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The Long Way Home: When We Can't Go

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When We Can't Go

“DO YOU YOU KNOW THIS PLACE?” A NEW FRIEND ASKED. I SHOOK my head. We stood looking at a framed assortment of photos showing a stream, forest, and cabin. “It’s the Dead Diamond River.” He’d beckoned me down to the basement level of his house to show me this.

The sandy New Hampshire river he gestured to in the photos winds through a large reservation known as the Second College Grant (owned by Dartmouth College) and on to Lake Umbagog. Dan had first explored “The Grant” as a college student. It had captivated him. Some years later, his old friend Ron had lured him back. “I again fell in love with it,” he said. He’d taken his family and friends once or twice a year. They’d slept in cabins, canoed the rapids, bushwhacked up mountains, and watched the Northern Lights.

Even after surgeons removed a benign brain tumor, he’d returned. “It became not every year, but most years, for the last decade or so.”

Dan lingered over—almost leaned into—the framed collage. The Grant connected him to himself in a way other places did not. He’d served as a captain in the U.S. Army during the Tet Offensive, in the bloodiest year of the Vietnam War, 1968. “I had never been able to open up to myself, or anyone else,” he said. “The Grant was the place where that started happening.”

The sky is dark up there; he’d gazed at Orion, which reminded him of watching the Southern Cross, a constellation he could see only in Vietnam. He saw moose climb partway up a ridge, hang up above a ravine, and turn around. He’d thought he could read their emotions: “As in, ‘Oh, damn; what do I do now?’ So I was contemplating that, and it probably brought out, ‘Gee, life is about being thwarted and then finding alternate pathways.’ And that described experiences that I had had in life. Yes, that’s how we stayed alive, in my opinion.”

HE HADN’T BEEN ABLE TO GO LATELY.

He’d undergone rotator-cuff surgery and discovered a heart-valve problem. He had to visit a hospital regularly for physical therapy. At home, he still

mowed grass, cut tree limbs, and fixed furniture. But the last time he had gone to the Dead Diamond River, with his daughter and two friends in 2013, they'd set out up a steep trail. "I was the leader. We were climbing a mountain, not a big mountain. I couldn't go on. I had to stop. I told the others where to go. I said, 'I'll wait here.' When they went on, I sat on a rock and cried."

HE WAS LOSING SOMETHING HE LOVED. HE'D PUSHED HIS BODY AGAINST the unyielding rocks until his body said, "Stop." People measure themselves against mountains, but the mountains just are.

I told him that I understand. Going up the mountains trains me in living deliberately, doing one task at a time, accepting what I can and can't do. I hope that those habits bleed into my usual life. I have struggled over the trails; those struggles form me.

But I don't fully understand. I'm a decade and a half younger than he. I've fooled my muscles and joints into thinking they're still near to youth. I've beaten some of the odds by climbing up rocks year after year. I'm addicted, and this addiction delivers peace and understanding.

Dan said, "It's the adrenaline I miss."

His wistfulness evokes what Wendell Berry talks about in his poem, "The Thought of Something Else"—"that old dream of going, / of becoming a better man / just by getting up and going / to a better place." Is it the place that transforms us or the idea of it? When our bodies tell us to stop, what we miss is the freedom to seek change. But the change happens inside. It was happening again in that basement.

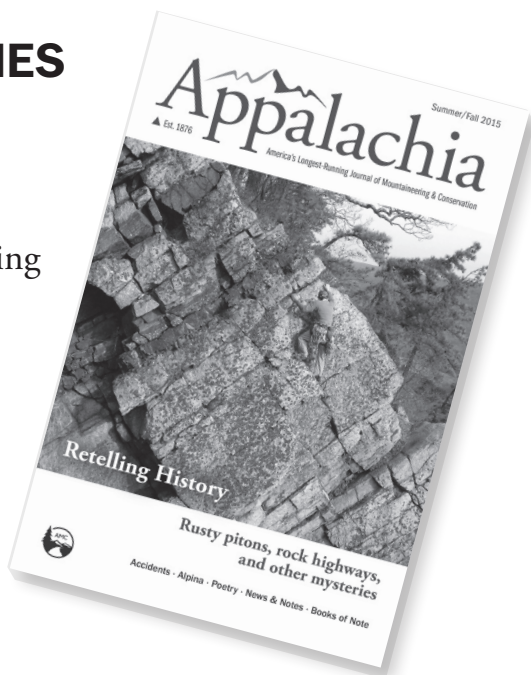
—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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