

No Small Mercy

Ajelian's prediction has come true: Farg is running late. Very late. Thirty-five minutes and forty seconds late. But who's counting?

I'm on my second pint of Michelob Ultra, sitting on an undersized bar stool that must be harder than metamorphic rock, and a backless one at that – the worst kind for my aging dad bod, which doesn't have the limberness it did even three years ago, never mind nineteen, the last time I saw Farg. But I endure the pain because I'm at home here at the Green Onion. The bar is small and dimly lit, an oasis for afternoon drinkers who languish in quiet desperation, haggard men who should be redeeming AARP rewards rather than pounding light beer.

The regulars all leave me alone. I don't come in enough to be on a first-name basis with any of them, but I'm familiar enough not to stand out, not to draw territorial glares. I come here for a couple pints after work or on a weekend night when I can get a babysitter. I drink in peace, nibble on oversalted, overbuttered popcorn, and watch whatever game's on the big screen. It can be nice. Depressing at times, but nice. And necessary for a man pushing forty with few social outlets and a nine-year old girl at home.

It's also the place I've chosen to meet up with Farg, someone I briefly knew during college, who has become through these intervening years a sort of Yeti, a character that exists only through the bizarre stories and anecdotes relayed to me by our mutual friend, Hayk Ajelian.

The text from Farg a week earlier came as a shock. It read simply, "Hey Malcolm, I'm going to be in town next week for a few days. Ajelian passed on your number. Meet up for drinks?"

"Maybe...but who is this?" I responded.

"John Farg."

"Farg!"

Exclamation point notwithstanding, I was ambivalent about seeing Farg. I was not eager to relive the past and turn over old memories, and I wasn't sure I'd have the patience to make it through an encounter with him.

And yet, I was compelled to see him. Farg had become such a fiction, such a mesmerizing character, that I worried I'd regret missing out on the opportunity to at least meet up with him,

to see if he was real. I also felt like I owed it to Ajelian, that if I didn't buck up and see him, I'd be betraying Ajelian in some convoluted way.

But more than all this, I felt guilt for what happened all those years ago. And guilt can be a powerful thing to shake. So I agreed to meet.

At the forty-five minute mark, the door opens and in lumbers a linebacker of a man. He's much bigger than I remember, six-four, broad-shouldered and wide-bellied, and completely bald on top with rivulets of grayish brown hair that crest over his ears. He's wearing black running pants with a white stripe down the side and a t-shirt with our college logo.

He stops about halfway inside the bar, a large grin on his face, turns his head sideways, doesn't say anything for at least a second as our eyes fix on each other, and then says in the slow baritone I remember at once, "Hey hey hey, Malcolm McCarthy."

"Farg," I say in a much higher voice than I intend, get off my bar stool, and extend my hand.

I sit back down and Farg sits next to me. He smells like a gym locker. A bead of sweat rolls down his neck. When he reaches up to wipe it with the back of his hand, I catch the dark stain under his armpit.

"It's hot out there, huh?" I say, but Farg ignores me, a whimsical smile still on his face as he surveys the people around the bar.

"Where are the chicks, man?" he says and chuckles.

"It's not that kind of place," I say, taking a sip. "And it's only Tuesday night, man."

Farg gestures at my beer with his chin. "What are you drinking?"

"Michelob Ultra."

He nods and snaps his fingers at Darlene, the bartender, and says, "Ma'am, two Mich Ultras down here, please." I'm immediately put off by the snapping, but I know that Darlene can handle herself. She's in her sixties, but is wiry and tough, and I've seen her drag drunk buffoons out by the collar.

She glares at Farg before filling up a couple pint glasses and thudding them down in front of us. She gives me a quick look and lifts her eyebrows as if asking me who's this asshole and why'd you bring him in here.

Before another word is spoken, Farg has the glass up to his mouth and takes half of it down in a prolonged gulp.

I don't remember Farg being a drinker in college.

The first time I met Farg was at Ajelian's apartment senior year. Ajelian and his roommates threw a party early in the semester. Couple kegs. People crowded into a tight overheated space. Lots of horny guys trying to get laid, former high school lacrosse types at the peak of their handsomeness. Of course there were girls in attendance, girls to receive the attention of these horny males, some of it welcome, most of it not. I'd like to think that I was different from these other guys—I was taking a creative writing class and saw myself as a burgeoning writer, an artist with a softer side—but I wasn't that different, really. And neither was Ajelian.

Ajelian and I both studied abroad the year before in Dublin, and that's where we met and became close. Coming back to campus life meant meeting each other's circle of friends.

"Who's that tall kid over there?" I asked Ajelian about the emaciated kid with a long narrow face and a long narrow neck standing in the corner alone, arms raised overhead, eyes closed, swaying back and forth to the music playing on the stereo.

A smile came over Ajelian's face. "That's Farg. Haven't you met Farg?"

I hadn't. And I never did meet Farg that evening, but he did eventually migrate from his corner into the general fray, although he didn't say much. He wasn't drinking and he certainly wasn't talking to any chicks. He seemed like a monk displaced from a monastery, a far-off gaze in his eyes, scanning the room as if he were forming a meditative treatise that he would later scribble on the walls of his cell.

"No chicks," Farg says, louder. "I never thought you'd be in a bar with no chicks. I remember that party at Ajelian's, all those pick-up lines you were throwing out there." He bursts into laughter, admiration in his eyes.

"Yeah, you remembered that?" I remembered Farg from that evening, of course, but I'm surprised that he remembered me and even more surprised that he found my behavior so commendable.

“Dude, you walked around the room and started approaching chicks and after like thirty seconds of conversation, you’d say, ‘The sexual tension between us is killing this friendship.’ I remember you went up to Jen Fiorella – remember Fiorella? – and you said, ‘How come two uncommonly attractive people like us aren’t making out right now?’”

I snicker at the memory, but hearing about my college personae feels like I’m considering a different person, a different life, as though my former self were a character in a movie that I find slightly amusing but also a bit repulsive. I haven’t essayed a pick-up line in more than fifteen years. From before I met Claudia. And with Claudia, we were friends at work, and there was no need for pick-up lines. No pick-up lines and no affectations.

But I used to be an incorrigible flirt in college and I cast my net wide. When I failed, it was never for a lack of effort. And my successes? Insecure girls who hated their father. What that said about me, I don’t dare ponder.

“What brings you into town, Farg?” I ask.

“Just passing through. Traveling across the country.”

“On vacation?”

“No, I’m driving Lyft. I’ve been staying places a week at a time. I’m heading to Richmond after this and then going south to Florida.”

Farg’s cross-country peregrinations are nothing new. Ajelian told me how he biked from Duluth to Santa Fe one summer years ago. I’ve heard all about Farg’s itinerant lifestyle and his odd jobs. Over the last two decades, Farg has worked as an apple picker, a youth basketball coach, a Census enumerator, a mailroom clerk, a CCD teacher, a landscaper, and now a driver.

“Shit, that must be interesting. You just pick up and go from place to place?”

“Yeah, man,” he says and looks away from me toward Darlene and holds up his beer glass. She gives an exasperated inhalation and fills up another glass for him. Over her shoulder, she asks, “Want another, Malcolm?”

I’m about to beg off when Farg answers for me, “Fill him up.”

“Richmond’s a cool little town,” I say. “My daughter and I go there when it’s hot. There’s a little swimming hole we like on the river.”

“Your daughter,” Farg says and pauses. And then he lowers his voice and says slowly, “Hey man, I’m really sorry about your wife and son. Ajelian told me about that.”

“Thanks,” I say. I’m not in the mood to talk about my losses, especially with Farg.

"A car accident?" he says.

I nod and swallow my words with a long drink.

"That's fucking horrible. That tore me up when I heard about it."

I have no desire to talk about the accident, about the remorse of knowing that I was to blame for rushing the kids out of the restaurant and leaving the stupid stuffed kangaroo behind, leading to their return trip.

"When does the traveling stop?" I change the subject back.

He flits his hand around in a circle and says, "The journey never stops, Malcolm."

I don't dare bring up long-term goals. Settling down. The future. Impending old age. Because I know that Farg is lost in a different way than I'm lost. An inveterate lost. And I know this because he's been adrift since we were barely old enough to drink.

The hike in New Hampshire was Ajelian's idea. "Let's get up to the mountains," he said in advance of Columbus Day Weekend. "Hike some of those four-thousand footers, find a rustic bar, some mountain girls, sleep under the stars."

While we'd be giving up the long weekend on campus where the partying would be animated, I was up for the change of pace and knew that a weekend away with Ajelian could be momentous. But it wasn't going to be just he and I.

"Farg wants in," he said.

"Farg!" I said, remembering the mystical way he behaved at Ajelian's party, excited to see what a full weekend away with him would bring. As a new writer, I was interested in immersing myself among new characters, particularly eccentric characters, and Farg promised to be fruitful in that regard.

On the three hour drive up, Farg was in the back seat, staring out the window, as Ajelian and I prattled on about recent sexual escapades, upcoming sexual escapades.

"What do you say back there, Farg?" Ajelian asked him.

He didn't respond for a long second and then said quietly, almost in a chant, "The greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss - an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife - is sure to be noticed."

I was in shotgun and twisted my torso to look back at him behind me. He had a dreamy look on his face, peering out the window at the trees that burst in autumn colors and then receded into the distance and then burst again.

"Farg, are you okay, bud?" I said through my laughter.

"Farg's majoring in philosophy," Ajelian said, a knowing smile on his face.

"Ajelian, I need to take a leak," Farg said. "Can you pull over?"

"Can you wait until the next rest stop?" Ajelian asked.

"Don't think so," Farg said.

Ajelian peeled off to the right, and Farg opened up the car door and then in a slow shamble, each footstep coming down deliberately, disappeared into the woods before emerging a minute later, head bowed and in the same slow shamble, walked back to the car.

"Ajelian said you're an accountant," Farg says.

I nod. "Well, not really an accountant. I work at an accounting firm, directing tax research, tax policy. It's okay," I say and shrug and then realize I don't want to talk about work.

"Tell me about your love life, Farg. Will you get married someday, have kids?"

"I've never wanted it more in my life," he says, which startles me, since it seems contradictory to his lifestyle. And then he looks up at the television and wags his finger at Darlene who's at the other end of the bar, working a crossword and chatting casually with one of the regulars. "Can we get a game on, Ma'am?" Farg asks.

Darlene straightens herself up and walks over slowly. "You don't have to keep calling me Ma'am. Name's Darlene. He would have told you that." She shakes her thumb at me.

"Was just gonna, Darlene," I say. "Forgive us. We're a couple of old college friends getting caught up." I feel the need to apologize for Farg.

She picks up the remote control and directs her question at me, "Are the Nats on, Malcolm?"

"Should be." She knows I'm a baseball fan, that I'm one of the few people who come in and request a game on the TV.

Farg orders another round of drinks, and I know that I'm already in one drink too deep.

We arrived at the Mt. Kinsman trailhead by early afternoon. The most experienced hiker of us three and a native New Englander, Ajelian warned us to pack at least two liters of water, a second layer of clothing, a winter hat and gloves, to be prepared for the worst. Weather in the White Mountains was unpredictable, he told us, especially with winter looming.

Farg stepped out of the car with a two-liter bottle of ginger ale, tucked under his right armpit like a football, and four pancakes encased in plastic wrap in his left hand.

"Farg, that's all your bringing?" Ajelian said, his voice climbing an octave. "Where's your backpack?"

When Farg held up the items in his hands and said, "I'm good," Ajelian just nodded in resignation. And thus we began our long march up the ridge line to the summit of North Kinsman through a gorgeous forest of pine and hemlock, Farg perpetually behind us, Ajelian and I out front riffing on all the inanities of youth.

"When's the last time you talked to Ajelian?" I ask.

"Months ago, must have been –" he holds the glass away from his face as he searches his memory. "Christmas night."

"Busy guy, huh?"

"Yeah, four kids and all."

I'm surprised that Farg doesn't know about the fifth, but that stuff with the girl from the all-night diner was a long time ago, and it was one of my lowest moments, and I know it was one of Ajelian's too. I think Ajelian still sends money. The kid's in college now. He might be paying the full tuition for all I know – I never press him. I don't know who knows and who doesn't know at this point, and I've never inquired with Ajelian whom he's told. So I've never brought it up with anyone else. Except Claudia who knew all my secrets. Well...almost all of them.

"I'd have thought his schedule would have slowed down by now, but apparently not," I remark.

Ajelian is a doctor. Internal medicine. He looks inside people, finds out what is wrong with them, and then fixes them.

A few weeks after our weekend in the mountains, Farg dropped out of college for the first time. When Ajelian broke the news, I was desperate to find out the reason.

“Was it because of what happened on the hike?” I asked.

“No,” Ajelian said with a confident shake of his head.

“Did something happen since then?” I pulled out my pliers and tried to pry the secret loose. “I mean, he just dropped out of college out of nowhere?”

“I don’t know, Malcolm.”

“What the fuck, Ajelian? What happened?” I shouted at him. It was the secret itself and Ajelian’s concealment of it, rather than concern for Farg’s well-being, that mattered to me.

He held up his hand and when his voice broke, I knew that he knew, and I knew that he wasn’t going to tell me. “Listen, Malcolm. That’s all there is to it. I don’t fucking know. And it doesn’t matter. He’s back in Minnesota now and he’s not coming back.”

I never did find out the reason, and I never pressed Ajelian again. And for my surrender, for my tacit agreement to let it lie, Ajelian has seemingly rewarded me with other Farg stories over the years. Interesting stories, of course, and strange, but always innocuous, never incriminating. But why Farg dropped out of college? That one he tied to a giant boulder and dropped to the bottom of some distant sea.

With Farg next to me, it’s the perfect opportunity to pull out the crowbar, to inquire what happened all those years ago, but it feels too cruel to dredge up the past, to unearth a bad memory. In college, I would have ripped through the opening to find out.

When we finish our beers, I’m in no shape to drive anywhere. Farg gets up and walks to the bathroom with the same slow stride he had all those years ago when he made us stop suddenly to pee in the woods.

I send a text to my daughter. My mother-in-law is babysitting. “Can Lita stay another hour or so, Muñeca?” I write. “I’m going to get a bite to eat with my buddy.”

She writes back, “Yes!”

Lita has been like a second mother. I’m grateful we have her. I send a text to Lita to make sure it’s okay. I don’t want to abuse her generosity.

With Farg in the restroom, I catch Darlene’s eye, request the check, and then go heavy on the tip.

At the top of South Kinsman, the sheer immensity of the landscape was lost on Ajelian and me. We rambled on about college sports and tore into our sandwiches with abandon. The ascent had been difficult – three hours up, thirty-five hundred feet of elevation gain. Farg sat near us in silence, his expression one of blank absorption, facing outward toward the valley below dotted in green and fiery shades of yellow, and soaring up on the other side of the notch, the monoliths of Lincoln and Lafayette. He ate a pancake like a slice of pizza: one hand underneath the flaccid sphere, and the other at the rear, guiding it slowly to his open mouth. In between bites, he took swigs from the bottle of ginger ale, which was now half gone. Finally, he pointed to some birds flying off in the distance and said, “They don’t fly south because they want to go; it’s just that they can’t be here and survive. They’d rather stay.” Ajelian and I barely paused to acknowledge the comment before resuming our conversation.

We traveled back along the ridge toward the north peak as the sun sunk to our left. Farg stopped several times, bathing himself in the dying light, and stared out at the vista. As Farg fell farther behind, Ajelian turned around and beckoned him on, “Farg, it’s going to be dark soon. We can’t spend all day up here.”

Once we got off the ridge, the descent was steep and full of granite and roots. Darkness slipped in. Shielded by the pines, the sun waned into a small orb in the sky, visible only in streaks. Ajelian was telling me about Christina, the girl he dated in Ireland, telling me about her recent family troubles. We both got lost in the story. About halfway down, we turned around and didn’t see Farg. His falling behind was habitual, and we had to stop often to wait for him to round the corner or emerge into view. After a couple minutes, I looked at Ajelian and said, “Where the hell is he?”

We walk to a diner near the Green Onion. Our waitress looks about nineteen with strawberry blonde hair and a stud in her nose – the kind of girl I’d have hit on before I even sat down, back in the day.

She drops off a couple menus and tells us she’ll return shortly for our order.

“Thank you,” Farg says loudly. “Emily,” he adds, reading it off her nametag, and then gives her a long look as she walks away. He looks at me with a smile. “Not bad, huh Malcolm?”

“Farg, she’s young enough to be your daughter,” I say.

He just looks at me like a rejected puppy and takes a drink of water.

She's back in a couple minutes. "You fellas ready to order?"

"I'll take the Western omelet," I say. She jots it down and looks over at Farg. His smile is back and he says, "How's your night going, Emily?"

"Going all right," she says, working over a piece of gum, like it's a thick lump of taffy. "Kind of slow tonight." She glances out the window and then back at Farg. "So, what are you thinking?"

"We were just over at the Green Onion. Ever go over there?"

"Um, maybe, like once," she says, biting on her lower lip and glances over at me.

"Farg, just order something," I say, feeling the heat rise up in my face.

Farg snaps the menu shut and hands it to her. "I'll have the pancakes," he says quickly and then grabs the salt shaker in his right hand and slides it across the table to his left.

"Anything with them? Blueberries? Bananas?"

"Just pancakes, please," he says, looking straight ahead.

As we wait for our food, I ask Farg what he's doing tomorrow, what time he's starting his shift.

"Not sure yet," he says. "I'll decide when I wake up."

Our conversation is running on fumes, and I'm relieved when the food arrives. The waitress lays down Farg's plate first and then mine.

"Thanks very much," I say overenthusiastically to smooth over any awkwardness caused by Farg. I also mean it as an apology.

"What time do you get off?" Farg says and chuckles. "Want to meet us over at the Green Onion after your shift?"

"Um, I don't think I can," she says with hesitancy.

"He's just kidding," I say and shoot Farg a look.

"Well, enjoy," she says and wheels around and heads toward the kitchen.

"What the hell was that?" I say.

Farg's mouth hangs open and he stares back at me wide-eyed.

"What was that?" I repeat, my voice raised. "Meet us over there for drinks?"

"I just thought it'd be fun. That you'd be up for some female company."

"I'm sure she has it tough enough without guys like us harassing her," I say and I'm almost yelling.

"Hey man," he says slowly, and for the time I detect something other than somnolence in his voice; there's a ripple of anger. "I thought you'd enjoy that. I was just joking around for your benefit. You and Ajelian were always talking about chicks, hitting on chicks. I never felt part of that. That was never me."

I'm stunned into silence. Both of us break eye contact and look away at the empty diner around us. And then I realize something: I always thought that the world just didn't fit Farg; it's never occurred to me that it's Farg who doesn't fit the world, that he's the bird on top of Kinsman Ridge flying south against his will, flying to survive, wanting to stay.

"Sorry, Farg," I say, feeling a sadness come over me. "I've been on edge of late. I guess I just get protective now with my daughter, that's all. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You don't owe me an apology," he says and nods. "It's me who owes you something. My gratitude. I've never forgotten what you did for me." And there's a watery film in his eyes, and I know what's he referring to and why he's appreciative, but I also know he shouldn't be. Not of me, at least.

"I'm glad you got in touch," is all I say. And we both know the time for talk is over and we dig into our food.

Ajelian looked at his watch and performed some silent calculations. "He shouldn't be that far behind us," he said. We stood around and waited another few minutes. I took out my water bottle and took a long sip. My knees were sore from the steep pounding and the cold had wormed its way into my body, my hands throbbing despite my gloves, and my toes numb despite my wool socks. The temperature must have dropped into the low forties. I couldn't wait to get off the mountain, drive into town, get dinner and drinks at a bar. Somewhere warm where the girls wore plaid flannel shirts and had sweet mountain smiles.

"Let's go back up and see where he is," Ajelian said.

"Back up?" I protested. I had no will to do more climbing. "Let's just give him a few more minutes, and then if he's not here, let's just go down."

“Go down?” he said, indignation in his voice. “Malcolm, it’s going to be completely dark soon,” he pulled out his headlamp and wrapped it around his forehead and put the light on. “We’ve already given him ten minutes. He must have gotten off trail.”

“Where the hell is he?” I repeated, and saying it again did nothing to quell my anger. “Why the fuck can’t he keep up?”

Ajelian didn’t answer and began climbing steadily.

“Isn’t it smarter to go down and get help if he’s lost?” I tried to appeal to his logic. “What’s the point of all three of us freezing up here? The Forest Service knows this area better than we do.”

He didn’t look back and just said, “It’ll be hours before they get back up here. You know what he was wearing.” Farg was in a cotton t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts. “You’re welcome to go back down,” he said, took out the car keys, and turned around to throw them at me.

I would have taken those car keys without hesitation, I really would have. I felt no responsibility to babysit Farg. As I saw it, he was going deliberately slow and he needed to learn a hard lesson. But the truth was I was scared to be by myself the rest of the way down. And Ajelian had the light. So I shook my head and begrudgingly followed him.

Every thirty seconds, Ajelian shouted out for Farg. We must have climbed for fifteen minutes. Ajelian’s headlamp shot out a beam of light in front of us, searching left and right for unmarked spur trails. His voice grew hoarse. He paused and gave me a withering look, “Jesus, can you help me shout?”

I just shook my head. “I’m out of gas,” I said, barely able to catch my breath.

Higher we climbed, back over root and rock, treading over trail we had ascended once before. To rest, I had to lean against one of the glacial erratic boulders that Ajelian had pointed out on the way up. I watched the light from his headlamp dwindle ahead and when I saw that he wasn’t going to wait for me, I pushed myself up and hurried after him.

“There’s a little trail off to the left here,” he said at last. “I’m going to go down it. Stay here in case he comes down the main trail.”

But even that request, I couldn’t abide. I didn’t want to be left alone without the light. So I waited a few paces and trailed after him down the serpentine path. A couple minutes later, I heard him shout “Farg” and then I hustled to catch up. Thirty yards ahead, I glimpsed the

prostrate body, the long legs draped over the trail, perpendicular to it, and as I got closer, I saw the straggly brown head of hair next to a rock the size of a basketball. Ajelian rolled Farg over onto his back. He had a deep gash on his forehead and congealed streaks of blood ran over the bridge of his nose and down his left cheek. We brought him to his feet. Ajelian kept telling him it was going to be alright, we had him now. "Malcolm, get him on the other side," he ordered.

"Was it a bear? A bear attack?" I asked hysterically, not realizing he just fell. "What happened?"

Ajelian ignored the question, didn't even look surprised that I was there. "Malcolm, get him. Make sure he's steady," he said placidly, as though he were speaking to a child, and for the first time that day, I obeyed.

Farg's head lolled in my direction. I could see the woozy tenderness in his eyes. With Farg's long arms draped over our shoulders, we walked him down the spur path to the main trail and then went down. Eventually, Ajelian's headlamp flickered and went out and then we were alone among the shivering trees and the quivering mountain air, but we kept walking, step after step, slowly, carefully, together in the darkness.