the Jeep down and turned right onto Pittman's Gap Road, a paved, two-lane feeder to mountain-ridge residences. As they rounded a sweeping left curve and passed Rhododendron Run on the right, Linda unleashed her habitual question in her usual monotone.

"How much farther?" *I knew it was coming.*

"Six miles [9.65 km] and twenty-two minutes, my sexy copilot." *That was very nice of him. But, I bet that he just said that to calm me down. He knows that my ire is growing with the length of this never-ending, serpentine journey. Twenty-two minutes to go just six miles. Talk about slow-ass travel.*

They remained silent as Adrian swerved and curved through the sparsely populated residential area. The still-paved lane changed names; they were now on Clarkton Road. And then, after a triangular intersection, another name change; they were now on Mortimer Road, burrowing deeper into the dense, mostly hardwood, now-becoming-green-everywhere-once-again forest. *A day just budding with possibilities. It's going to be a most memorable one. I can already tell.*

After a sharp turn to the right at a white, square-steeped, wood-frame church, the paved road changed to compacted gravel. Then the quite-easily-could-be-imagined-to-be-gnome-inhabited forest passageway descended and became Old Mortimer Road (FS 464). A sand-and-gravel parking area appeared on the right with two vacated cars. Across from it was the beginning of the trail that led up to Big Lost Cove Cliffs. *Looks like some hikers are already on the trails. Hopefully no more than four. / I'm so glad that there are other people out here. Though, I know that Adrian wishes otherwise. He's really not a people person.*

"We're getting close now, honey," Adrian assured Linda. *I'll believe it when we're actually there.*

"Ok, dear." *She hasn't enjoyed this drive at all. Hopefully her mood improves once we start hiking. Sure hope so.*

After several hairpin turns, the name changed again; they were now on still-gravel Pineola Road (still FS 464). A minute later they were passing the trailhead for Little Lost Cove Cliffs. After going past the gray, humongous-boulder-stacked cliffs on the right, Adrian made a very hard – practically a switchback – left onto another gravel road (FS 464A) that led up to their

point A: Little Lost Cove Trailhead. The NFS gate was open. *Glad that gate wasn't locked. Would have had to walk 4,300 extra feet. [1.31 km] / Great! It's not locked. Thank you, Lord!*

"We've made the turn for home, honey." Adrian announced. "Just two more minutes." *Thank God!*

After fording a small, very shallow, flat-bottomed wash, and coming out of a hemlock-lined, left-hand curve, Adrian spied the little dirt parking area (actually a primitive campsite) about 200 feet (61 meters) ahead. There was only one motor vehicle in it: a 2011 pacific-blue Toyota RAV4. *Yes, that's it – that's Daryl's car. He's here! What time is it? 10:59. Perfect. We hit it right on the dot. And, it's only us here. Excellent.*

Adrian parked their Jeep about four feet (1.2 meters) to the right of Daryl's crossover SUV (sport utility vehicle). He looked over his left shoulder. Blonde-haired Daryl's head was bent down. He was taking a mighty draw off of a chrome one-hit (a miniature marijuana pipe). Then Adrian saw Daryl exhale a giant plume of grayish blue smoke. *Wake and bake. Nothing has changed.*

Daryl then looked at Adrian and gave him a thumbs-up while laughing. *So, he's already high as a kite. / Adrian's exactly on time. 11:00 AM. Amazing.*

"Is that guy him, hon? Is that dude your friend Daryl?" *He looks about the same. Hope he doesn't go overboard today.*

"Yeah, that's him, honey. Looks like he just had his brunch bowl." *Or, maybe his second brunch bowl. / Great. Another stoner pal of Adrian's. I can't hike very far when I'm high. I may just pass on it. Don't want to become a liability.*

Adrian and Linda exited their vehicle and walked over to the driver's side window of the mud-splattered RAV4. The windows were partially fogged-up.

Daryl lowered his window. "Good to see you two again," he stated with a big grin. *'You two'? I've never met this guy. / Why did Daryl have to say 'you two'? Now Linda will be suspicious the rest of the day. / She sure is a cute, sexy thing. Even sexier than on that night. I bet that Adrian can barely keep up with her.*

"Likewise," Adrian replied. "How have you been doing up here, man?" *Wonder where this guy lives. Did Adrian tell me that he lives in an old single-wide trailer on the Linville River? Or, was that someone else? Not sure. Don't ask.*

"Better than I would be doing down in the city," [of Charlotte] Daryl answered. *Not sure what he means by that. / He is kind of handsome. He must have a girlfriend hidden away. I bet that he dates a waitress at a nearby restaurant.*

Daryl then got out of his vehicle. He shook Adrian's hand, and then hugged Linda. *That handshake was way too formal. Very peculiar. / That was weird. It's like he knows me. But, from where? / This should be an unforgettable day.*

"Have you eaten yet?" Adrian asked Daryl.

“Yeah, man, I put a stack of pancakes and sausage down the hatch at 10:15. I’m all carbed-up and ready to go.” *Sausage? I guess the vegan phase has already worn off.*

“Ok, just give us a minute or two to munch down some protein bars,” Adrian said as he began walking back to their Jeep. “I’ll get your backpack out, hon,” he said to Linda as he neared the driver-side door.

“Ok, thanks, honey,” Linda replied while looking back at Adrian. Then she turned her head back around and smiled at a staring-at-her-as-if-she-were-naked Daryl. *He obviously likes me. At least in an animalistic sense. Typical young male horndog. / My boy sure has a hottie.*

Daryl smiled back. “Ever done any mountain hiking, Linda?”

“Oh, yeah,” she blurted. “But mostly down in the Asheville area.”

“That’s a sublime sector, too,” Daryl responded. *Sector?* “More waterfalls down there it seems. However, there are several nice ones in this Lost Cove area.”

“What brought you up here?” Linda bluntly asked Daryl. *What a question. She’s direct.*

“The water.” Daryl chuckled for a few seconds. “Just kidding. Oh, I just like cooler weather and shady forests. The low-land summers are just too hot for me.” *I believe him, I guess, but he’s leaving something out – something important. I can feel the omission.*

Adrian then put Linda’s green backpack straps over her pink-sweater-covered shoulders and made the necessary adjustments. “You’re all set, my love. Oh, here’s your energy bar.”

“Thanks, dear.” Linda then began to eat her hiking fuel. “It sure is a beautiful, refreshingly crisp spring day in the Blue Ridge.” *Indeed it is. / Without a doubt.*

“Truly,” Daryl concurred. “My SUV’s outside thermometer reads 57 degrees. [Fahrenheit; 14° Celsius] That’s A+ hiking weather in my book.” *His book? Is he a writer? / Wonder if Daryl is writing again. Thought he swore it off. Said that it was making him crazy. Or crazier. But, don’t writers write to avoid going crazy? He has always been an odd one.*

Linda and Adrian finished their calorie-rich bars and gulped down some energy drinks. They then checked to make sure that their vehicle was completely locked. Daryl did the same.

“Well, I guess that we’re now all set for an epic hike,” Adrian proclaimed. “Lead the way, Daryl.” *Epic? Oh, it will be epic alright.*

“Here, each of you take one of these pills,” Daryl insisted with his right palm extended. “Don’t worry, friends; it’s pretty mild. It boosts your clarity. You’ll have keener thoughts. Might even have a million-dollar idea. I got a great insight on how to innovate my real estate website last time. It has really paid off.” *Hope it’s not acid. [LSD] That would be too much for this situation. / Boosts your clarity? Sounds like Adderall.*

“Is it Adderall, Daryl?” Linda asked.

“No, it’s not Addy,” [slang for Adderall] Daryl replied.

“Is it acid?” Adrian quickly asked, looking at the two, white, oblong, unmarked tablets.

“No, it’s nothing like that kind of high voltage,” Daryl assured. “It’s a much tamer psychoactive.”

“Ok, I’ll try it,” Linda announced as she plucked and gobbled a pill. *Wow! I can’t believe that she took one. / If they can take them and function, I can, too. And, some mental clarity would be most welcome. I bet it’s just an Adderall clone.*

“Well then, I’m in, too,” Adrian asserted as he grabbed the remaining one. *Hope this doesn’t get too weird. Hope I don’t become discombobulated. / Hope I don’t have to babysit Adrian. Hope he doesn’t get too zoned-out like the last time.*

“Excellent,” Daryl said with detectable glee. “Now, don’t worry; you won’t get lost in your thoughts.” *Wish that he wouldn’t have said that. Infamous preliminary words. / Sure hope not. And, sure hope that we don’t get lost out in these woods. Already flashing between zero and one bars – virtually no cell reception.*

Their hike then commenced. They walked back down the old logging road a few paces and turned right, marching over several pushed-up-by-a-bulldozer dirt mounds designed to restrict motor vehicle traffic. The old roadbed quickly became just a footpath as it curved past some minor, not-totally-lost coves, crossing a few trickling tributaries on its sinuous way. After a few more minutes, Little Lost Cove Creek soon became audible, splashing down below.

At one half-mile out (.8 km), the glen-inset creek got much noisier, as the first (upper) waterfall’s plunge pool could now be heard.

“This little, unmarked deer path leads right to the top of the upper drop of Little Lost Cove Falls,” Daryl confidently informed. “It’s a little steep, so hold onto the trees as we descend.” *Please, dear God, no medical-attention-needed-in-a-hurry mishap. / Wow! He’s not kidding. Do deer really use this vertiginous trail? Probably just crazy hikers – like us.*

The rhododendron-lined path dropped precipitously to a small ridge just above the upper falls. There was now some surveyor’s flagging tape on the lower tree limbs. The both-hands-required trail led to the base of the upper drop, right after the junction with an old logging road. The last 20 feet (six meters) down to the upper falls’ base was extremely steep. *This is way more dangerous than I thought. Must be careful. Must stay wary. / Man, without these roots for footholds, this trail would be impassible. / Looks like they’re doing ok. Linda likes challenges.*

From the base of the upper falls, the three of them could almost see the lip of the lower cascade. Linda then embarked on a hair-raising, stream-side descent.

“No, Linda, we can’t take such a direct route,” Daryl warned. “We’ll just go back up to that logging road. It gently winds down to the base of the lower falls.”

“That’s a big relief, Daryl,” Linda replied. “It was looking kind of scary. Too risky without ropes.” *No doubt. / Damn right! That descent is certain suicide. No ambulance needed – just send a casket.*

They would take the old logging road all the way down the slope to where it ended, which was very near Little Lost Cove Creek’s confluence with the larger Lost Cove Creek that flowed

down from the northwest. They walked downstream a little ways and then worked their way back up the smaller creek to the base of the lower section of the two-part Little Lost Cove Falls.

The hiking trio then stopped to admire the sylvan scenery. The pills had started to take neural effect. Their mouths were closed, but their minds were now all-gates-wide-open. *What a place. What a day. Glad we came. This two-phase waterfall doesn't warrant a five-star rating itself, but the overall setting surely does. Immersed in such a pristine forest. It will be verdantly opaque in another month. How many people have stood right here? The exact number. Could it ever be known? Or, even calculated? As what precisely defines 'right here'? What are the exact dimensions? Down to the millimeter. [0.04 inches] The two-feet or one-foot in-bounds rule? Who was the first Cherokee to set eyes on this? When? What was the exact date and time? What was he or she thinking on that day? A personal-safety-and-welfare-and-our-family's-survival-is-paramount kind of thought? Or, just a why-won't-my-lazy-mate-do-such-and-such? kind of thought. Man, I'm feeling that pill inside my skull now. No doubt about it. / It almost seems like I've been here before. Wait, have I? No, it's just the omnipresent mountain laurel and rhododendron. These evergreen plants make it look like so many other Appalachian waterfalls. But, exactly which one? Was it Mouse Creek Falls? No. Crabtree Falls? Yeah, that's the one. Already getting some clarity. Wonder if the guys are, too. / Need to really highlight the incredible hiking in this area on my website to move those stubborn homesite lots. Post some sharper pics. Yeah, let's do it tomorrow. Man, I'm on my way. I'm going to make it up here on my terms, and prove all of them wrong. It's already happening. Three closings next week. I'm on a roll. Mountain life is getting good. Getting really good. Must maintain momentum. Must snag that hot Chinese waitress. Is she Chinese or Korean? Is she even available? Maybe she's married to the owner. A mail-order bride? Or, maybe she is, or was, an exchange student at ASU. [Appalachian State University] Need to step up my game the next time I'm in there. The busboy will know. Yeah, I'll ask him. And give him a few bucks for the intel.*

"Want to make a super-scenic loop out of this hike?" Daryl suddenly asked after downing a slug of alkaline water.

"Sure," Linda replied. *She seems to really be enjoying this day now. Her mood has vastly improved. Thank God.*

"Yeah, that sounds good, Daryl," Adrian tacked on. *Wonder what honey is thinking. No telling.*

Daryl then started to slowly lead them back to Lost Cove Creek. No one talked; everyone was still silent-surfing on their own burgeoning swell of thoughts. *If I automate our purchasing process too much, I may write my own pink slip. Charles may be my cousin, but he would love to pocket my salary and benefits, and make up some ass-covering reason for letting me go. No, can't get too lackadaisical at work. / These creeks keep wearing down these mountains, re-carving the valleys. Very slowly, but unrelentingly. They were once over 20,000 feet [6,096 meters] tall according to that geology instructor. In a million years, what will be here? Some lost soul awash in sorrow? Why did I think that? It's that pill. / I can tell that both of them are having a plethora of thoughts. Linda seems more content, though. Adrian seems kind of low-energy, and maybe even a little worried. Maybe there's some issue with he and Linda's*

*relationship. It's nagging at him. He's not sure how to solve it. Maybe he knows that he can't. Maybe he thinks that I'm a better fit for Linda. We'll just see how the next four hours play out. Not going to make any move. Though, her body language sure seems receptive towards me. No, I can't do that to Adrian. What the hell am I thinking? Just focus on that waitress.*

When they got back to Lost Cove Creek, Linda had a bodily function announcement.

"Guys, I have to pee. I'm just going to walk downstream a little ways. I'll catch up with you. Just go ahead. Proceed at the same pace."

"Ok, hon," Adrian said in a flat, completely emotionless tone. *Gosh, he sounds so pensive. Would love to pull him aside for a private chat, but can't really do that now.*

"Sure, Linda," Daryl said. "We'll walk really slow."

"No, keep up the normal pace," Linda restated as she began to dash downstream on the bankside trail. "I'll come running back." *What energy she has. / I think she likes me. She wants to impress me. And show me that she's not a fragile flower.*

When Linda had gone about 40 feet (12.2 meters), she ducked into a patch of witch hazel. She found a small flora-less area and lowered her jeans to urinate. While her bladder emptying was in midstream, she saw a large, dark, husky mammal moving quickly upstream on the path. She parted the nearby rhododendron for a better view. It was an adult black bear. This mama bear was heading for Adrian and Daryl. She quickly got re-zipped and thought about what to do. *If I scream, the bear will come after me. And most likely attack/kill me. We must be in her territory. Maybe she has cubs close by. Probably so. God, I hope they don't get killed! Surely, I should do something. But, what? My cell phone has absolutely no reception. And, I forgot my pepper spray. Darn it! I'm useless. Why did I have to think about a bear attack? If I didn't think such a thought, would this even be happening?*

Suddenly a male voice was shouting. It was Adrian's.

"Linda, there's a bear after us. Keep going downstream. Don't come this way. We'll lead it away. Go downstream!" *Oh, no! / Hope she wasn't attacked. Dear God, not that. / Shit just got real. Really real. Life and death in the forest.*

Adrian's repeating command faded, as the distance between he and Linda was increasing. He was now running upstream with Daryl a stride in front.

The mature black bear, which could easily outrun the men, was not going at full speed. The mama bear just seemed intent on running them out of her area. However, Daryl and Adrian weren't certain about that, and were sprinting as fast as they could. They both would occasionally look back and see the bear's menacing, enraged face, only 15 feet (4.6 meters) behind them. *Holy shit! It's still chasing us. / That bear is pissed. Must run faster.*

They soon came up to where the old logging road on the left tied into the trail. It was decision time. The Eastern American black bear was maintaining the same following distance.

"Don't take it!" Daryl barked. "The bear would easily catch us going upslope. Let's just keep running this way." *He's right.*



“Ok, man,” Adrian replied, now gasping for oxygen. *Holy fuck! Why did this have to happen? / My boy doesn't sound good. Hope he doesn't have a heart attack.*

“I'm going to take the trail across the creek,” Daryl then declared. “It's probably better to split up. You keep going straight; keep running upstream, Adrian.” *Not sure about this plan, but maybe he knows better. Anyway, no time to argue.*

“Ok,” Adrian acknowledged as he exhaled, nearing exhaustion. *Is this really happening? Yes! This is as real as it gets. Keep running! Or perish!*

And with that, Daryl curved to the right with the trail and soon began sloshing his way across a shallow ford in the creek. He was afraid to look back. *That's the bear splashing. It's almost on me. Must go faster! It really is a matter of life and death now. Run, boy, run!*

Adrian continued to follow the creek upstream on a faint fox path. However, his speed was slowing. *My battery is almost shot. I'm done for. I just know it. This is where it ends for me.*

Seventeen seconds later, and now almost totally spent, Adrian came to a halt and looked behind him. There was no bear chasing him. There was nothing but a mountain stream gurgling over a riffle zone. His heart was still racing. *Jesus effing Christ! Where did that bear go? Maybe it decided to chase Daryl. Wonder how he is. Has he been caught? Is he being eaten right now?! What a grisly thought. Gosh, please let's not have a medical crisis way out here in the middle of nowhere. 'God, if you're there, show us some mercy. We're not bad people. If you let us escape from this one unharmed, I'll start going to church again. I promise.' Guess it's worth a try. [Adrian had become agnostic over the last few years.]*

After sitting quietly on a fallen fir tree for nine minutes, Adrian began to cautiously make his way downstream on the not-so-well-worn path. There were no human voices, except for the one in his head that was conjuring up a slew of unsavory scenarios. *Oh please, let Daryl be ok. And please, let Linda be safe. Wonder how Linda is doing. I'll try to call her now.*

Adrian felt his left-front jeans pocket, where he typically kept his smaller-than-most smartphone. It wasn't there. Then he felt his right-front pocket. No luck there, either. He freaked out for a few seconds. Then he realized where the phone was. *Darn it! I left it on the console in the Jeep. Yeah, I can see it lying there. I never grabbed it. Oh brother, what an idiot I am! What a time and place to forget my cell phone.*

Dejectedly, Adrian plodded downstream. When he got to where the eponymous, creek-side trail made its crossing, he did so, too. But, he saw no signs of Daryl. He continued walking. Then the mostly flat trail began to suddenly rise sharply. Switchbacks started. After the third one, he heard a blood-curdling crunching noise. In the fourth switchback, he saw the startlingly tragic reality, which caused him to stop breathing. Right there in the middle of the inclining trail, the black bear had mauled and killed Daryl, and was now munching on the back of his neck. He crouched down. *Oh, my! The bear got him. Daryl's a goner. He's dead. This is real. It's not a Hollywood movie; it's a rapidly unfolding real-life horror. What should I do? What?! Think, Adrian. Think! What a nightmare! Should I throw a rock at the bear? Would that scare it off? Or, just get me killed, too? Daryl is obviously already dead. It's too late to save him. But, still don't want that bear to drag his corpse away.*

Suddenly the bear's massive head turned. It had picked up Adrian's scent. The black bear snarled. *Oh shit! Time to get the hell out of here before I end up like Daryl.*

Adrian charged back down the switchbacks. The furious bear did likewise. As Adrian approached the stream, his lead had shrunk to 13 feet (four meters) over the angry carnivoran. *Maybe the bear will stop at the creek. But, maybe not! If I jettison this backpack, maybe the bear will stop to check out the contents. It will like the blueberries inside. It can already smell them. And wants them. Now.*

His idea worked. Adrian safely crossed the stream as the bear ripped his discarded canvas backpack open. He turned left to go back to Little Lost Cove Falls. *Whew! Must keep running. Must not slow down. Must open up a sizable gap. That bear could come back after me at any second. It is much faster than me, and could easily chase me down. And kill me – just like poor Daryl. Maybe it was Daryl's pill that gave me that life-saving idea. Though, it sure didn't help his thinking. Hmmm ... I bet that bear is rabid. It has gone stark raving mad and is full of viral-transmission-time rage. Wonder how Linda is doing. Hope she's ok. Hope she hasn't encountered daddy bear. Oh please, dear God, no!*

Eleven minutes had eerily passed with just the sounds of birds, some small critters in the woods, and the creek. Linda's mind was full of horrid possibilities. She was beginning to think that both Adrian and Daryl had been killed by the black bear. She was immobilized per despair. An engulfing sense of gloom and doom pervaded her mind. But then she observed a 40-something, lanky, black-haired man walking up the trail towards where the guys had last been. He had a straw hat on and was toting a hiking cane in his right hand. *Ah, yes! A person! Finally! A real, live, living, sentient person. I can go with him to safely find Adrian and Daryl. Safely? Wait a minute. Hold on, girl. Should I really approach him? Remember what happened to Debbie [her best friend] on the Appalachian Trail last year. She's lucky she's still alive. And, she's still traumatized. He could become a rapist, too, under these conditions. If he's borderline, this setting will provide too much of a perfect opportunity to rape me. Rape and then kill me. Yeah, it's just too risky. Just let him pass by. Then follow out of sight, maybe ten minutes later. Yeah, let's go with that strategy. Let him be the bear bait.*

Just as now-slow-jogging Adrian reached the junction with the old logging road that led up to the waterfalls, a middle-aged, Asian, thin, smiling man accosted him.

"Hello sir," the man said cheerfully, catching Adrian looking down. "They call me the wondering man." *Huh?*

Adrian stopped, surprised and relieved to see a hiker. "Oh, hey, would you happen to have a cell phone that I could use? It's an emergency. My friend was attacked by a black bear. It's very bad; in fact, I believe that he's dead. And, my girlfriend is missing. Did you see a young lady back there by chance?" *A fatal bear attack? A missing girlfriend? This guy might be trouble. Maybe he's a robber. Maybe he's one of those full-blown addicts who robs for drugs. Or, maybe he's a killer. Maybe both. Must stay alert. Watch his hands. Don't see a gun. No large knife. Good.*

"No, I don't own a cell phone, sir," the tan-faced, dark-eyed man stated. "And, no, I haven't

seen any hikers, female or male, since Hunt-Fish Falls. No one but you.” *Female or male? Why did he use such phrasing? Hunt-Fish Falls? Did he just make that up? He’s very non-emotional. He sure is blasé to what I’ve just told him. Suspiciously indifferent.*

“Well, where do you live? I need to call medic and the police as soon as possible.” Exasperation had now permeated the tone of Adrian’s voice. *He sure seems to believe what he says. Some of these drug addicts are very clever, though. Remember what edgy Edgar from Edgemont [a nearby, national-forest-surrounded, railroad-trestles-and-tracks-long-ago-removed, almost-forgotten enclave] said: ‘Minh, be careful; they can be very convincing, as they can believe their own lies.’ No, I think he’s telling the truth. Something very bad has really happened. I can sense it.*

“I live in a cave about halfway up Breakneck Ridge,” the slender man replied. *He lives in a cave?! This has been a day in the Twilight Zone. And, it’s not over yet. God, I hope Linda is ok. I hope he didn’t harm her. Or, worse.*

“And, where might that suitable-for-human-occupancy cave be?” Adrian asked incredulously. *He doubts me. So typical.*

“About 1.2 miles [1.93 km] from here, up Sassafras creek. I can see Big Lost Cove Cliffs out my front door.” *Front door? He must have boxed his cavern in. How did he get the lumber up there? I bet that he used nearby trees. What a character. Some real oddballs up in these hills.*

“Ah, a cave in a cove with a mountain view. Very nice. Listen, I’m going to go back up to my vehicle. That’s where my cell phone is. If you see a white, 20-something woman of average height with dark hair named Linda, who knows me – Adrian, please tell her that I’m up at the trailhead.” *I can relax; he’s obviously not out to rob me. What he says has really transpired. So sad for his pal. Wonder if he provoked that bear.*

“Ok, will do, sir.” *He’s harmless. Well, sure hope so.*

“So, what do you do out here?” Adrian asked anxiously as he retied a dangling shoelace.

“Wonder. I just wander around and wonder about this whole existence. That’s why they call me the wondering man.” *Who are ‘they’? He’s bonkers. One too many [Hawaiian] baby woodrose seeds somewhere back there. Need to get going. Wasting precious time.*

“Well, nice to meet you, wondering man. I wish that the circumstances were better and we could talk longer. Thanks in advance for re-directing my fiancée.” *And now, he refers to her as his fiancée. He’s not sure? Strange fellow.*

“Certainly. It was an honor, sir.” *Honor killing. Why did I just think that? Daryl is dead. Linda is missing. Unbelievable. What a God-forsaken day. Need to get to the Jeep. Pronto.*

Adrian was between waterfalls and the wondering man was .3 miles (483 meters) farther upstream, when Linda arrived at the junction with the old logging road that led up to the lower cascade of Little Lost Cove Falls. She stopped and pondered the situation. *Should I continue upstream? No, that’s dangerous. That’s just pleading for trouble. Big trouble. I could easily become that black bear’s next meal. And, I don’t think the guys are down here anymore,*

anyway. Yeah, I'll just return to the Jeep. Maybe have emergency cell reception up there. Adrian and Daryl may be up there waiting for me. Yeah, I bet that Adrian's already up there, and desperately trying to call me. He is probably worried sick about me. I'll never hear the end of this from the guys. 'And, scared little Linda hid in the woods for forty-five minutes.' 'Whatever, guys. Whatever!' We'll all be chortling over a beer at Fonta Flora [a craft brewery in Morganton] in an hour or so. Well, time to start the climb out of this gorge. [sic] Georgette in the Gorgette. That would make an interesting title for a hiking-themed novel. Maybe write it someday. Have it start off just like today. But then, make it very grave. Well, let's keep those dark thoughts for the future writings. As for now, just think positive. And, watch each step. So many slippery rocks. Moss is everywhere. Even on the dead trout. Now, where did that thought swim in from?

Adrian safely reached the top of the upper waterfall nine minutes later. He then started walking back to the trailhead. As he rounded the final left bend, he saw a disturbing sight: a broken driver's side window on Daryl's RAV4. And as he got closer, he noticed that he and Linda's Jeep had been hit by the thieves, too. His cell phone had been stolen. He stared at the shards of broken glass on his seat. To say that Adrian wasn't happy would have been the understatement of the year. *Goddam lousy thieves! Worthless scumbags! Probably local squirrel-fed inbreds. This day must be like life in hell. A bear savagely kills my friend. And then, my fiancée gets hopelessly lost. What happens next? Does a tree fall on me? Jesus H. Christ! What to do now?*

Adrian walked over to Daryl's RAV4. He opened the driver's door and looked around, hoping to find Daryl's cell phone. But, it was all for naught. He shook his head as he looked at the two damaged vehicles. *Darn! Daryl's phone must have been on him. Or, maybe it was stolen, too. Well, it was a longshot. What now? I know – I'll drive to that church. Maybe someone is there. But, before I go, I'll leave a note for Linda. Yeah, just in case. She may come up here while I'm gone.*

After rummaging a bit, Adrian found a white sheet of paper – the backside of a standard real-estate addendum form – and a black roller-ball pen in the back seat of the RAV4. He wrote on it in large block letters:

DEAREST LINDA: I AM OK, HON. HOWEVER, DARYL IS NOT. MY CELL PHONE GOT STOLEN. WENT TO GET HELP DOWN THE ROAD AT THE SMALL CHURCH. BACK BY 1:30. JUST WAIT HERE FOR ME. LOVE YOU, ADRIAN

He then laid the note face-up on the RAV4's dashboard. His mind felt sharp. *Yes, I'm making the right move. Daryl's pill is helping me make the right decisions. Wonder what Daryl would think about Linda and me getting married. Guess I'll never know now. 'Rest in peace, pal. I hope it was sudden. Hope you weren't writhing in pain for ten agonizing minutes with that 330-pound [150 kg] bear parked on your back'.*

Adrian then started the Jeep, backed it up, and motored towards FS 464. After making an acute right turn, he was heading west on the rarely-ever-straight, loose-larger-gravel-shouldered, now-somewhat-dusty-as-the-morning-dew-had-evaporated Pineola Road at 36 MPH (57 km/h). The sun was a bright, light shade of yellow and the sky was cerulean blue.

The quite-pleasant-for-a-vehicle-with-a-missing-window air temperature was now 64° Fahrenheit (18° Celsius). *A picture-perfect spring afternoon in the Blue Ridge. Except my friend is dead, my wife-to-be is nowhere to be found, our Jeep is damaged, and my smartphone has been stolen. Yes, other than those four small details, everything is six stars out of five. Hey! We're in luck! There's a car still parked over there. Yes! No need to go to the church.*

He pulled into the parking area for Big Lost Cove Cliffs and cut the engine off. The vehicle next to his, a nondescript, dull silver, 2008 Nissan Sentra, was unoccupied. Adrian thought about his next move. *This trail is not that long. I remember studying it on the map app on my pilfered phone. It's only a mile and change to those cliffs. [1.2 miles; 1.93 km] And, this trail doesn't connect with any other trail; it's just a stand-alone segment. Therefore, I will most assuredly run across these hikers. And, they will have a working cell phone. And, Linda will be tracked and found. Alive and healthy. Yes, please. And, Daryl's body will be recovered. Will I have to tell Daryl's parents? No, the police will. Wonder when the funeral will be. Where will it be?*

As Adrian started his hike, Linda arrived at the Little Lost Cove Falls Trailhead. She shrieked in horror when she saw the Toyota RAV4's broken window and the absence of their Jeep. *What in the world has happened? Where is our Jeep? Was it stolen? Did Adrian drive off somewhere? Is Daryl with him? Did they have to break into Daryl's SUV to get something? Was the window broken because Daryl forgot his keys? Where would they need to go? So many questions. My head is spinning. I feel faint. Oh, my God!*

Linda walked closer to the Rav4. Looking through the windshield, she saw Adrian's note. It was now 12:49 PM. It was unnervingly quiet. She took a seat on the passenger side of Daryl's vehicle as her mind tried to figure out what had happened. *So, Daryl is in bad shape. How bad? Life-threatening bad? I bet so. And, Adrian's cell phone got stolen. How did that happen? What kind of help is needed? Maybe Daryl is not with Adrian. Maybe Daryl is injured so bad that he's non-ambulatory. Maybe the bear mauled his legs really bad. If Daryl is with Adrian and immediate medical attention is needed, Adrian would be taking Daryl to a hospital – not to that Baptist chapel. And besides, it's Saturday. I bet no one is even there. Adrian is just looking for a line out, since he's now phone-less. But, why doesn't he use Daryl's phone? Poor Daryl. He must be out in the woods somewhere. Suffering. In agony. Did that bear attack him? Or, did he fall down and get hurt while being chased. I thought that black bears don't attack people. Aren't they the most timid of bear species – nothing like those ferocious brown bears? Well, maybe timid until their cubs are perceived to be in danger. But, I never saw or heard any cubs. Wonder if that man that I saw has anything to do with Daryl's plight? Did he attack Daryl? With what? That walking stick? Kind of doubt that. He would be no match for Adrian and Daryl. And, Adrian would have mentioned it. If Daryl was injured due to an act of violence, Adrian would not have left me here with a maniac in the vicinity. Yeah, something really bad has happened to Daryl as a result of the bear or an accident, and he is in dire need of medical attention. Gosh, Adrian might not be back for 40 minutes. Wow! This is going to seem like half an eternity. What a ridiculous thought. What would half an eternity be? Kind of like half of infinity? Kind of like a day straight out of a bad movie. Only, it's real. Those hiking tragedies on the news. And now, I'm part of one. Gosh, I hope this ends ok. Please, dear God.*

Linda then looked at Daryl's real estate papers scattered all over the back seat. She grabbed an Offer To Purchase And Contract form and started to read it. *Not exactly synapse-firing reading material, but maybe it will settle my mind down and pass the time. Daryl was right about those pills; they're quite mild. So, drapery rods can be considered fixtures. Fixtures in fissures. Ah, that geology class with my funny boy. Tempus fugit.*

Adrian quick-stepped it and reached Big Lost Cove Cliffs at 1:11. There was no one on the massive granite outcrop. However, an awesome, jaw-dropping, panoramic view to the north of Grandfather Mountain, including the Linn Cove Viaduct section of the Blue Ridge Parkway, greeted him. He paused and pondered his next move. *The people, or person, in that Nissan Sentra, where did they go? Where in the world are they? This is the end of this trail. And, there were no forks or spurs. I bet that they're hiking down there in the cove. And, I bet that Linda is with the wondering man in his cave right now. He was so serene. Too serene. It was just an act. He spoke with Linda on the trail. I just know that he did. They planned a clandestine rendezvous. 'I wander around wondering.' That's just a subterfuge. A ruse. He wanted me to think that he's meekly insane – just a feeble-minded nut-job. Yeah, I bet that they're screwing each other like wild animals right now. Yeah, just like hyper-sex-crazed, lust-saturated humanimals. [sic] Humanimals. Won't ever forget seeing that word in print. Or, on a screen. Which website did I first see it on? Which article was that? Or, was it in some story? Not sure. Oh, what does it matter? Yeah, I'm sure that it's a debauched festival of fluids right about now. Yeah, that's what's going on. I need to stop being such a schlep. Yep, Daryl's pill has given me the insight alright. 'Thanks, recently deceased buddy o' mine. Excuse me if I grin and don't bear [sic] it. Not much for puns in the afterlife, Daryl? Ok, I'll stop. I'll show some respect for the dead. Though, I'm now not so sure about your motives. Or, your mortives [sic] – your mortal motives. Why did you really want us to come up here? No answer necessary. Just mull it over.' Well, I'm going to surprise the hell out of them. I'm going to find that cave over there. Yeah, I'm going to find wondering man's secret sex lair. I bet that he charms and balls lone female hikers all the time. That old, sly, horny, trail predator. Quite a crafty chap he is, but he didn't pull the wool over my eyes. Plenty of sun left. At least three hours before it slips below the ridgeline. Could be over there in an hour. Or less. Easily. No problem. Yeah, I got this. It's time to call them out. Right around supper time, I'll abruptly bust them in the act. 'Knock-knock. Hello, it's me, Adrian! And, I aints [sic] too happy.' Newfound party time in Lost Cove. Wa-hoo! Ah, lookie [sic] here, the path leading down. Down is where I want to go. Perfect. Just perfect. Under this pill's influence, I will be led right there. Yeah, right to the front door with a view. 'Get ready for a scene you'll never forget, you wondersome wankers!'*

At 1:18 Linda heard a vehicle coming towards her on FS 464A. The sounds of the tires mashing the gravel grew louder. Then as it rounded the last curve, a big hood and riot-style bumper of a green-striped, white, NFS-logoed, Dodge Ram pickup appeared. The mid-50-ish, Caucasian, uniformed, tall, balding, bespectacled male employee pulled it into the spot next to Daryl's RAV4. *Something has happened.*

Linda got out of the SUV and walked over to the driver's lowered window. "Hello sir."

"Good afternoon, ma'am," the man said with a concerned look on his face. *This isn't going to be good.*

“Have you seen my boyfriend?” Linda asked nervously. *Please say ‘Yes, I have’. Please.*

“Does he have wavy, blonde hair?” the NFS employee asked solemnly.

“No, he has straight, medium-length, dark brown hair, sir.” *What has happened?*

“Well, an unlucky fellow with blonde hair in his 20s was mauled to death by a bear on the trail down there an hour or so ago. This most-unfortunate incident was reported by a hiker. We are closing this area of the forest until further notice – until we get that bear.” *Oh, no! That was Daryl. I just know it was. Oh, my God!*

“Sir, I think the person you just described is the owner of this vehicle. He’s my boyfriend’s friend. The three of us went hiking together a little over two hours ago. I don’t know where my boyfriend went with our vehicle.”

“What kind of vehicle is it, ma’am?”

“It’s a black Jeep Grand Cherokee, sir.”

“I saw it down the road at the parking area for Big Lost Cove Cliffs. Jump in, and I’ll give you a ride down there. We can talk on the way.” *Why did Adrian go there? What is going on? This is so weird. And, so tragic. Daryl is dead – killed by that black bear. Just so unreal. But, it’s not. This is reality.*

Following a narrow, steep, wash-like goat path, Adrian reached the headwaters of Sassafras Creek at 1:47. He crossed the rivulet and looked up at the towering verdant mass that was Breakneck Ridge. Then he looked to his left. There was a faint trail. *Yes, I found the ‘driveway’ to your house, wondering man. Get ready Linda, Adrian is coming to dinner. With a four-pound [1.81 kg] stone in hand.*

Just as Adrian stepped into the seemingly-even-denser woods, he heard the sound of a heavy mammal coming up behind him. He looked back right as the one-hiker-is-just-not-going-to-be-enough black bear swung its left paw. The facial blow was fatal.

Adrian’s body would be recovered just before sundown by a canine search-and-rescue team.

The surprisingly-tested-negative-for-rabies bear was tracked, found, shot and killed.

Linda would begin writing her 77,777-word novel 25 months later. On the mid-January day that it was e-published, the wondering man died from hypothermia.