

MARGERY

JEFFREY PENN MAY

“This graceful, lyrical, and delicate novella lets us live in the mind of a fellow human who seeks solace and escape in the wilderness. As Jeffrey Penn May goes deeper and deeper into the narrator’s consciousness, the reader experiences confusion, fear, hope, and love along with him, and May is brave enough to tackle and illuminate the big mysteries: how and why we keep going, how we face death, how we connect or fail to, how we hide from our desires, and how we accept the inevitable.”

Mary Troy, award-winning author
The Alibi Café, Beauties, and Swimming on Highway N

“I really enjoyed *Margery* ... an almost surreal atmosphere ... stirs up all sorts of emotions: despair, sorrow, a sense of reality, irony, tension, grief, courage, love, anger, hope.”

Carol Cole, editor

“A lone hiker is drawn deep into the woods and emerges into a community set apart from the real world. What unfolds for him there—and the secret he discovers—isn’t what you might expect. With its rich descriptions of the natural world, its wise and articulate insights, its cast of humane characters, *Margery* addresses the deepest and most important issues we face. It’s Jeffrey Penn May’s best book.”

John Dalton, prize-winning author
Heaven Lake and The Inverted Forest

“Literary and thought-provoking; it’s something I think we all experience in different ways, a search for meaning, if you will.”

Mary Ward Menke, editor

“A bizarre journey.”

John Reichle, Outdoor Education Specialist

“The characters, and situations on the trail, have these small moments, words and gestures that feel fresh. *Margery* by Jeffrey Penn May is clever and has great plot points, but mainly I see the characters’ positive quirks in people I encounter throughout my day.”

Julie Heller, Outdoor Enthusiast

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Published by Paper Angel Press
paperangelpress.com

SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

AS I HIKED FURTHER INTO THE WOODS, deeper than I'd ever gone before, I noticed darkness not only surrounding me from the thick canopy of hardwood trees, their leaves abnormally large, but also felt a heaviness in my heart, a tightness in my chest that was counter to all my previous experiences hiking into the wilderness.

Usually I felt exultant at the blood and oxygen and endorphins rushing through my body, making me thank God, nature, pure existence. But not this time as I forged along this narrow winding path, an innocent offshoot to the heavily used trail, a path that begged for exploring, one that reasonable people should be turning away from ... but I've always felt drawn to the unknown, to the receding view around the bend. Sometimes I went too far, and this time I followed the path through underbrush, nothing more than the hint of a trail, and came upon a shallow clear stream about a dozen strides wide, roots of trees tangled along the banks.

I stopped and sat, backpack against a tree, my feet dangling from a root wad, feeling exhausted, almost crushed by the effort of moving. Not like me at all. What was going on? Should I sleep here, or retreat?

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Should I try to lay out my one-person tent along the small, twisting snake of a footpath and sleep? Darkness was seeping in around me and I suddenly felt more alone, more apprehensive than ever before.

In that moment, I chose to reflect; or more likely, I had no choice—my nature has always tended toward too much reflection. I was raised in middle-class privilege that has been eroding for many years, slowly at first but accelerating with each passing year and with the acceleration, my way of connecting with the world and with myself had regressed. I longed for an earlier time, a time when I could conquer whatever lay ahead, a time when I knew less, but was confident I knew a lot—I pretended to be a smart man and practiced formal English until it became a habit, and was often accused of being old-fashioned, but as I aged, it felt natural to speak and think like those long dead. I'm not hip, not cutting edge or fashionable, my style perpetually retro, wardrobe waiting to become trendy again because there is of course nothing new under the sun—except the progressive cascading swell of technology, but my phone was dead and gladly buried at the bottom of my backpack.

The other side of the stream was even more dense with tree roots than where I sat and squinted, looking to see if the path continued, but couldn't tell, couldn't make out any passage through heavily leafed thickets and thorns. I looked over my shoulder at the path I'd taken—a narrow tube-like passage—and wondered how I'd managed this far, ending up here, which was nowhere. My bare legs were scraped, but that was to be expected, hiking in shorts when paths like this one were more suited to long pants. My hands had thin scrapes with blood dotting along the wounds, but the wounds were minor. I had no idea how it happened. Normally, I wouldn't notice such things ... so that was normal. I shut my eyes to listen—the forest sounds sometimes soothing—and heard a twig snap, an unnatural sound from across the shallow stream.

A young man, perhaps in his twenties, splashed into the water and stood staring at me, eyes brilliantly blue, jaw sharp with a short dark-brown beard, wearing ragged blue jeans, and a T-shirt with no brand names, no logos or witty quotes, nothing, just plain black, worn and dirty—a younger version of me—and he stood barefoot, water rising

up to his ankles, soaking his jeans, his long dark hair tangled. If I'd seen him on the streets, I'd have thought him homeless, but here, he might be with a group of backpackers trekking into the unknown—and my thoughts seemed confirmed by his nonchalant greeting.

“Hey, how's it going?” He turned away, grabbing a tree root and pulling himself out on the opposite bank.

“Wait!” I called, “Where does this path lead?”

“Here,” he replied. “It leads here.”

He might have said something more, or it could have been just a splash, a rustle of leaves, or maybe the wind, and he disappeared through the brush, rising up the slope, again ignoring my calls to wait, so I took off my boots, waded across, nearly falling while climbing the root wads on the other side. I sat in the midst of a bramble and pulled my socks and boots back on over wet feet—my feet would dry and everything would be fine.

The evening was settling in, making the already shrouded forest darker and more difficult. *Where'd that guy go?* I hiked up the incline through the underbrush and soon my backpack got caught on a branch, and I tangled myself in a thicket and cursed and thought about shouting for help, but I'd done that only once in my life, pinned in the twisted wreckage of a car, and even then I could have gotten out on my own, so maybe it was pride keeping me from calling for help now.

I'd always been able to enter the forest and return in better spirits than when I'd started, but now I felt like giving up. Normally, I'd gut it through okay and break free of the bramble and go along my way, a better person for the struggle, but I felt trapped, worn out, noticing the stark contrast to the vitality of the young man who'd bounded away into the dense forest, apparently so “one” with his surroundings that he could melt through impenetrable underbrush.

My arms and hands had new gouges, not deep punctures but enough for me to smear the blood a few times before it dried. I stared at the dried blood, and the age spots patterned along the back of my hand like a map, as if they would lead me out of this mess, and lunged forward, pulling my tangled leg free, and pushed mightily against a branch. After a series of maneuvers, twisting my limbs so much that the pain lingered, I fell onto a narrow, barely noticeable V-shape in the

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undergrowth. I stepped carefully in the direction of what sounded like muffled voices, but couldn't be sure; my mind starting to trick me, the voices like a memory, hallucinations from the past seeping into my immediate future. Somewhere in the darkening forest ahead there was the crackling of a campfire, and a glimmer of hope appeared in the blackness, a flame, and then the glowing blue dome of a tent, making me think of spaceships, and aliens settled into our world. The young man was hunched over the fire, warming his hands near the flames. I stumbled into the campsite.

"What took you so long?" He sounded tired, but vigorous, his voice edgy.

I nodded up the slope, the earth rising above us in the dark. "Had to explore the ridgeline first."

He glanced at me, and I could see the moment he thought it possible I had climbed higher and explored the ridge in the impossibly short time since meeting him at the stream. We exchanged a few words in which he claimed he had told me to follow him, but obviously I didn't hear—my hearing not a subject I wanted to talk about—so we fell into a natural silence. As I wondered who this homeless backpacker was, youthful and vibrant and alive, he mumbled something else I didn't hear. He grimaced, then smiled—must've been something sardonic and funny—white teeth set against the layer of earth coating his windblown face, while I stood tired and uneasy, my teeth yellow from smiling at too many sunsets, and from inhaling the rust-colored clouds wafting up and swirling around glass, gem-studded lights in the lowlands, where the bleating noises of civilization overpowered my cries for solitude.

It was almost night, the light coming from the campfire, and I had been standing there for what seemed like forever, as everything sometimes did in the orange glow of crackling campfires. In the faint grayness of the descending light, the woods rustled and a young woman appeared from the dark and stood at the young man's side, wearing jeans and a T-shirt like his, and my gaze fell upon her small breasts, perfectly round, small nipples, enough to make me uncomfortable about my daughter, who lived far away and whom I hadn't seen in so long—this young woman perhaps even younger than my daughter

exuding a timeless sexuality, one that I could welcome only for a moment without feeling creepy, or grotesque.

“Hello,” she said, as if expecting me, a guest to this camp so far into the woods that for a moment I’d forgotten how I’d gotten there, and then wondered if I’d stumbled into a modern-day fairy tale—or dream—or nightmare in the long tradition of Grimm—my literary sensibilities interfering as they have in the past, barging into my reality and occasionally destroying the perfection of the moment.

I felt wobbly and needed to sit, so I gave in to the weight of my backpack pulling me to the floor of this hardwood forest and leaned heavily against a tree. The young couple watched me with interest but without alarm, as if I were a harmless and nameless woodland mammal settling into a burrow.

My legs felt like slabs of concrete—how long had I been hiking? It wasn’t the first time I’d hiked past sunset and searched for a camp, pitching a tent in the dark. But I tried to avoid it, and now a succession of events had piled up on me and made my current hike feel like an impossible slog—odd because I have stood triumphant on mountaintops—but now my arms felt glued to the straps of my pack and I could barely move, and after sliding out of them, I hoped to feel the lightness that comes from releasing heavy burdens, the lightness that always came in the past, the sudden feeling of freedom—releasing the backpack and roaming around the woods like a newborn fawn—but now I struggled to my feet and, while feeling momentarily free, it passed quickly, the weight returning all too soon, a momentary respite but none of the lightness of the past.

I stood across the fire from the two young people, who seemed to be patiently waiting for me. Waiting for what, I wasn’t sure, but nonetheless waiting—like I could tell them something useful. We stood across from one another, the fire providing an air of mysticism, as fires always do, and perhaps always have across generations, centuries, millennia.

I studied the young woman, envious not of the young man, whom I assumed was her boyfriend, but that I was not as young as she seemed to be. Yes, I could hike into the dark, could hike for miles, for days, forever and survive, or so I thought, but the exhilaration from the effort was becoming increasingly elusive. She would have no such problem. Though not beautiful in any sort of commercial sense, she was immensely

attractive, with athletic hips, and eyes that glistened orange from the fire, but I suspected they must be dark brown and not as reflective as my own blue eyes, which seemed to have been gradually turning gray. Her lips were full and her skin smooth. I would have traded places with her. As if that were possible. I wanted to say something, but what? Conversation silenced by fatigue—or maybe solemnity or laconic demeanor—no one spoke for such a long time that the first words would inevitably be banal. So I kept quiet—clearly among the three of us, I was supposed to be the one with answers, but I had long ago learned that keeping my mouth shut was usually the best approach.

Eventually, I would pitch my small tent, nothing more than a bivouac really, near the fire and would stand there by myself, wondering why I had not been more inquisitive. I thought about saying something but was surprised at my level of exhaustion, so much so that I could barely clear my throat—going for long periods without speaking makes me less inclined to do so. I don't know about you. Maybe it has the opposite effect. There was a time not all that long ago when I would check the statistics, the data, the reports from everyone around the world, check all the sociologically conflicting surveys asking oh-so-important window-to-the-human-soul questions—are you more or less likely to speak after long periods of not speaking at all? While watching the young couple silently staring into the fire, I recalled a *Twilight Zone* episode in which a man bets another man, who was known for his inability to shut the hell up, one million dollars that he couldn't stop speaking for one year, and after the year, the man had lost his ability to utter even a single word. Seems ridiculous, but in the *Twilight Zone* anything is possible—just as it is standing next to a fire, sorting through the details of a fictional world, uneasy about my lapse into silence, afraid I might not recover.

“You hungry?” the young man asked, his voice strong and clear, and his demeanor reminding me of a hippie I'd picked up from the highway a very long time ago while driving from Denver to Portland.

“No,” I said hoarsely, “thanks,” although I would have gladly eaten a camper's gourmet meal like the kind given on eco-tours.

He shrugged. “We're going to put out the fire –”

The young woman interrupted. “If it's okay with you.”

“Yeah,” the young man said, “if you need the light ... just put it out when you’re finished.”

The young woman stepped toward me, extended her hand to shake, a formal greeting that seemed at odds with the environment, as if she were struggling to maintain structure, control of her circumstances. “My name’s Kaylee,” she said, gripping my hand.

“I’m ...” but I hesitated, holding onto her hand, maybe her vigor, longer than I should while thinking about giving them a false name because mine has always caused me undue consternation. I’m terrible with names, yet they often seem to define us—Kaylee? My awkward silence filled the air with tension—or was it merely my anxiety? She squeezed my hand tighter and let go. Was she trying to reassure me? “Jerome,” I said, using my formal name, but quickly steered them away from using Jerry, a comedic name associated with cartoons and sitcoms. “Call me Jeremy,” I said, resisting the temptation to say, “Call me Ishmael” and Kaylee released my hand, and I felt as if I’d misplaced something that was just in my grasp a moment ago. Then as I shook the young man’s hand, I felt further need to explain myself, “‘Jeremy’ just sounds better ...”

“Works for me,” the young man said, his name easy enough, Josh, and they climbed into their tent, their shadows on the blue dome. I stood watching for awhile, feeling voyeuristic, until their light went out, and I unrolled my tent in the firelight and soon had everything in order, my water bottle, my flashlight, what little remaining food I had hanging from a tree, then kicked dirt into the fire and plummeted into black night. I couldn’t see anything, but heard Josh and Kaylee move, or at least thought so, as my hearing seemed lately to be accompanied by a constant humming and ringing. The blackness stayed with me, causing some uneasiness until my eyes finally adjusted to the glow of the evening stars, a half-moon rising from the eastern forest, the chirping of insects ... or was it my brain?

I crawled into my coffin-sized tent, and the ground was hard, my sleeping pad ill-suited for the rocks beneath it, and my thoughts were tinged with a rawness unlike what I’d come to expect here, where I used to find peace. I resisted sleep, perhaps because of what I’d become, or made myself to be; not necessarily horrible, just that there was no going back, no

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starting over, and perhaps it was that cold gray reality continually seeping into my consciousness I didn't want to face in the morning.

I drifted in and out of sleep, tossing and turning and struggling with my sleeping bag, zipping and unzipping, cold then hot, then cold, mumbling and mangling Robert Frost –*I've tasted desire ... enough of hate ... ice is great* And I peeked out the mesh opening to my tent, catching glimpses of the stars past the treetops, finally giving up and rummaging around for my small medical emergency kit, finding a pill and nibbling from the end like the harmless woodland mammal they likely thought I was, giving in to pharmacology and blacking out—regaining consciousness to the smell of dampness, burnt wood and sweat, and the hot brightness of late morning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey Penn May has won several fiction awards, including one from *Writer's Digest*. He has received a Pushcart nomination and was a Landmark Prize finalist. Jeff wrote and performed a story for Washington University Radio and was a consultant to a St. Louis theater company.

Among other occupations, Jeff has been a waiter, hotel security officer, credit manager, deckhand, technical data engineer, and creative writing teacher. Jeff's adventures include floating a home-built raft from St. Louis to Memphis, navigating a John boat to New Orleans, digging for Pre-Columbian artifacts, and climbing mountains from Alaska to South America.

For more information about Jeff's world and works, visit askwritefish.com.

*Introverted backpacker Jeremy wanders off trail
and discovers an eccentric, otherworldly town
nestled in a mountain basin.*

The people he finds there are pleasant, but a little peculiar. He befriends a reticent doctor and his wife, who is struggling with dementia, and Margery, who regularly leaps from a cliff in death-defying bungee jumps.

Why, he wonders, do the otherwise healthy and upbeat townspeople seem to be disappearing?



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