

## Upon a Rocky Top

This week had been too much. Meetings for hours on end, unreasonable deadlines, schoolwork after work, poor sleep, and bad encounters with worse bosses, all demanded a trip to the rocky top. The fluorescent lights gave Jeffrey a headache. His coworkers made him grind his teeth. The air smelled like mildew in the old office building, and it was time to go. Enough with work. At the stroke of 4:00 p.m., Jeffrey packed up his things and rushed toward the exit to his office, not bothering to wish anyone a good weekend or make small talk. He'd spoken to them enough this week. It was time to take something for himself.

A "rocky top", as the old-timers called it, was just a term for a sandstone peak typical to that region of the Appalachian range, and they were Jeffrey's favorite places to be. Making his way outside, Jeffrey speed-walked to his truck, started it up, and peeled out of the parking lot. He could make the hills in 30 minutes, or faster if he stepped on the gas. He definitely stepped on the gas. The day was aging but not old yet. The frost of the late October morning had long since melted away and the crisp autumn air had dried off the moisture that remained.

Jeffrey felt anxious as if he were escaping something and his headache returned to his consciousness. The workday had done a number on him, never mind the week at large. The main road out of town was packed with early rush hour traffic but soon he would be snaking down the backroads and eventually to a gravel road which led to the trail head. Along the way, the forests surrounding the town were virtually on fire with brilliant shades of yellow, orange, and red near the waterways. In his rearview mirror, some darker storm clouds were beginning to arrive from the west. Jeffrey had seen the forecast earlier. Winds 10-12MPH, 80% chance of rain showers which would last until Sunday morning. The forecast called for the rain to hit this area around 7:30. This would give Jeffrey time to go into the hills, get out and be at

home by the time the rain hit. For now, he just wanted to get there but the sight of the clouds reminded him that he had a type of curfew.

Turning on to the final gravel road, Jeffrey hit the gas harder than he needed to and the tires spun, lightly fishtailing the back end of the vehicle. It was almost a tradition to gun the accelerator turning onto this road. His dad had always done it too, so why would Jeffrey stop? The truck jumped and sank with the potholes and bumps in the old road. The rural farmhouses and soybean fields shrunk in the rearview mirrors and the forest appeared to swallow the vehicle as it rumbled up the hill. This region was thick with Hickories, Oaks, Beeches, and Hemlocks. In a forest rich with yellows, oranges, and reds. The only typical green came from the Hemlocks, Pines, Firs, and Cedar trees. By now, the mosquitos are gone or rare, snakes are hibernating or getting ready to, and the deer, turkey and squirrel would all be actively preparing for winter. Jeffrey soared around a hairpin turn and further up the hill, the truck's exhaust roaring as the engine pushed him toward the trailhead. He found that gunning the gas while driving was therapeutic, if unnecessary. He let off the gas, allowed the truck to roll along the gravel to a stopping point and the truck rolled to a halt. Jeffrey put it in park and took the keys out of the ignition.

Silence now. No heavy music, no rumbling exhaust, only his thoughts and the sound of the breeze outside. Opening the door, the sounds of nature took over his awareness and he grabbed the backpack he'd stashed under the seat this morning. In it, he had the usual gear, such as a pocketknife, water, snacks, lighter, matches, spare gloves and hat, and a flashlight. He never needed much in this section of forest because nothing ever happened here except bad weather. Jeffrey turned his eyes westward, scanning for the storm clouds again. Now they were a little bit more developed. "I'll have time" he thought. Jeffrey's mind lingered on the week that was now behind him. Working in an office had always run directly contrary to who he was. Jeffrey believed that he belonged out here, in the wilderness, uninhibited, smelling the earth and trees, listening to the birds and the wind. He doubted that anyone had ever truly dreamt of working in an office, confined to one office building, smelling old coffee and

cleaning chemicals, and listening to people complain about their lives outside of work. His boss was at worst, a dreaded sight and at best, out of the way. His cubicle mate never seemed to hush about his family who Jeffrey wasn't even sure existed because he'd never seen them. Then there were the different calls that came in, always wanting to make small talk before getting down to business. "Look, I know why you're calling because I've memorized your number. I've memorized your number because you've called my desk phone three times a day, every day this week." Such were Jeffrey's thoughts each time the phone rang, even if it wasn't true. Jeffrey had already made it 100 yards from his truck by the time he finished the thoughts. He was venting internally but didn't even know it.

His steps carried him up a well-worn foot trail and around a rock outcropping. This outcropping stuck out from the main hillside and was covered overhead by long, wide, hemlock branches. To his right and front was a short cliff with a view of the nearby hillside and more of the trail ahead of him. This was a spot for reflection. He sat on a nearby rock and pondered. He wasn't as angry now as when he got out of the truck. His headache had dampened to a low sensation. The mood had shifted to one of concern instead of annoyance. The idea had been in his mind for months now to get a different job or maybe even switch fields. Each time it came up, he didn't know if it was the office culture, the people, the work, or all of it combined. He reminded himself that the grass wasn't always greener, but he still wondered what could be tolerably different or even better if he worked somewhere else or for different people. "Maybe I should ask some of the more experienced people what keeps them going," he thought. But he knew that most of those people were hanging on for a pension.

The wind rattled the branches around him and stirred him back to awareness. His concerned ideas dropped away. He turned his head up looking for any branches that might break loose. There weren't any immediately visible, but the wind was picking up and he decided to get moving again. Time was passing after than he wanted this evening.

The path went around the side of the rocks, past an ancient Beech tree and down into a gulley. This portion of the forest was one full of memories. All around Jeffrey were signs of adventures past. His initials and those of his friends were carved into the trees, old campfires scorched into the bare rock and old lean-to shelters all brought back old memories. Simpler times or maybe times when he didn't pay attention to things so much. His adulthood experience had seen a lot of gained responsibility and he was no longer as carefree as he once was. Some of these friends hadn't been heard from in years and they too remained as memories. Memories as they may be, they were good memories and sprang forth with vivid imagery in this section of forest.

By now the late evening sun cast a lustrous glow on the storm clouds and the old familiar hills. The leaves on the hills shined and amplified the orange sun beams. "El Dorado" he thought. The clouds at the same time were nearly blocking the sun, and in another few minutes, the clouds would roll over the peaks of the hills and block out the last remaining sunlight. Jeffrey realized if he didn't turn back now, he would be caught out past dark, and probably get rained on. He had his flashlight, but it was a safer idea to get back to the truck soon. The wind was beyond a breeze now and Jeffrey was walking steadily back to the trailhead. The steady crunching of his footsteps was interrupted by a loud flushing of sound and scattering of dead leaves under Jeffrey's right foot. A rapid 'thump thump thump' sound was the best way he could mimic it. He jumped at the sudden flurry of action and looked quickly around. It was a grouse that he had nearly stepped on. This time of year, the dark brown feathers of the grouse blended in very well with the ground and dead trees. So much so, that they were easy to step on without seeing them from a distance. With one more jump scare under his belt, Jeffrey adjusted his backpack and stepped away, this time more cautiously. The clouds were overhead now, and he felt a raindrop on his cheek. Much too soon.

Jeffrey picked up his pace in unison with the rain. As the rain fell, the sloped path back up to the rock was quickly turning to mud and made the climb back up slow going. The mud caked to the tread in his

shoes and each step slid backwards a little. He wasn't about to get stuck, but he still had to take more steps to cover any ground. As he reached the rock again, he paused and caught his breath. This rock wasn't quite the rocky top that he usually visited further down the path, but it'll do. Despite the rain soaking into his clothes, the rapidly declining weather and the mud all over his legs, the rock made for an excellent place to pause. He wasn't concerned with anything anymore. The perils of bad weather and a darkened forest were mere trifles now. The low points of the week were barely in his memory and the elements seemed to wash away the angst of his troubled mind. The only thing on his mind now was getting back to the truck and home for the weekend. He pulled out his flashlight to illuminate his path.

The forest canopy took whatever light remained and forced the forest floor into darkness. The flashlights beam put a shine on all the raindrops, insects on trees and even a bat who had begun a hasty evening hunt. The darkness seemed to exaggerate distances. Each step felt shorter but the distance and time he'd spent walking also seemed longer. Soon the flashlights beam reflected off the trucks lights and Jeffrey let out a sigh of relief. He hit the key fob button in his pocket and the truck's lights flashed and the vehicle unlocked. Jeffrey arrived at the truck, opened the door and threw his backpack in, then climbed in the truck and shut the door. He sat in the driver's seat for a moment. The rain drops pelted the truck, the noise drowning out everything else. He just listened.

The day was done, the rocky top was not quite visited but it was close enough. His workday flashed in his mind. He knew that he would have to start all over again on Monday. "No.", he thought. "I came out here, had a good time and got away from all of that. ". He banished any other thoughts of the last week or the work week ahead. The good times will continue until they can't. The weekend was just beginning, and Jeffrey dug the keys into the ignition and the truck rumbled to life again. This would not be the last time he would pursue the rocky tops to seek their peace. He put the truck in the drive, turned around and drove down the hill. "There's always next time.", he thought. He knew it to be true. No matter what

the world threw at him, he would persist and when he felt like he couldn't, a trip to the rocky top would set him straight.