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The Long Way Home: A Man, Yelling "Echo, Echo," Out There

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A Man, Yelling “Echo, Echo,” Out There

FIFTEEN PEOPLE HAD CRAMMED SLEEPING BAGS ONTO THE FLOOR of the Guyot Shelter deep in the White Mountains that wet August night. The structure’s open front faced rows of dark pines. I stood on the platform edge, staring into the light curtain of rain. All around, stoves hissed, sleeping bags zipped, spoons clanged against pots. I had just given the rest of my extra stove fuel to a guy who’d settled into the only chair, a seat hewn out of an old stump and propped at the edge of the platform. He sat looking out as if not seeing.

The man now said he had deliberately *not* brought enough fuel. “I’m out for ten days,” he droned. “My stove holds enough fuel for nine meals. This is the eighth meal. I don’t carry extra fuel, to save weight.”

He didn’t smile but just looked out into the dark, stroking his long, dark hair.

And then he started a monologue. “This strange thing happened the other night,” he said. “I was on the Davis Path, staying at the Resolution Shelter.” This was in 2002, a decade before the Appalachian Mountain Club’s backcountry crew finally tore down that shelter because the U.S. Forest Service wants to get rid of structures in the Wilderness areas. The Resolution Shelter was named after a forested mountain few visitors seek out—Mount Resolution. Both shelter and peak honor the resolve of Nathaniel Davis, a nineteenth-century trail builder who had graded a fifteen-mile bridle path to the top of Mount Washington. Few tread this path now.

The guy said, “I’m more afraid of humans than I am of anything else in the woods. There was a guy out in the dark somewhere nearby. I couldn’t see him. But he kept calling out to me as if he wanted me to answer him. He had amazing skills, because he never showed himself. He kept calling out: ‘Yodel! Yodel! Yodel! Echo! Echo!’ I ignored him for a long time. But then I answered him in a tiny voice, ‘echo.’ He just kept yelling out those words over and over.

“I sat there until about 8 o’clock, listening to this,” he said. “Then I decided to pack up and leave for the next shelter.”

He said he had no headlamp or flashlight, just a little 2-inch-long penlight, the sort you buy at a convenience store and affix to a key ring. He flicked the light on for a second with his thumb. “I kept thinking that someone without my skills could have slipped and hit his head on a rock,” he said, “but I got out onto the trail and made pretty good time going 2 miles.” He thought he heard the man following alongside him off the path, but he wasn’t sure.

I shifted to the other foot. I did not move away. Only a few of the men were listening with one ear, it seemed, as they went about their business of putting away their gear for the night. But I listened attentively. I began to run over in my mind what he was saying. It didn’t quite make sense to me—packing up after dark and hiking out past the unseen intruder.

At the next shelter (which must have been the now-torn-down Rocky Branch Shelter Number 1), “I spent a fitless night,” he said. He must have meant “fitful,” and I suppressed the urge to correct him.

“I didn’t know where the guy was. He had to be out there, waiting. My friends ask me if I’m afraid of bears. I say I worry most about humans.” And he flicked his penlight as he sat.

This happened twelve years ago. I have debated with myself since then whether the man had made up the whole thing and whether he himself had been the yodeler. In which case I was politely hanging out with a creep while the other men around me used some sixth sense and avoided him.

I believe that I am an expert in most backpacking skills and that I can take care of myself in the woods. The rape and murder rates in remote areas (about 300 over a period of five years in the national parks, for example) don’t come close to that on city streets (428 per 100,000 people in 2011, the FBI reports). But this storyteller, even if a truth teller, made my landscape feel creepier that night. He did it for his own ego. And I stood by his tree-stump-chair throne giving him an audience.

Every few years, I review that night. I sit on my own chair, staring out into my own woods, lost in my own judgments about the man who escaped the yodeling stalker. Assuming he told the truth, his story made me think more about those unlikely dangers. But if the man at Guyot Shelter lied, and the echo-man never existed, then I encouraged his fraudulent bravery by standing by, listening for so long. If he lied, that means that he was trying to impress the only woman at the shelter. Perhaps he could not perceive awe in the forest just by considering the forest. He had to make up a story.

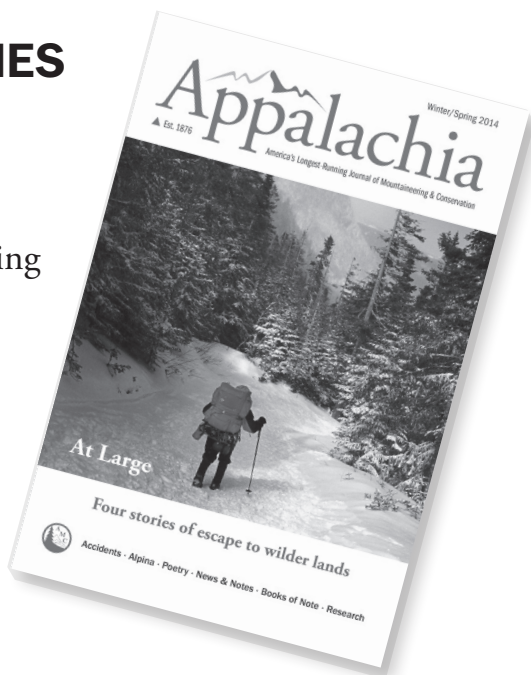
—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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