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# Too Cold

*The death of Kate Matrosova*

**Sandy Stott**



THIS IS A LOVE STORY. ITS BACKGROUND CONTAINS A WIFE AND husband; its foreground features a woman and mountains across the world. Even as Shakespeare and life remind us that love stories do not always end happily, love's spirit still suffuses this one, makes us want to know it. It may seem odd to begin parsing a tragedy by talking about love, but without some sense of Kate Matrosova's passion, this story becomes too simple, becomes simply a record of error that can be recounted and tutted about. It is more than that.

Sometime on February 15 or 16, 2015, New York City resident and Banque Nationale de Paris Paribas trader Kate Matrosova froze to death near Star Lake between New Hampshire's Mounts Madison and Adams. Her death was all over the news; its starkness drew the eye, engaged the heart. At age 32, she was, by all reports, mountain-experienced, though that experience was concentrated within the last few years, and she was fit and equipped for winter. But not, it turned out, for what blew through the White Mountains during her final 48 hours. Can one be "equipped" for winds near 80 MPH and temperatures of -30 degrees Fahrenheit? The estimated windchill on nearby Mount Washington had dropped to nearly -80 degrees F; the ground blizzard of snow must have been impenetrable. A YouTube clip of searchers crossing the slopes of Mount Adams shows two of them simply blown over like cutout figures at an amusement park shooting gallery.

Why, so many wondered, walk up into such extremes? All of us who press out into the mountains' elemental world know its lure. There, at distance from the channeled forces that heat and light our houses and apartments, that drive our devices and their synthesized worlds, we find our old selves brought forward from a million years of evolution, which is another name for experience. "Are you experienced?" asked Jimi Hendrix in his short life. "Yes," say our ancient selves, "yes, we are." Or we want to be.

Twinned with this drive is our need for recognition—from others, yes, but often most centrally from ourselves. In Western culture, this need often takes on a solo cast; we want to be seen and see ourselves as singular, as distinct and distinctive, and achievement seems the best route: "Whoa," we like to hear, "did you hear that? Who is she? How did he do that?" It begins early in the

*Two miles from Route 2, members of the Mountain Rescue Service relieve exhausted members of Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue as they carry Matrosova's body down the Valley Way.* MIKE CHERIM

home or on the playground and rarely goes away. Who doesn't want to be "bad-ass," if only for a short time?

Mix in the mountains, even the ground-down molars of our New England Appalachians, and the weather they breed. For the last 300 years, after our highlands shifted finally from being home to the gods to being no one's home at all, mountain-drawn folk have found a sort of distinction there. First, there was the challenge of peaks unclimbed; once they'd been climbed, it became routes deemed unclimbable or weather judged too severe. See, for example, the media flurry around January 2015's "free climb" of El Capitan's Dawn Wall, the generally acknowledged "hardest rock-climb in the world." Supported by years of practice and planning and liberal rope-hauled supplies, Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson's exploit was filmed and blogged and, yes, tweeted throughout its 19 days. The climb drew long eyes—the thicket of cameras in the meadow below pointed aloft like cannons. Can they do it? Will they break the wall, or will it break them? Will they stay together? Will one fly and the other fall? Caldwell and Jorgeson were "out there," remarkable. Climbing free of what holds the rest of us in our chairs and jobs and various forms of predictable inertia.

Before this, we riveted our attention on and sometimes glorified the young Alexander Supertramp, a.k.a. Chris McCandless, whose story Jon Krakauer told in *Into the Wild*. Until his mysterious death, he too wanted to free climb though life, defy its gravity.

That, I think, is part of the appeal. You pack up the little town that goes on your back; you step from the lot where people park their cars and their usual lives; you slip between two trees, free for some elemental time in this oldest world. You go up, where divinity once lived, where your hoped-for new self can emerge.

Kate Matrosova was part of that tribe. She would go up—in a grueling daily training regimen on the steps of New York City buildings and to the summits of Kilimanjaro, Elbrus, Aconcagua, and Denali, and she hoped eventually to reach the summits of all seven continents. Over the years that stretched ahead, who knows how many other mountains she would have climbed? Ferociously fit and able to endure what many cannot, Matrosova was in the first flush of a passion for the hills.

As Chip Brown's sharp-eyed April 2015 essay for *Bloomberg News* makes clear, Matrosova's capacity for passion drove her training—she trained at levels most can't reach—and kept leading up. Tragically, on those two February days, her passion met weather more turbulent, more driven than she could

master. But before we think more about this unhappy meeting, we need to climb the essential details to it, to arrive at the meeting of climber and storm.

By the time she reached the Whites that weekend, Kate Matrosova had already compressed a lifetime of movement into her 32 years. Born into meager circumstances in Omsk, Siberia, she showed drive throughout her childhood and gained entrance to Omsk State Transport University, where she studied finance. At age 20, Matrosova secured a student work visa and flew to the United States where, over the next decade, she transformed herself into an astute financial analyst and remarkable athlete. With a magna cum laude BA from DePaul University, where she studied finance, marketing, and accounting, and a master's from the University of California, Berkeley, in financial engineering, Matrosova climbed quickly to levels of accomplishment most see only from a distance. Those she met and those she worked with were drawn to her zest for life and awed by her abilities and drive. In his *Bloomberg* article, Brown quoted a research partner, Li Sun, a PhD physicist who now works for Morgan Stanley. He said that Matrosova “was an adventurer, but I don’t think she was a risk-seeker. She wanted to know different things, achieve different things, get to different places. It wasn’t about risk. It was about achievement.”

And so, as part of her upward training, Matrosova and her husband, Charlie Farhoodi, arrived in the winter Whites in mid-February. On the 15th, she planned to climb over and through a Northern Presidential traverse in alpine style—quick and light over its four summits and 16 miles, beginning on Mount Madison before dawn, climbing then over Mounts Adams and Jefferson, and dropping down from Mount Washington along the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail as dusk came on. It was an ambitious itinerary. In the face of an extreme forecast, speed would be essential; Matrosova expected to be up and down before it got too tough.

Still, that forecast continues to give many pause. Surely the nearby Mount Washington Observatory was explicit in its predictions for uninhabitable cold and wind, as were other forecasters: the coming weather would be the toughest of an already notable winter. Digesting the observatory forecast, the Mount Washington Avalanche Center’s Snow Ranger Jeff Lane put it this way in his February 15 comment:

Mount Washington will truly be putting on a show today and tomorrow. Its well-earned reputation for harsh winter weather will be on display, and I’d recommend taking a seat away from the action for

this show. . . . Temperatures will be falling today, reaching –35 degrees F (–37 degrees C) on the summit overnight. During this time, wind speeds will be rising quickly up to the 100 MPH (161 KPH) mark, with gusts possibly reaching 125 MPH (201 KPH). These conditions are not to be taken lightly. I encourage you to be judicious in your choice of adventure today. Even if your plan is to stay well below treeline today, bring plenty of warm clothes and extra food and water.

There is a measured, laconic quality to Lane's sentences, even as its figures are eye-catchingly extreme. But Lane, deeply experienced, writes from the point of view of someone who has seen all of this before and knows what to make of it.

As veteran mountaineer and rescuer Rick Wilcox pointed out in an interview after the tragedy, there are two ways to approach the mountains: heavy and slow or light and fast. The first is a geared-up, full-pack style reminiscent of the siege method of early high climbing. The second is a stripped-down, bare-essentials quickness close in spirit to trail-running. When fully equipped, you carry civilization's core with you—shelter, fire in some form, fuel, clothing—all in service of providing and protecting your elemental heat; the quick-footed climber leaves some of those behind and so depends on not being stopped.

Well below treeline, Mount Madison's Valley Way eases into the woods over gentle contours for its early mile, and Matrosova must have made rapid headway from her 5 A.M. departure. After training on stairs and in stairwells, at times with a 60-pound pack, the liberation of real trails and light weight must have felt grand. And the boot track of this usual way into the Northern Presidentials would have made for good walking.

Matrosova was alone in two ways: she and her husband had agreed he would stay in the valley and be the day's driver. Although Farhoodi enjoyed "being drawn along in her wake," he was not an aspiring mountaineer; that was her goal. In addition, the day's cold forecast made it unlikely that she'd meet others on these north- or cold-weather-facing slopes. Still, I'm guessing Matrosova did not feel lonely as she climbed. There is a snug economy to being outfitted for and moving at the right speed through intense cold, where the little engine of your body is kicking out heat and your layered clothes are managing that heat efficiently. From such economy comes pleasure and confidence, a sort of mental fuel and companionship of self.



*Two rescuers, one kneeling, the other's leg showing, work to recover the body of Kate Matrosova (out of frame). The site where she was found is between Mount Adams and the Madison Spring Hut, off the Star Lake Trail south of the lake, at the bottom of the summit cone of Mount Adams.* MIKE CHERIM

For reasons unknown and unknowable, Matrosova's ascent slowed as the morning wore on and she summited Mount Madison, then dropped down to the col between it and Mount Adams. Global positioning systems records show that she later climbed another mile from there to the top of Mount Adams and then turned back into the gathering gale, returning, finally and fatally, to the col near Star Lake, where she pressed the button on her locator beacon (carried at her husband's insistence) at 3:30 P.M. She was found dead near there the next day.

By the time Matrosova summoned help, the morning's heat and confidence had been drawn from her by the ceaseless cold and wind. It's likely that these two administered a final blow as she reached the col, where Mounts Madison and Adams rising above would channel and accelerate that wind through

a narrow gap. Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue team member and Mount Washington State Park Manager Mike Pelchat noted that most of us don't understand the effects of high winds on simple body motions because we haven't experienced them:

It wasn't a bad day [early on], but you could hear the wind beginning to build like a freight train bringing in the cold air. The front came in really quickly, sooner than forecast. One thing people often don't understand is that every 10 mile-per-hour gain in wind speed increases the force much more than 10 percent. When the winds are 80 or 90 or 100 miles an hour, you can't walk or stay on your feet; you're on your hands and knees waiting for a lull. You can't lift your goggles up, the wind blows your arms behind you. If the temperature is 20 below and a zipper breaks or you drop a glove, you can get into trouble quickly. Hypothermia sneaks up on you, and you start making poor choices.

Take a look at the chart showing the progression of the wind and cold recorded on nearby Mount Washington: you'll note the steady decline in temperature as the morning wears on, and the corresponding increase in wind speed as the day deepens. A 4:49 A.M. reading of -4 degrees with 35 MPH winds becomes a 3:51 P.M. reading of -20, with 77 MPH winds.

By 3:30 P.M. Matrosova was achingly close to the point where the trail to the valley begins to descend toward the shelter of the woods below, but the

**February 15, 2015 Wind and Temperature Chart  
for Mount Washington**

Time	Temperature °F	Wind Speed	Windchill °F
4:49 A.M.	-4	35 MPH	-33
5:55 A.M.	-6	45 MPH	-38
8:54 A.M.	-11	41 MPH	-45
1:49 P.M.	-17	86 MPH	-62
3:51 P.M.	-20	77 MPH	-66
5:49 P.M.	-31	75 MPH	-81
9:49 P.M.	-35	79 MPH	-88

MOUNT WASHINGTON OBSERVATORY DATA

wind must have formed a wall she couldn't walk or crawl through. Add to that the effects of prolonged cold and oncoming hypothermia, which also robs one of coordination, and you come to Matrosova's final resting place.

### **Seasons of Risk**

When in the grip of a story like Matrosova's, we move finally from narrative to a search for meaning. What are we to take away from her climb and death? What are we to make of her passion and decisions? It is easy to idle in an armchair and let your fingers fulminate. A scan of the commentary on various websites finds more than enough condemnation and superior trash-talking, sometimes by experienced climbers—a sort of rabid drooling in print. Often, as I emerge feeling unclean from the fetid pools of such a scan, I think, "Who are these people? I hope I never meet them." But, of course, I have.

So let's steer away from such sites; let's listen instead to the voice of a great mountaineer as he talks a bit about his climbing life and its risks. A number of years ago, I had a chance to interview mountaineer Chris Bonington. He was 59 at the time. After reviewing some of his fabled ascents in the Himalaya and elsewhere, I asked him if he still gathered with his friends to talk of those days. "My friends from those days are all dead," he said. After a pause to let this stark truth settle, I asked what separated him from these friends: "Why are you still alive?" I thought I might get some insight, a hint of some faint intuitive voice that says, "Don't do that; don't go there." I thought I might get a survivor's sense of superiority.

"Plain luck," he answered. And then he went on to sketch two scenarios, one when he was delayed in a midslope camp and started out hurrying to catch the rest of his party; the other when he and his companions were pinned down by a storm high on a 7,600-meter peak, China's Kongur. In the first instance, as Bonington followed the tracks of his fellow climbers, he soon arrived at their end, minutes after an avalanche had swept through. No tracks continued beyond the swept slope. They were gone. On Kongur, as the weather turned, each climber dug a single, body-sized slot in the snow, got in, and then spent three days hoping the storm would abate. "They were really snow coffins," said Bonington. "But finally the storm passed and we got up and then down."

"I miss them all," said Bonington about his dead friends, "especially because I was with them where we are most alive."

Another noted climber, writer Jon Krakauer of *Eiger Dreams* (Anchor Books, 1990), *Into the Wild* (Anchor Books, 1997), and *Into Thin Air* (Villard, 1999) fame, said this to me in a 1997 interview:

As you can imagine, it's incredibly illuminating at the age of 43 to be able to see some younger version of yourself. I don't know about you or most people, but when I was in my 20s, I was clueless. I was just acting; I was this roiling cloud of emotions drifting in the world, and I was compelled to do some pretty intense things. I never asked the question why, and I can't imagine I would have. I needed to go climb the Devil's Thumb [described vividly in *Eiger Dreams*]. It wasn't that I analyzed it carefully and said this is going to advance my career; it was none of that. Then to see, from the luxury of twenty years down the road, McCandless, another person on a similar path, is like finding a home movie of your childhood you never knew existed.

Both climbers have been given the chance of reflection on younger moments of risk. Neither sounds superior; both are humble in their acceptance of the gift of going on.

I often talk over risk and decision making with my friend and kayaking partner, Geoff. In charge of a large company's psychological support services, Geoff makes risk assessments daily, and he's the most prepared and clear-eyed of my outdoor adventure companions. A few days after we'd mulled over Kate Matrosova's story together, he sent me this note:

Last summer I spoke with our Deer Isle [Maine] neighbor, David L., an active, outdoorsy lawyer from Seattle. We were talking about levels of risk in outdoor activities, e.g., kayaking, mountaineering. He said that, early in his time out west he had lost three friends to the mountains. These losses nudged David from the risks of rock-climbing to the less-vertical ones of hiking. His friends were all white-collar professionals, like himself, who loved the mountains. We agreed that those realms were probably near the top of the charts as regards danger, in part because there were a lot of very tricky (treacherous) variables that one couldn't really control.

Once or twice a year, when in a mathematical frame of mind, I

think of the probability curves for danger as I drive around the neighborhood or to work—little graphs dancing in my mind: thus, heading east on Hennessey to Spring Street, and making the turn onto Spring Street (either right or left) has a much sharper, spikier chart than that of Weymouth, just 50 yards (if that) to the south. There, the sharp, little hill over the railroad tracks just to the north of Hennessey is only yards away, blind, and a seemingly perpetual temptation to fast-driving teenagers. Best to avoid it, and take Weymouth. Just playing the odds.

The mountains are packed with such equations.

I do wonder about Kate Matrosova. How could one not? Did she know the forecast? My recollection is that one could see that storm coming a long way off. If she didn't, that's pretty close to Original Sin. And if she did . . . ?

Perhaps she was at that point of having a dangerous amount of experience. I've read that with pilots and chain saw operators, this point is reached at about 200 hours. One has the basics down and is competent with them. If a pilot, one might have both VFR and IFR<sup>1</sup> ratings. And if one is naturally talented (as was Matrosova—or, at least, she was in killer good shape), one is likely to be overconfident in one's skills. Specifically, one doesn't know what one doesn't know; one has encountered actually only a few experiences, and perhaps not enough of the sobering ones.

For me, Geoff's thinking rings true. My own experience is sprinkled with such moments. And yours? Has not your mountain time also been subject to such calculations and miscalculations?

I recall reaching this level of experience in another exploration, that of being a teacher. There I was in my year-three classroom: all eyes were turned my way; subjects no longer seemed unruly; word after word was arriving right on time. I was in command! No reason I shouldn't stay that way; no reason this couldn't go on and on. Yes, I thought, I was good, already a master. And then, a few months later, given a new class with different chemistry (from the

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1. VFR means "visual flight rules." A pilot with VFR capabilities can fly only in weather clear enough to see landmarks. A pilot with IFR—"instrument flight rules"—capabilities is permitted to fly in all conditions, even clouds and fog.

get-go, a few students seemed simply not to like me—what’s that all about?), not so good. In fact, downright bad. No master; not even mister.

I had entered what Geoff and my teaching friend David call the don’t-know-don’t-know zone. I didn’t know what I didn’t know. I had no experience to help me figure out what could be wrong; every attempt to fix the situation felt like a random choice. That stretch went on, and on. How to escape? Wallowing seemed the only route, and I was lucky to be given time and space to wallow my way through. On the equivalent challenge of a mountain in a subzero tempest, I would have perished.

And so, perhaps sobered by reflection on our own close calls and wallowings, in the hills and elsewhere, we return to the col by Star Lake on February 15. GPS records give us Matrosova’s course to her final fall. We have an image of an earlier moment provided by her camera, perhaps the point where the day began to pivot. What follows is purely my own speculation, but it seems consistent both with Matrosova’s spirit and the day’s extreme weather. In the last picture Matrosova took midmorning, she’s down off Mount Madison, near the hut (which, as White Mountain climbers know, is locked tight, providing no option of shelter during the winter months; Matrosova would have known this). Though she’s already well behind schedule, she is smiling. What might that smile mean on a climber as driven as Matrosova?

We don’t know, of course; we never will. But here’s a guess. The climb up and over Mount Madison had taken her longer than planned. It was extremely cold and windy, and going to get colder and windier. In the face of time and forecast, perhaps Matrosova had already decided to abandon the remaining 12 miles of her traverse and return to the parking lot at the Appalachia trailhead. The smile could indicate that, for her, the hardest moment had already passed—that moment when she would give up her goal, step back a bit from her drive to complete her planned climb, a drive that had already taken her halfway across the world from her birthplace in Siberia and into rarified air in so many realms of life. What a hard decision. But one finally made. And so, the smile.

Given my decision to back off the traverse, she might have thought, I’ll just do the mile up Mount Adams, then turn back down and call Charlie from the parking lot. It won’t take him long to drive around and get me. And so, as her GPS record shows, she went up Mount Adams, with the north wind’s strong hands at her back. Then, as she turned to go back, the winds amped up a little earlier than expected; the tempest went from barely walkable to unlivable.

## Coda

This essay has looked at a tragic story and tried to understand its genesis and arc; it has not followed the more journalistic pattern of our journal's Accidents reports, where readers might expect to find it. And so, I've resisted some of the cautioning and assessment of responsibility that are common to the Accidents column, though I hope my opinion is clear. Still, I would be remiss if I did not mention some of the analytic takeaways from Kate Matrosova's story.

As noted in this essay, Matrosova made the choice to go fast and light in her traverse, and that meant that she had no option of hunkering down and waiting for the tempest to pass when she got in trouble. Carrying the added weight of shelter and fire and food would have slowed her, making the planned 16-mile traverse less likely. Such equipped climbing may not have saved her in such severe weather, but it might have offered a chance. Her only remaining margins of safety were the aforementioned speed and high-tech communications (locator beacon, phone), which did succeed in making her trouble known, but, given the extreme weather and the lag in rescue it created, couldn't save her.

Matrosova made a point of taking responsibility for herself, and I argue that each of us should have the freedom to risk our selves in pursuit of living. The tougher question arises when one considers the rescuers who responded to Matrosova's beacon call late on the afternoon of the 15th. Rescuers, professional and volunteer, did what we have come to expect of them, even in extreme nighttime conditions: they tried to find the climber in trouble. Did Matrosova—do you or I?—have the right to summon this response, to put others at extreme risk, when we have chosen to climb in such dangerous circumstances? Here, I have to say, no. And yet, even as I do so, I also have to say that each rescuer who responds to such a call bears some responsibility, too. Each makes a choice to go out, and each can refuse or turn back if the risk to self becomes untenable. Which is precisely what happened on the night of 15th, when searchers couldn't find Matrosova at one of the locations indicated by the beacon's signal.

*One* of the locations? Yes, one of the locations, plural. Although we like to believe our technology is precise to within inches, the truth of beacon and cell phone signals is that terrain and weather can make them unpredictable. And, of course, even had this signal been true, it doesn't take much to miss a person in howling darkness with visibility measured in inches of headlamp light, like that of the night searchers on the 15th.

The weather, amply cited in this essay, bears repeated mention. Predictions by Snow Ranger Jeff Lane and myriad other forecasters came true. It really was a day to stay in, or down low. As I speculated earlier, I think Matrosova learned that in the col between Mounts Madison and Adams, but her realization arrived a little too late.

Finally, I will defend Matrosova's right to go up as she did, alone and lightly equipped for speed, even as I would not do the same, even when I, too, was in the first flush of a life's passion for the mountains.

### **Trail's Endnote**

Those of us who go up alone probably don't need a reminder, but my recent phone conversation with Charlie Farhoodi impels me to offer it: no one climbs solo. Weightless but with us every step are the relations we hold close; when one of us doesn't return, her or his absence goes on and on for those left behind.

At the outset, I contended that Kate Matrosova's final climb is a love story; after spending long hours reading about, thinking through, and finally writing it, I still think this is so. At times, love brings erasure; the rest of the world goes away, and one is fully present—with another or in a special place. Living with such a love is a gift, though it is not, as we learn repeatedly, without peril.

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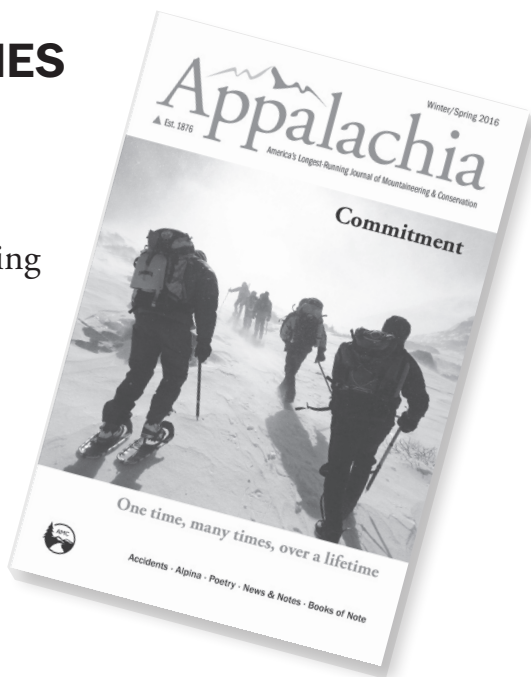
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