

101 Hikes in Big Squirrel Lick

Gregory Hischak

Time: *A present day or a very near future.*

Setting: *The Welcome Center and various external locales within the official boundaries of Big Squirrel Lick National Park—a fictional refuge of dubious integrity. Staging should be assembled with minimal detail. Likewise, flora or fauna of BSLNP, as performed by the actors, veers away from any serious realism.*

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE / PRECURSOR TO THE BIG ONE

(In darkness the sound of volcanic rumbling and then lights up on RANGER MEL center stage.)

MEL This morning, children, we're going to learn all about the wonderful woodland creatures that live right here in Big Squirrel Lick National Park. Have any of you ever seen a dead squirrel?

(Beat—nodding.)

That's right—on beautiful Big Squirrel Lick Highway coming into the Park. That's *Nature*. *(Grimly.) Nature* in all its brutal glory. Mighty oaks once lined Big Squirrel Lick Highway until we chopped them all down—

(Beat—nodding to a question.)

Why? We *had to* chop them down—to build things, child. To build Welcome Centers like this one and splintery picnic benches and rickety boardwalks and to guide you across the bleak sprawling terrain of this God-forsaken scenic wonder.

(Beat, as RANGER CAM enters upstage holding on her outstretched heavily-gloved arm a large bird. The bird's head is hooded.)

Yes...yes—God *has* forsaken this place, children. Only a thin layer of nasty yellow dirt separates us from the scalding geo-thermal waters below.

It is through this process that bad children are culled. Just as the squirrels who skitter out there on the road collecting acorns perish while those begging for food outside the gift shoppe thrive and multiply.

(Hushed, confidential.) We call this natural process of selectivity *Evolution*.

(MEL is startled by RANGER CAM's presence.)

CAM Children, the official stand here at Big Squirrel Lick is that it is Divinely-Determined Selectivity at play within the park.

MEL How long have you been lurking back there, Cam?

CAM I went to zumba alone last night, Mel.

MEL You brought the curlew out early.

CAM *(To audience.)* Big Squirrel Lick is a God-Determined National Park.
(To MEL.) This is where I *always* bring out the curlew.

MEL You were early, Cam.

CAM No, this is where I *come out*.

MEL This isn't where you *come out*. You're supposed to come out later and this isn't the place to *talk* about coming out.

CAM You said we were going to zumba together.

MEL I *know*, Cam. I had to go up up to Septic Gap last night.
(To audience.) Children, this is Ranger Cam.

CAM Ranger Mel and I share a cabin.

MEL We don't anymore. *(To audience.)* Look at what Ranger Cam is holding.

CAM The Septic Gap road is closed.

(Awkward beat.)

MEL What's...that?

CAM The Septic Gap road is closed.

MEL Is it?

CAM So I don't see how you could have gone up—

MEL *(To audience.)* That *IS* a good question: *Why Is The Bird On Ranger Cam's Arm Wearing a Hood?* *(To CAM.)* Ranger Cam?

CAM They closed the road yesterday—you said we'd be going to zumba.

MEL Why did they close the road again?

CAM The mudflow—

MEL People travel from across forty-one of our fifty states to see Septic Gap.

CAM I know.

MEL It's a destination *in* and *of* itself.

CAM It's on the brochure cover.

MEL It's on the *brochure cover*, Cam.

CAM Where have you been staying?

MEL *(To audience.)* Ranger Cam will introduce that creature on her arm.

CAM It's a weeping—

MEL *(To CAM.)* It's none of your business where I stay.

CAM I heard through the grapevine that you put in for a transfer, Mel.

(Beat.)

MEL The bird, Cam.

CAM It's a weeping curlew.

MEL Where'd you hear that, Cam?

CAM The grapevine.

MEL One of the squirrels told you—

CAM It wasn't a squirrel.

MEL *(Up.)* The squirrels talk too much.

CAM Officially, squirrels do not talk—

MEL I know. *(To audience.)* Ranger Cam will now explain why the weeping curlew is wearing a hood.

CAM You're leaving tomorrow?

MEL I was *thinking* of leaving tomorrow—the hood, Cam.

CAM You weren't going to tell me?

MEL Well, I figured you'd probably read it in the park newsletter.

CAM The *quarterly* newsletter?

MEL The *hood*, Cam.

(*Beat.*)

CAM (*To audience.*) If you remove the hood from the weeping curlew—it weeps.

MEL Maybe tell us *why* the weeping curlew weeps, Ranger Cam.

CAM Because it was BETRAYED—temblor.

(*We hear earth movement as MEL and CAM jerk sharply in unison, swaying as the trembler subsides—and then continuing.*)

MEL Trembler.

CAM Temblor, trembler—same thing.

MEL Children, that concludes our Big Squirrel Lick wildlife lecture.

CAM What about Emily?

MEL We've run out of time for Emily.

CAM I mean does *Emily* know you're leaving?

MEL We're moving on to the Nine AM Adult Welcoming now.

(*To audience.*) Thank you children—remember to stay on the boardwalks at all times—that was not an earthquake.

(*Beat, then to CAM.*)

You think that was the big one?

CAM You'll know when the big one comes. That was just a precursor.

MEL A what?

CAM You know, precursor to the Big One—hang on, Quake Stench.

(*They both react to a whiff of quake stench.*)

MEL *Woo*—why does it do that every time?

CAM There are some bad things in the earth that get emitted—you know, whenever it shakes.

MEL What the hell has the earth been eating?

CAM Mel?

MEL Cam, I was *going* to tell you—okay? I was going to—

CAM Can I hold your hand?

MEL No.

CAM Is this a bad place, Mel?

MEL This is a *bad* place, Cam.

CAM You mean bad like situational or—?

MEL We're in the Welcome Center, Cam.

CAM I know.

MEL It's time for the nine AM adult welcoming.

CAM What about Emily?

(Beat, then somewhat flustered to audience.)

MEL Good morning and welcome to the Big Squirrel Lick National Park Visitors Center.

CAM Welcome Center.

MEL Welcome Center. A beacon for recreational vehiclists from across forty-one of our fifty states—the park, that is, not the Welcome Center.

CAM It *used* to be called the Visitors Center.

MEL This is where we welcome you to the *beacon for recreational vehiclists* from forty-one of our fifty...

What was that? *(Beat.)* Yes, it did feel like an earthquake.

CAM A temblor.

MEL Trembler.

CAM Same thing.

MEL We get *a lot* of questions about the earthquakes here.