

Making a Name

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Hiker midnight was racing closer as the sun went down, but no one was willing to step away from the warmth of the campfire and return to the chill of the Virginia Highlands. Jo sat with her legs criss-cross facing the sunset, more interested in the fading colors than the company of the other hikers who huddled together, puffy jackets and beanies helping to ward against the cold. Alex and Close Encounters were leaning against each other's shoulders, singing along to the early 2000's pop songs that someone was strumming out on their ukulele while some of the retirees hiking the trail sat on their logs and traded stories about previous thru hikes and beers from town. Jo swirled the remnants of her ramen around her pot and took a final swig, grimacing as the salty broth hit her tongue.

Someone called her name from across the campfire. The petite hiker turned her attention to the group and looked around at all the faces looking at her, instantly wishing that she'd stayed at the campsite further back instead of the shelter.

"Did you get a trail name yet?"

"Not yet," she said. The group chorused their frustrations. She shrugged and set her now empty cup down in front of her. "What can I say, I'm kind of boring. Nothing exciting happened to me yet."

"Girl," Alex said, drawing out the word, "You're in Virginia already. You're telling me you haven't been spotted taking care of business, tripped over a root, made some questionable food choices or told someone an embarrassing story that they'll never let you live down yet?"

"You don't have one either," Close Encounters chastised.

"I've been hiking with you since Amicalola, I'm gonna go ahead and blame you for me not having one yet."

One of the older hikers turned to the brewing argument and the rest of them silenced, eager to watch how this worked out. The two had been bickering for the last week, tensions strung high by the foul weather.

"Bear Hug," Close Encounters said after a moment, looking Alex, now dubbed Bear Hug, in the eye. "You greet everyone in the tramily with a big hug and when you're putting your tent away in the morning you hug it down to fit it in the stuff sack."

"Bear Hug." She smacked her mouth as if to taste the name. "I like it." A cheer went up from the group and a beer was tossed over the fire for her to catch.

"To Bear Hug!" someone said, and everyone repeated the toast. Jo joined in hesitantly, her voice lost in the cheer. As it died down, the sun dipped all the way below the horizon. A handful of people, Jo among them, excused themselves from the campfire and made their way back to the shelter to prepare for their upcoming day. The potato chip bag-like crinkle of inflatable sleeping pads started up as people laid down, so Jo put in her earplugs and turned over to face the wall of the shelter she'd been relegated to by showing up late in the day.

Jo set off before the sun came up, and was three miles north of the shelter before it even touched the horizon. She paused, leaning against a fence and decided to break for her second breakfast, hoping that the fog would roll off the hills and she'd get a view before descending back into the green tunnel later in the day. The valleys and hills of Southern Virginia opened up beneath her as the temperature climbed. A hot day like today would make for fewer weekend warriors out, so she'd be able to put an earbud in and listen to a true crime podcast while she put her head down without seeming rude.

She'd come out here to get away from everyone's expectations for her and to take some time for herself, but in the middle of peak season, she was never truly alone. There were hundreds of people backpacking around her in their little groups that she would bounce between. She'd pass them, they'd pass her, and then they'd be in town together on a Zero Day and she would inevitably end up getting food or doing laundry with them all. Her mother and father were probably grateful that she hadn't hitchhiked into any towns alone, but she was quite over everyone assuming that she needed help up the steep inclines of the Smokies, or through the shallow creek crossings, or that she needed someone to help her hang her bear bag. A few days spent hiking completely alone at this point would be nice, if only to prove that she could do it herself.

She was half way through a breakfast shake and pack of pop tarts when someone's humming carried through the fog. No one else had even been awake when she'd left, so the odds of this being someone from camp last night were slim. The person emerging from the hazy gray fog was certainly not someone from camp, nor was he someone he'd seen before, as she was certain she'd have remembered him. He was a behemoth of a man, red hair and matching beard making him look like the world's most stereotypical lumberjack were it not for the short-shorts and neon pink Hawaiian shirt.

"Howdy," he called. She held a hand up and gave him a tightlipped smile. Hopefully he was going for a speed record or he was a crazy ultralighter trying to pack in as many marathon days as he could and he would just keep moving. "What's your name?" Of course he wanted to stop and talk. Everyone seemed to. She should have started in February and avoided the bubble.

"Jo," she replied, shaking his hand from where she sat leaning against the fence post.

"Nice," he replied, "I'm Shakespeare." So this was the guy who had been the talk of a campfire a few weeks back, Close Encounters had met him back in the Smokies when they were waiting for a bear to cross the trail ahead of them.

Jo scoffed and looked him up and down, "Let me guess, you quoted Hamlet or something week one?" Shakespeare certainly wasn't the worst trail name she'd heard, but it wasn't terribly original either.

"Nah," he smiled, his entire face lighting up under the facial hair. "I'm just really good at making up trail names for people." Jo raised an eyebrow and took another bite of her poptart. "So is Jo your real name, or a trail name?"

"It's my real name," she admitted. If he gave her one right her and right now she'd reject it. The name had to have meaning and she refused to be another Smiles or Dusty or Jack Rabbit. "Why, do you have one in mind?"

Shakespeare laughed with his entire body. “I can’t just give you one, you’ve got to earn it. C’mon you definitely know better than that at this point.” Jo nodded and smiled. This guy was a trail name purist like her Aunt was on the Pacific Crest Trail. “Tell you what, I’ll hike with you for the next couple days and if you don’t have one by the time we reach the schoolhouse I’ll buy you a beer in the next town. Deal?”

Jo took his outstretched hand and shook on it. He pulled her to her feet, and she reshouldered her pack, accepting that she had a hiking buddy for the foreseeable future. The two set off from the trailhead at The Scales, following the signs north toward the ever-distant Katahdin. The sun did clear the fog away as they walked bringing with it scorching heat and screaming cicadas. Jo was eager to get back to the green tunnel that made up most of the trail and enjoy the shade of the forest. Shakespeare had her take the lead while he alternated flipping through the guidebook and checking an app.

“How’s your water situation?” he asked.

“I’ve still got a liter and a half,” she replied, “Why?”

“The next water source has been spotty apparently and then it’s five more to the next reliable one.” He held up his phone screen to show her the entries on the database of the last hikers to come through. “Sponsored said that it was flowing two days ago and we’ve gotten rain since then though, so I’m thinking we may luck out.”

Jo hummed in acknowledgement and turned back toward the narrow trail cut out of the ridgeline’s low grasses and continued on. If there was water, great. If there wasn’t, she was still carrying more than she usually did and was fine with filtering at other sources later in the day. As they hiked, Shakespeare made idle chatter, not particularly caring that she didn’t respond. He talked about how he’d graduated college in December, just like her, and was planning on going to med-school after this. He’d probably take another gap year before that though to prepare though.

“What about you,” he asked, “What are you going to do once you reach Katahdin?”

“Sleep for a week straight in a real bed,” she said. He chuckled at that.

He talked about the clouds and how his neighbor growing up had been a meteorologist so she’d taught him how to identify them one lazy summer when he was too old to go to the town summer camp but too young to start working.

“We’ll probably get rain tonight,” he said, gesturing to the horizon obscured by stratus clouds with his trekking pole.

“There were mare’s tails yesterday,” Jo said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if we did.”

“You know your clouds too!” Shakespeare smiled as if she’d just told him the best news of his life.

“I spent my summers working on my grandparents’ farm until I turned sixteen,” she replied, “We had to know for hay harvests.”

“Oh cool.” They walked in silence for a bit longer, picking their way down the descent off the ridge. “What kind of farm is it?”

“Dairy farm.” Jo paused to look for the next white blaze on the trees of the forest to mark the trail. She spotted it and set off, stepping high to avoid the roots that decorated the forest floor.

“Is that why your gaiters are cow-print?” Shakespeare asked. Jo looked down at the pieces of fabric that protected her ankles from the underbrush and kept rocks and dirt from her shoes. The white was brown at this point and the elastic around her calf had started slipping.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she admitted, “I just liked them on the website and they were available in my size. Why are yours flames?”

“My brother got them for me for Christmas,” he said, “I would have been down for the shiny pink ones but he decided these would go over best with our parents.” There was a plastic rustling behind her and Jo turned back to see him pulling an entire pack of Twizzlers out of the side pocket of his pack.

“Want one?” he asked, noticing her attention. She shook her head and continued walking. Hearing him rip the candy out of the pack made her stomach growl, so when they stopped to take a picture at the sign announcing that they were leaving the wilderness area and were back onto regular old public lands, she pulled a granola bar from her hip belt before they continued on.

Come noon they’d replenished their water at a stream where Shakespeare had danced across a footbridge, they’d taken a side trail to another shelter to use the privy, and stopped for an early lunch on some rocks next to the stream. Shakespeare yanked his heavy boots and thick socks off and stuck his feet in the cool water. He pulled out a tuna packet and some crackers that were more crumbs than wafers and had simply mixed them together for his meal while Jo opted for peanut butter and dried apple on a tortilla wrap. The two ate in comfortable silence until a few other hikers stopped by and struck up a conversation with Shakespeare. Jo took the opportunity to lean back on her pack, pop her earbuds in and listen to the podcast for a while. The sun and shadows flitted across her eyelids, and she pulled the brim of her cap down to let herself bask in the relative coolness of the forest.

Shakespeare tapped her foot with his trekking pole to get her moving again a bit later, and the two of them set off, leaving the others to enjoy a longer mid-day break. The heat under the cover of the forest was less than it would have been had they been on the ridge, but it still made for slow going.

“How far are you thinking?” Jo asked, pausing as they came to a downed tree.

“Probably to Trimpi,” Shakespeare answered, stepping up on it and hopping off the other side only to slip in the clay-like soil. “I’d love to go all the way to Partnership but that’ll put me over thirty miles for the day and I don’t feel like showing up to camp in the dark even if I can order pizza there.”

By the time he’d regained his balance, Jo had swung one leg over and was sliding the other over. She took both trekking poles in one hand and hopped back to the ground maintaining her footing better than he had.

“Pizza would be nice,” Jo said, “But I agree, Trimpi will put me right at twenty for the day.” They continued hiking, with Shakespeare complaining about the lack of good pizza along the trail. When Jo had mentioned the New York area and even the train station that could take them straight into the city, he’d scoffed, claiming that the only real pizza was Chicago Deep-Dish. Big Apple, one of the hiker’s she’d been bouncing around with back in North Carolina, had chewed him out for that and made him promise that they would get pizza together in New York. Apparently the New York local had had to get off trail in the Smokies for a knee-injury but had been texting Shakespeare and intended to make good on his promise. Jo agreed, pizza on trail sounded good, and Shakespeare assured her that if they were hiking near each other at that point, that he was sure that Big Apple wouldn’t mind another hiker to feed.

The rest of the afternoon was spent hiking in relative silence. Both of them put their heads down, earbuds in, and pushed forward, pausing only to filter more water and to debate whether it was worth it to take a technically-closed section with a sketchy bridge or to take what had been deemed the official route until it could be fixed. Given the heat, risking a dump in the river didn't seem like such a bad idea. They ignored the neon orange warnings and pressed on, following the white blazes the whole while. The bridge hadn't been bad at all. Shakespeare crossed first and then held out a hand for Jo that she didn't take as she stepped down off the bridge.

"I think I've got your trail name." Shakespeare gasped in between breaths to inflate his pad. They'd reached the shelter by late afternoon and for a change, no one else had been there first, so they got free rein of where to set up. They'd both chosen the middle for the reduced chance of mice running over their toes at night.

"What is it?" Jo asked, a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

"Self-Reliance. You are so confident in your ability to do this all on your own. When we stopped for lunch I asked a couple other hikers about you and they said you haven't stuck with one tramily the whole way and that all through the Smokies you were the first person to give up your shelter spot for your tent if someone with a reservation showed up." He put another couple of breaths into the pad. "Self-Reliance suits you. Have you read it?"

Jo nodded and looked up from her pack. "Are you trying to make a literary tramily?"

"No! No. No, I'm not trying to pull you into a group if you want to do this solo. The name just fits," he said.

"I like it," she said after a moment, stopping her search for her paracord and carabiner. Shakespeare punched the air in celebration and collapsed on his sleeping pad before he'd closed the valve, the whole thing going flat as he did so.

"Aw dammit," he said. "You've got the right idea with the foam pad, I might buy one next time I'm in a town."

"Beer and a sleeping pad," Self-Reliance said. When Shakespeare raised an eyebrow she continued, "You gave me a trail name before the schoolhouse so the beer is on me."

He laughed and sat up, and got back to work blowing up the sleeping pad. Self-Reliance took her bear bag and the paracord and set off to find a spot to hang them, knowing that dinner and bed were going to come early after a long, hot day. Voices echoed through the woods from the trail and she prepared for another night around the campfire, listening to Bear Hug and Close Encounters singing, the retirees telling their stories, and the general bitching and moaning that came from a long day on trail. There would be no complaints about her lack of a trail name tonight.