

2018

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Recommended Citation

Cherim, Mike (2018) "How I Died Hiking: An Imagined Story that Could Happen to Anyone," *Appalachia*: Vol. 69 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol69/iss1/11>

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How I Died Hiking

An imagined story that could happen to anyone

By Mike Cherim



Author's note: This work of fiction isn't meant to be shocking or morbid. Nor is it meant to point out any glaring errors or huge lapses in judgment. You'll find, in fact, that it could really happen to anyone. It can creep up on us. In a moment, an innocuous experience becomes something else. The scariest part is that no matter how much we know, if we reach the point where we can no longer reason, the downward spiral can be swift and irreversible without intervention.

Chapter 1: Like Any Other Day

The day began on the warm side. Light winds and clear skies were noted on the 4:50 A.M. summit report. The forecast told of increasing winds and dropping temperatures, courtesy of a front also possibly bringing snow squalls or freezing rain late in the afternoon or early evening. Being a fast hiker, I figured I'd be up and back well before any of that nastiness rolled in.

I was going to go do this with a buddy of mine, but he ended up fighting a bug, according to a text he sent at 3 A.M. I was on my own. No big deal. I've gone on so many winter hikes I've lost count. I may be from out of state, but it is no reflection on my ability. I green-lighted my trip without giving it a second thought. After a quick breakfast, I hopped in my car and made for the mountains. "The mountains are calling and I must go," I posted to my friends on Facebook in the wee hours of the morning.

Before I knew it, the mind-numbing drive was over, and I was on the trail. It was nice. I was cruising up the mountain, taking it in big strides. Since the forecast for the better part of the day was decent, I didn't bring my really heavy gear, so that allowed me to hike a little faster. Bear in mind, I'm experienced and didn't head out without the essentials; I just didn't bring the really heavy stuff, like my big parka, pad, or sleeping bag.

The temperatures were unseasonably warm, and I began to sweat. I knew better than to sweat out my clothing too much, so I de-layered. I could have slowed my pace, too, but I wanted to be off the mountain by early afternoon, so I got down to my base layer and continued on. The effort paid off. Before long, I was in the krummholz zone at treeline and putting a layer back on, thanks to the winds. Apparently, they were building more quickly than expected. I couldn't see to the west yet, but based on the winds, the

In a moment, an innocuous experience becomes something else—something dangerous.

ILLUSTRATION BY REBECCA M. FULLERTON

front was coming through earlier than forecast. Mountain weather can be unpredictable at times.

Within a half-mile of my last position, the winds had picked up, and the sun had become a dim, gray light bulb. The clouds were descending. I loved it, actually. I was having a great day. I had the mountain to myself, it seemed. Not many people took the route I did, so that added to my feeling of solitude. It was a bummer my buddy couldn't make it, but I was far from unhappy. I was in my happy place, after all.

I finally made it to the ridge. I looked to the west—except, well, I couldn't. The clouds from the west had made it to the ridge at the same time I did. I found myself wrapped in a wet blanket of gray and white mist. I donned my hardshells. The temperatures were dropping as forecast, and soon I found myself shrouded in ice. My hood became a helmet, my trekking poles like two thickening limbs. I'd been in worse and decided to press on. I was close to the summit, and I had done this so many times before. I barely gave it a second thought.

It didn't take me long. The winds were picking up, nailing me from my left side on the way up—and would be on my right on the way down—but I was able to stand on the summit in my ice suit. I was rocked by a gust, and it took me aback for a second, but this was grand. “Woooooo-hooooo,” I shouted. I was slammed by another gust and decided enough was enough. I retreated from the summit and retraced my steps back down the mountain.

Chapter 2: A Turning Point

The front came in early, that's for sure, and the wind grew not only in intensity, but it shifted direction, albeit slightly. This wasn't in the forecast, but mountain weather will always be fun like that. Now it was in my face more, so I altered my angle of descent a bit so I could see better. My goggles were able to do their job. I was heavy with ice, but the wind still tried to pick me up and set me down at times. My poles helped a lot, doing their job as well. Having altered my course some, I found myself off the regular boot pack and into some softer snow. I postholed a few times in unseen spaces between the rocks, but I was making it OK. It was a little tiring and tedious.

The biggest problem with the uneasy footing was that it was coupled with gusting winds. The winds were wet and heavy with ice, and the gusts violent and unpredictable. At this point, the grandness of it all was diminished, and

I just wanted to get down below treeline. I had about a mile and change to go. Usually I'd cover that distance of descent plunge-stepping down the mountain in about ten to fifteen minutes. I was thinking about this very thing when it happened.

A gust caught me off guard and sent me to my knees. One of them, my right, struck a rock. I cursed. I knew I had injured my knee. I tried to get up and managed to do so, but I was in severe pain. Not only was I slowed by the weather, ground conditions, and visibility, I was now favoring a painful knee. No speed records would be broken on this descent. I was making it, though. Hobbling. Meanwhile, in the world above treeline, the winds continued to gain in intensity, and the temperature was dropping like a rock. I was getting chilled having slowed my pace. My mind wandered. I thought of my big parka, back in my closet. I continued to descend.

A sudden gust twisted my body, causing me more knee pain and snapping me out of my daydream. I was laden with ice and couldn't seem to be rid of it. I was getting tired and cold. It was raw. Always thinking—still thinking, thankfully—I had a snack close at hand and managed to take a few bites of a dense, nearly frozen PowerBar. It was amazing as it thawed in my mouth. I felt a surge of energy. I continued on shouldering the wind, stronger, and feeling slightly warmer. I reacquired the boot pack. This would be no problem, despite my knee.

I was doing OK, but the falling temps and increasing winds intensified the challenge. The precipitation changed from freezing rain to heavy snow, and it blew everywhere, making visibility even worse. I was still on the boot pack and not fearful of getting lost (plus, I could use my compass if I needed to), but I was mindful of my painful knee and the difficult walking conditions. I continued on, using up the last of my PowerBar buzz, and once again found myself thinking of my parka. I was getting cold again.

I stumbled. A gust caught me off guard, and a crampon nicked my hardshells above the gaiter as I high-stepped around a rock. In doing so, I tweaked my knee again. I sounded out, but the wind carried my cries away so quickly they weren't audible, even to myself. That's when another sudden gust hit me and sent me down hard, bending my trekking pole in the process. I landed on my effing knee! This time whatever damage I did in the first blow was complete. My patella was in pieces. I was injured to the point that I was no longer able to remain upright or mobile. The pain was relentless.

Chapter 3: In Decline

Where the hell was everybody?! I crawled along on the ice and snow for what seems like hours, my tears freezing to my face. I knew I was in trouble. Not dead yet, no impending doom, not even thinking that way, yet, but this was not only no longer fun, I was getting pretty worried. This could end bad—nah, I couldn't believe that, not really.

I didn't get far. I was shivering. I needed to find cover. My mind was still working. I thought so, anyway. I told myself, I be, therefore, I think I am . . . I am Sam, Sam I am . . . green eggs and . . . what the ham?! So muddled. I was losing it. Crawl to the krummholz, I told myself. I made it. I took off my pack and dug out all of my layers with a strange, nearly silent laugh. My fingers wouldn't cooperate as much as I'd like them to. Everything took so long. I fumbled for my light puffy and my clavibala, baliclove—whatever. This sucks! I couldn't get it on my head. I struggled in the krummholz. My hood came off. Was it even on? I shivered so hard it hurt. Then that subsided. I began to think I was screwed. Some snow fell down my back.

It's nice here in the krummholz. Not as bad as being out there in the wind. I didn't bring my pad but I have put myself in my pack a bit, and I'm sitting on my gear trying to stay off the ground. I am clinking thearly. I wish I had brought my big parka. I keep daydreaming about it. The snow that fell down my back melted. I want to eat some snow, but I need to wait a little to warm up. I eat some anyway. Sooooo good. I have some more. My knee doesn't hurt any more—I don't think so, anyway—but my pants are bloody. It's really nice in here. I bet dandelions grow here in the summer. It feels like summer. My mind wanders.

Somehow, I nod off but wake up again, this time feeling nothing, yet also feeling incredibly stiff. I no longer feel cold. I want to take off my puffy, but somehow it's already off. I then decide to put it on but I don't move. I forgot: I'm not cold anymore. It's so confusing. I just sit there . . . in my happy place.

I nod off again, thinking about parkas and dandelions. Maybe. I don't know that I am thinking. Maybe I'm not thinking. Maybe I just am. Then maybe, I wonder, if even that's true. Day becomes night. Time moves on. I slip away into the alpine zone.

"He died doing what he loved," they said.

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