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Finding Courage in the Mountains' Shadows

Recovering a climber's body

Ryan J. Harvey

. . .the stark reality of death, that half dreaded, half invited angel ever brooding in the shadows of the climber's world.

—*Laura and Guy Waterman, A Fine Kind of Madness*



BACKS TO THE ENCIRCLING HEADWALL, WE LISTEN AS THE HELICOPTER flies out of sight, rounding Chandler Ridge until we can no longer hear its low hum. The silence and stillness of the Great Gulf dominate. Without conversation, we collect our gear, gather our thoughts, and begin to pick our way back up the headwall in the moonlight.

This time I climb ahead of Mike, lost in my thoughts of the evening's events. The adrenaline receding, I withdraw into a meditative state of climbing. The moonlight seems to illuminate my thoughts on the past three hours, on the darker side of the alpine experience: suffering, struggle, and death.

Only a few hours before, with the sun still in the western sky, I awoke in the afternoon as I had every other day of my shift. The rime-encrusted portal of my bunkroom within the Mount Washington Observatory glistened as sunlight filtered through. I knew by the intensity of the light that we were out of the clouds.

As I was walking up the spiral stairs of the cold observation tower, the hum of instrumentation dominated as the ever-present winds were noticeably absent, at least through the thick walls of the tower. Pushing my way through the tightly sealed door of the weather room, I awoke again to the uninterrupted alpine light pouring through the triple-paned windows that frame our workstation. The Northern Presidential Range was majestic with fresh snow and a rare, clear winter afternoon. After exchanging "good mornings" with the day observing crew, I withdraw myself to sit, sip my coffee, and contemplate the mountains, skyline, and my perch atop the Northeast's prudential.

A half hour before shift, my evening changes.

Mike Pelchat, manager of the Mount Washington State Park with which the Mount Washington Observatory shares a space, approaches me with purpose. A search and rescue is about to be under way in the nearby Great Gulf Wilderness. This glacially carved valley separates the Northern Presidential Range and the Mount Washington massif. "Would you be available?" he asks. "Sure." I respond hastily not knowing what I am committing myself to. "You're an ice-climber, right?" Mike inquires. I answer "Yes," reluctantly. Having picked my way through the mountains of the Adirondacks and the Whites, my skills are reliable, yet they have never been applied to the pressure

On a cold night in March 2005, skiers were missing near Pipeline Gully on the steep, frozen slopes below Mount Clay, in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The author agreed to go down and search—after answering the question, "You're an ice-climber, right?" MIKE PELCHAT

of emergency. The talent that had always been a source of pleasure and recreation is about to bring me to the site of pain and catastrophe. Mentally, I review the summit crew and affirm that Mike and I are the only winter mountaineers. I don't have much of a choice: He needs a partner for safety. Whatever safety I could provide.

We part ways to gear up, I to the observatory and Mike to the State Park office. Mike is unassuming and modest. Living in nearby Gorham with his wife, Diane, they share their work atop the "rockpile." Being involved in the local trail club and search-and-rescue team, and being manager of the Mount Washington State Park, his passion for the mountains radiates. As a mountaineer and ice climber, he holds considerable experience in the higher ranges of the world. As a long-time inhabitant of the White Mountains, his skills, resilience, and confidence are born of caution, prudence, and familiarity with the frailty of life within these mountains. Although he may modestly deny it, he truly is a living legend.

In full climbing garb, we step out from our sheltered bunker. Mike dons a heavy pack equipped with radio, extra climbing gear, a medical kit, and a full-piece climbing suit. I shoulder my winter rucksack with supplemental gear for a possible night out.

Stepping onto the stark, unbroken snow and ice, the crunch of our crampons onto the wind-scoured snow is sharp without wind. Climbing down the gentle shoulder of the summit, the broad but distinct lip of the headwall presents itself and the broad ridges of the Northern Presidential Range loom ahead. Though not far, the observatory appears very distant as the treeless alpine landscape distorts perception.

Reaching the headwall, Mike and I stand side by side gazing into the Great Gulf Wilderness 1,500 feet below. I'm in awe and appreciation, this being the first time I'm standing at this location. As the sun begins to set on the western horizon, the headwall casts a faint blue shadow over the dwarf spruce-fir forests below. The juxtaposition of grandeur in the landscape and the unknown suffering of the hikers we are heading to is highlighted by the intense beauty and calm of this particular afternoon. Still not knowing the situation we are approaching, the impartiality of the mountains is overwhelmingly clear.

Mike shouts into the depths of the gulf, straining to hear a response. Nothing. After a few more attempts, we hear a faint answer. With binoculars, Mike locates the party near a small snowfield perched above the frozen tarn of Spaulding Lake. Above them, the intimidating, steep east face of Mount Clay looms, eerily casting the faint blue shadow that I had admired

moments before. Mike contacts New Hampshire Fish and Game, the agency overseeing search-and-rescue operations in the state, via radio informing them of the party's location; I radio the observatory. Without hesitation or apprehension, Mike steps forward and begins the descent of the headwall. I follow.

Unroped, we slowly negotiate the headwall down-climbing. Mike leads, picking his way down, finding the best route. Frontpointing, climbing down I look below, through my legs, past the points of my crampons to plan my next foot or ax placement following Mike's lead below. Making a solid ax placement near my sternum I shift weight onto one foot and place the other below, then match them again with the other. Calculated and methodical, we plod our way down into the engulfing shadow. Intermittently, holding a secure stance, I pause to admire the panorama hoping to burn the images into my memory. The stunted forest below begins to creep closer and closer. As we land on the snowfield connecting the flutings and gullies of the headwall and Mount Clay, we travel totally within the mountains' shadow while the last sliver of daylight touches on the higher summits overhead. While admiring this wild perch, I am reminded by adrenaline of my purpose for being here and the task that remains.

On the snowfield, we direct our attention to the headwall of Mount Clay's eastern face. We can see the skiers scattered directly under the snow and ice couloir of Pipeline Gully, a narrow, 1,100-foot chute that prominently cuts through the rocky abutments of Clay's eastern slopes. Mike exchanges radio conversation with Fish and Game, and then turns to me.

"There's a fatality."

Fatality. Fatality. The word echoes through my mind. Catching my breath, the reality of the scene we are about to enter unfolds.

Working in the higher mountains of the Northeast, I knew this moment would eventually present itself, the harsh cost of mountain adventure. I felt prepared, and simultaneously fearful. To meet the ultimate example of human frailty within a beautifully indifferent landscape was already wrenching apart my notions of self, strength, and surety. With life and death on the slope above us, the mountains enveloped our darkening perch.

Mike and I are first approached by a member of the party who introduces himself as Colin and calmly briefs us on the situation. He leads us to his partner John who lies supported in the snow: dried blood is smeared across his face as he sustains an expression of agony and anxiety. As Mike reviews John's injuries, Colin gestures to a figure lying upslope. It's their partner Rob

who did not survive the fall. No explanation is needed as an icefall of Pipeline Gully remains maliciously visible in the dimming light.

Earlier that day, the three ambitious skiers hiked up the western slope of Mount Washington, skis strapped on their packs, excited to embark on an epic day of alpine skiing on the rugged terrain of the Northern Presidential Range. First, they summited Mount Washington and admired the glorious winter day above treeline. I was a mere hundred yards away asleep in my bunker. The three then traversed the northern shoulder of Washington toward the narrow ridge of the 5,553-foot Mount Clay with their eyes set on the steep, committing, 1,500-foot couloir of Pipeline Gully. In a good winter, snow remains in the sheltered northeast-facing gully into early June. However, in lean snow years, Pipeline is interrupted by steep ice. This winter, in fact, was one of the coldest on record in New England, thus providing little snow and lean skiing conditions. As the three skiers plodded their way atop the headwall, Pipeline remained hidden behind the vertical rock buttresses of Mount Clay.

Reaching the deceptive upper slopes of the gully, the run steepens and narrows to nearly 30 feet coupled with a consistent 40- to 45-degree pitch. The three committed and pointed their tips down into the unknown.

Nearly 1,000 feet down, the skiers encountered steep ice that was deemed unskiable. John, using his ice ax, began to replace crampons for his skis. With one secure, he slipped while placing the other and careened down, over the bulge, and out of sight. Luckily, he was thrown clear of rocks and landed on packed snow. Hearing his cries for help, Colin then instructed Rob to switch to his crampons to negotiate the steep ice bulge. Without time to react, one of Rob's crampons fell off and he, too, rocketed over the bulge. A boulder field stopped his fall, killing him on impact. Colin was left with one partner seriously injured, another deceased, surrounded by some of the most technical terrain in the Northeast, and nearly a seven-mile hike to the nearest road.

After packaging up John, Mike radios Fish and Game about evacuation plans. Several options are discussed and an air evacuation is initiated, taking advantage of the favorable weather conditions. A National Guard Black Hawk helicopter is dispatched, and Mike, Colin, and I prepare John to be airlifted.

Meanwhile, dusk has crept up from the valley floor as the bluish-gray shadow of the ridge appears above Chandler Ridge to the east. The stillness of the valley, the steep flutings of the headwall, and the persistent presence of



Staffers at the Mount Washington Observatory peered through clearings in the windows as they viewed Mike Pelchat and Ryan Harvey trying to find the missing skiers.

COURTESY OF RYAN J. HARVEY

Washington instills an unsettled and eerie atmosphere. It's hard to believe one of the windiest places on Earth remains so still on this night. A slight breeze brushes over the snow, nothing else. The silence is absolute, crisp. Waiting, listening, we anticipate the helicopter's arrival.

A low hum soon can be heard behind Chandler Ridge. It grows louder, louder, and more distinctive until finally the Black Hawk emerges, traveling up through the valley. The relief implied by such a sound is palpable; it is as if I could physically feel our spirits rising. The helicopter cautiously scans the slopes with a searchlight; the higher peaks appear to grow larger as the helicopter approaches.

Spindrift snow begins to swirl as the helicopter positions itself and drops off a litter for John. Using the Skedco—a sled-like litter—we secure John and carefully transport him through the krummholz to a small snowfield that lies above Spaulding Lake. I tether the litter with a plunge of my ice ax into the hard crust. Mike hails National Guard that we are ready for John's evacuation. John, immobilized, vulnerable, lies in the middle of the snowfield awaiting rescue. Mike stays by his side.

It's now dark and the moon is rising. The helicopter reemerges into the Great Gulf. I direct a flashlight onto Mike, who is now donning a fluorescent blaze orange jacket. The searchlight scans the dark slopes, highlighting the snow-covered, stunted trees and reaffirming our diminutive size among these gothics. The moment feels surreal, incomprehensible, otherworldly. We are so small and so desperate for life, working out our struggle across a landscape whose ambivalence could not be more blatant.

The helicopter now directly above, slowly lowers, driving the immediate chaos of wind, noise, and spindrift snow into our faces. The tag line of the litter begins to warp, twist, and snake itself around the gnarled treetops. Moments later, the litter, with John now strapped to it, spins with the rotor wash as Mike and I try to control it. Unknowingly, National Guard continues to haul John up until he is pulled into the secure confines of the Black Hawk, which then careens sharply and flies out of the valley. I imagine how John must be feeling in the safety of the helicopter and its crew, with the promise of recovery. My mind then turns to his partner, who lay in the snow below his final ski run.

The helicopter flies in once more to evacuate Colin, who agrees to be flown out after much persuasion. He'd been insisting on walking out but agreed it would be only right to have him accompany his friend who would be transported to the nearby hospital.

As Colin flies out, National Guard communicates their low fuel status and indicates they will have to retrieve Rob's body the next day. With that stated, it also means a climb up the headwall for Mike and me. We again stand side by side, silent, letting the utterly oddly peaceful landscape reclaim its space from the rumble of the helicopter. How do we reflect on the events that led us here?

Up the headwall, I feel strong, confident, quite different from my previous climbs. It is as if the clutter, the nagging uncertainty of my mind had been extinguished. The terrain, movement, and space behind me felt comforting, almost familiar. But it couldn't be. In fact, this is my first climb up the Great Gulf headwall.

I reach the lip of the headwall ahead of Mike. Waiting, I admire the four high peaks of Clay, Jefferson, Adams, and Madison, and the massif of Washington encircling the now dark Great Gulf. Intermittent fog now shrouds Washington's shoulders, clearing momentarily with light gusts of wind. Through the fog, I catch a glint of light from the observatory weather room, reminding me that my last radio transmission was from this very spot three hours earlier! I dig out my radio: "2-o mobile calling 2-o." The response comes quickly, "This is 2-o, go ahead." "We've topped out of the headwall and are coming home." Dan, the night observer on duty, signs off in a tone of relief.

Mike catches up, and we begin to plod slowly toward the summit, both feeling a bit knackered. Breaking the silence, Mike simply states, "That was quite a rescue." I agree and completely understand the weight of these few words.

Writing nearly ten years after this incident, I know how much humility and reverence were encapsulated into Mike's few words. Not a hint of bravado but of respect and humility.

The summit crew welcomes us back with leftovers from dinner, and we piece together our experience. I join Dan with observing for the remainder of the night until falling into a heavy mountaineer's slumber early in the morning.

The next day Washington and the Presidentials are once again obscured in clouds, rendering a helicopter recovery of Rob's body not possible. Instead, his body was heroically retrieved by Mike and the volunteers of the Mountain Rescue Service through the very terrain that led to his demise: Pipeline Gully. I am later informed that the rescue was the only winter night helicopter evacuation in the White Mountains to date. It was indeed "quite a rescue."

In the weeks following, I received thank-you letters from John and his family, keeping me informed of his recovery. I was most appreciative of their thoughtfulness and gratitude. John had fractured his vertebrae, broken some ribs, and fractured his pelvis. His last letter received contained his wishes to be skiing again the next winter. A year later, an article on this incident noted that he was out skiing again, pointing his tips down into Tuckerman Ravine.

Nearly ten years later, I find myself being jostled by our rough, rural roads attending a patient in the back of an ambulance. Full of adrenaline and urgency, I often think to myself how unexpected it is to be serving as a rural emergency medical technician. Late nights, early mornings, short sleep, the experience of the frailty of life: the urgency dissolves the boundary between self and other, life and death, and discerns from the relative the absolute. And in this light, I am thankful. Witnessing death, I recognize the fear that is the underside of human frailty. To contemplate this is challenging, freeing, transforming—a renewal of my humanity and a reminder of humility.

Only now do I recognize that night in the Great Gulf gave me such courage.

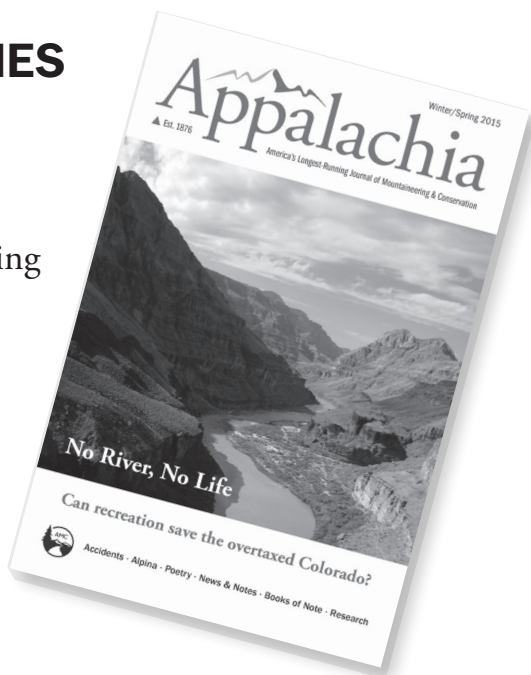
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