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# Frankenstein Cliff and the Black Dog

*A frightening hike beats back a man's sense of gloom*

**Christopher Johnson**



AS I GAZED FOR THE FIRST TIME UPON CRAWFORD NOTCH, A MOUNTAIN pass of sublime beauty that winds through the heart of New Hampshire's White Mountains, I remember thinking, "This vista should be touching me more." It was July 1986, and my wife, Barbara, and two children, Matthew and Emily, and I had driven north from Boston to visit Crawford Notch, the Old Man of the Mountain, and the countless other extraordinary sights that our friends and neighbors had urged upon us flatlanders, who had only recently relocated from the Midwest to New England.

From our campsite in North Conway, which was crammed full of retail outlets and shopping malls, we had driven north on U.S. Route 302, which rolls through the middle of the notch. As we entered the southern fringes of the valley, the mountains rose to the east and west like exuberant eruptions of wild earth. On the west side of the notch, endless forests carpeted the dizzying heights of Mounts Willey, Field, Willard, and Avalon. The east side of the valley, bounded by Mounts Crawford, Jackson, and Pierce, presented a stark contrast because those mountains were fairly denuded of trees but were dotted with enormous boulders, as if a god had tossed granite eggs from heaven that had broken into a thousand pieces. Along the base of the eastern wall, the Saco River tumbled over and around myriad clots of granite, and as the water leaped, it caught snatches of sun and gleamed like diamonds. As I slowly drove north, the road curved through mountains that overlapped one another like a series of green velvet curtains. We turned around and immediately drove back through the valley, and as we reached the southern edge of the notch, I pulled over onto the shoulder of Route 302, and we all got out of the car and drank in the sight. Directly facing us was a massive headwall which, I would later learn from my newly purchased *AMC White Mountain Guide*, was named Frankenstein Cliff.

I ordinarily was moved and would even be overwhelmed by such extraordinary vistas, but now, as we stood and gazed upon the elegant curvatures of the mountains and the towering cliff that faced us, I felt completely removed from the sight. The others were oohing and ahing, and I just felt like shrugging my shoulders. The fact is that at the age of 39, I was in the throes of depression—what Winston Churchill referred to so vividly and appropriately as his black dog. I was just beginning to realize that something was not quite right, that my reaction as I stared at Crawford

*The view from Frankenstein Cliff, from which forest-encrusted walls sweep down to the valley. This place began to heal the author.* JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN

Notch was different from what it would have been in the past. Ordinarily I would have felt elation and awe at such a sight . . . but now I felt flat, I felt nothing. I put the best face I could on the black dog, and as we stood there on the shoulder of Route 302 and the others exclaimed upon the splendor of the mountainscape, I joined in. But my heart was unmoved, stone-cold. It was as if all feeling had been squeezed out of me.

We returned to our campsite and cooked our dinner of franks and beans, and as the others chattered about the day, I sat silently in the tent. Matthew particularly had been impressed by the cliff, and he looked it up in the *White Mountain Guide*. An avid consumer of information even at age 12, he told us that the headwall was Frankenstein Cliff and that it had been named after Godfrey Frankenstein, a German artist who had moved with his family to America in 1831 and had embarked upon a successful career painting landscapes of Niagara Falls, the White Mountains, and other sites in the East's unspoiled wilderness of the nineteenth century. Then he said, "I want to climb it."

"The cliff itself?"

"No, Dad," he said, with the impatience of a preadolescent teaching something to his father. "There's a trail that goes alongside the cliff."

I looked at the guide, and the path started just off Route 302, slithered west to Arethusa Falls (at 176 feet, the highest single waterfall in New Hampshire), ascended behind the west ridge of the cliff, reached the overlook that we had seen from the road, and descended along the east ridge of the cliff, completing a loop back at 302. Barbara and I decided that the climb would probably be a little much for Emily, who was only 9, but Barbara and Emily would drop Matthew and me off at the trailhead and go canoeing down the Saco River. It was all settled.

We turned off the battery-powered camp light and settled into our sleeping bags for the evening. I lay there in the dark. I should have been thrilled at the prospects of a climb like the one that Matthew and I had planned . . . but I felt nothing. As I listened to the cackle of the crickets, I felt an overwhelming sense of helplessness, which had been gathering for at least a year. I didn't know what it was. I came from a family that was reticent in expressing emotions, and I had inherited (or learned) that trait. It was difficult for me to reach out to others, and as I had grown toward middle age, I felt it harder than ever to reveal myself. In my work at a publishing house in Boston, I had mastered all the social graces and was known and valued as a good team player. But in spite of all that, I felt isolated. And I

had the inchoate but persistent sense that some spirit was straining to burst forth from inside me. Haunted by these thoughts, I slowly drifted into a restless sleep.

All four of us awoke early, cooked eggs and bacon over our propane stove, stuffed our backpacks with lunches, and filled our canteens to the brim. I tried to rally myself. Barbara and Emily dropped Matthew and me off at the trailhead. We agreed that they would pick us up in four hours, which according to the *White Mountain Guide* would leave plenty of time for the hike. We started west on the trail toward Arethusa Falls. I was groggy from my poor night's sleep and felt the dour mood on me like a boulder that had been added to my backpack. I kept my eyes on the ground, not taking note of the forest that surrounded us. I must have been moving slowly because Matthew, full of energy, ran ahead of me.

Barbara and I had known since he was a young child that we had a character on our hands. He was energetic, outgoing, could be aggressive, could be given to moods. He adored baseball and loved U2 and the anthemic themes that rang from the band members' soaring blends of voice and guitar. And he was intense. If he made an out with men on base, he felt deeply that he had let the team down. Now, on the trail to Arethusa Falls, he ran ahead of me and then waited restlessly for me. Meanwhile, I felt as if I were wading through sludge. "Dad," he finally said, "you're walking like an old man." From beneath my gray cloud, I smiled. I liked it when he kidded me.

In an hour, we reached the falls and watched the resplendent water dance over rocks and tumble down to form an iridescent emerald pool. We both took off our hiking boots and woolen socks and lowered our feet into the pool. The water was frigid at first, but after a couple of minutes I felt the waters caressing my feet, soothing them sensuously, as if a masseuse were working out the kinks. Cooling our feet in the water felt like a ritual, an ablution. We gobbled our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and drank the cool water from our canteens. I looked closely at Matthew's face. It was almond shaped, and he had uncommonly long eyelashes for a boy. His lips were full, and he had Barbara's nut-brown skin. I was struck by how much he resembled her family.

He waded into the green water of the pool, joining two other boys about his age who had also ventured into the water. The water reached almost to the bottom of his shorts, and he started splashing water with two other boys. I envied them the carefree ways of youth—and my mood darkened further. Where, I wondered, had my sense of isolation come from? I didn't know. I

couldn't point to any event that had awakened the black dog. Instead, over the past year, I had slipped bit by bit into a gray dullness. Externally, everything seemed fine. My career was going reasonably well, the children were getting good grades, we had a nice home, etc., etc.

Yet at the edges of my life, I felt a fear that I could not define or get a handle on. It was like a fear of exposure. I somehow felt ashamed of revealing myself. As a kid, I'd had this goofy sense of humor and had been quick to laugh, but that had disappeared. Barbara and I had had our children early, and I had felt deeply the weight of responsibility. We'd had no money, and I had poured myself into work. I'd grown quieter. I would sit in my living room chair and watch sports for hours on end. Barbara was the one who had said we should head north for vacation, that I needed a break from the grind. She asked me what was the matter, and I just shrugged her off. "Nothing. Nothing at all." I knew she was worried about me

I was lost in these thoughts when Matthew came up and shook my shoulder and disturbed the cloud that hovered over me. "Let's get going, Dad!" he said. "We still have a long way to go to the top of the cliff."

I forced a smile. It was as if he were taking charge of the hike. "Lead on, buddy," I said. We rolled up our lunch bags, deposited them in our backpacks, dried off our feet, put our socks and boots back on, and resumed our climb. The trail led northeast and ascended more seriously, more assiduously, entering a series of switchbacks that followed the west fringe of the cliff toward the granite shelf overlooking Crawford Notch. As the trail grew steeper, I began to lag, stopping more frequently to catch my breath. Matthew ran ahead of me, and we started playing a sort of game of tag in which he would forge ahead for a couple hundred yards and then sit on his haunches and wait for me. I approached him, and he barked, "Get the lead out, Johnson!" It was a perfect imitation of his Babe Ruth League coach that summer. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," he bellowed, mouthing one of the endless stream of clichés that had rolled off the coach's tongue. I grinned, and Matthew laughed. I loved the way his face lit up and his eyes sparkled when he laughed, and I thought to myself that he was a pretty neat kid. For the first time in a long time, I felt completely immersed in the moment.

After a little more than a half-mile of strenuous climbing, we reached the granite overlook, the crown of Frankenstein Cliff. I bent down and planted my hands on my knees to catch my breath. Then I looked out at the scene that unfolded before us. The mountains, the land, the forest emanated a sublime energy that, despite my mood, I could feel. Matthew and I sat down

side by side on a boulder about ten feet from the edge of the cliff and looked south at the thousands of trees that populated the valley like soldiers. The sky that day was as crystal blue as ice and glowed with a clarity that made visible the mountains of the Sandwich Range far to the south. I wondered what caves and waterfalls were hidden in the corners and folds of this extraordinary landscape. I loved the way in which the forest-encrusted walls of the notch swept down to meet at the bottom of the valley. A hawk circled in the air perhaps 100 feet in front of us, riding the invisible currents of air and then plunging like a dive-bomber toward the floor of the valley. The sight made my heart palpitate. I noticed an ancient pine to the left of the boulder we were sitting on. It was gnarled and bent by the winds that had swept through the White Mountains for eons. The hold of that pine on its granite perch seemed tenuous, but still it clung to its tiny patch of earth. Across the valley, shadows were beginning to crawl across the tops of the mountains, as if an invisible hand were pouring ink over the landscape.

We left the boulder and, on our bellies, crept close to the edge of the cliff and stared down. It was a sheer drop, and I felt a strange mixture of vertigo and euphoria. I looked at Matthew, who was transfixed by the sight. The black dog had momentarily disappeared, and I felt a reconnection between Matthew and me. “How does it make you feel?” I asked him.

“Like that hawk,” he said.

Perfect answer. Free and soaring and unconnected to the ground. Silence surrounded us. “Close your eyes,” I said. He listened to me. He shut his eyes, and his face was that of an angel. “What do you hear?” I asked.

He didn’t say anything right away. Then he said, “I hear the wind.”

“What does it sound like?”

“Like a breath whistling through the trees.”

“What else do you hear?”

“I hear birds calling. And I hear kind of a chirrup.”

“That’s a squirrel. What else do you hear?”

He listened. “I hear the trees.”

“What do they sound like?”

“They sound like they’re talking.”

“What are they saying?”

“It’s like they’re murmuring, but I can’t tell what they’re saying.”

“Nobody can,” I said. “They speak, but we can no longer understand what they’re saying.”

Still he had his eyes closed. He was so at peace. He opened his eyes and said, “That was cool.”



We got up and dusted ourselves off. I put my hand on his shoulder and gave it a bit of a squeeze. He looked at me. "Are you all right, Dad?"

I smiled back and said, "I'm fine."

The trail continued on, and we started to descend, heading east and south of the cliff. As we resumed hiking, I felt that nature and this vigorous, unique son of mine were beginning to crack something open for me. I was feeling more connected. The descent was perilously steep in parts, and my boots slid on the gravel-laden trail, which had narrowed like the neck of a duck. Matthew, however, was as sure-footed as a mountain goat and had no trouble descending the narrow path. I looked down, and the valley loomed below us. If we had slipped, we would definitely have rolled down that mountain until a convenient tree or boulder stopped us. We rounded a corner, and the trail had a gap of about six feet. "Crap!" I seethed.

I tried venturing across the gap, hoping that I could get enough of a foothold to balance my way across the cleft to the continuation of the trail. I put my right foot forward, but it slipped. "Damn!" I raged. "I don't want to turn around and hike all the way back."

I looked at Matthew, and he had a defiant gleam in his eye. "I'm not hiking all the way back," he said. He took three steps back.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to jump across," he said, with the uninhibited confidence of youth.

"Wait!" I said. I had a short length of rope in my backpack, and I tied it around his waist. That way, if he lost his balance, I could at least haul him back to the spot where we were stranded. He took a deep breath and ran toward the gap. I thought he would jump, but he didn't. Instead, he veered above the gap, up the side of the valley, letting centrifugal force carry him above the break in the trail. In two breathtaking seconds, he was back on the trail and on the other side of the gap, and he was grinning madly with delight.

"Now, Dad, you gotta do it." I was extremely leery, but I knew I had to do it. He unhitched the rope around his waist and threw the end to me across the gap. "Tie it around yourself, Dad," he said, taking charge. That little piece of rope gave new meaning to the word pathetic. It didn't look as if it could hold a flea. "Back up and get a running start," he ordered. He was the father talking to me, the son. I retreated, took a deep breath, and scampered up the side of the valley, above the gap. But I was losing momentum, feeling myself start to plunge down the side of the valley. "Grab me, Dad!" he yelled. He reached out his hand, and in the crazy way in which senses sharpen during a



crisis, I noticed how almond-tan his hand was. He clasped me and yanked me onto the narrow ledge that he was standing on. I stood next to him, breathing hard and trembling. And then we both laughed. We laughed uproariously. I put my arms around him and wrapped him in a tight bear hug.

With the exhilaration born of danger, we careered our way forward, descending the trail that wound downward. It remained gravelly, and we grabbed the branches and trunks of trees lining the trail to steady ourselves. At times, we skidded down on the gravel as if we were on skateboards. As we slipped down the side of the mountain, Matthew at times extended his hand to steady me. I didn't really need it, but I deeply appreciated his trying to help his old man.

By now it was late afternoon, and as the sun declined, the giant balsams and spruces cast enormous shadows across the trail, and the air around us was absolutely silent and still. I felt, for once, firmly planted in the here and now. I had stopped thinking about the future, about where I ought to be in my career and my life, about my disappointed expectations. I was acutely aware that not a leaf stirred as the shadows of dusk crept across the mountain. We neared the bottom, and the trail took us beneath Frankenstein Trestle. I felt a renewed interest in what we were encountering on this hike, and Matthew and I stopped to study this striking bridge, which supported railroad tracks with steel girders angling out like spider webs and extending to the floor of the canyon, where the girders were secured by concrete abutments. Later I read that the trestle had been built in 1892—an astonishing relic of the Industrial Revolution that is still used to transport tourists north from North Conway for the 30-mile sojourn through Crawford Notch.

After another half a mile, we had finished our hike. We returned to the parking lot. For three hours, we had been in a separate world, and together we had negotiated our way down that gravelly path from Frankenstein Cliff. We were closer to each other than we had been in a very long time. I tried to say what I was feeling to him, but I could not. The emotion was there, but the words wouldn't come. Barbara and Emily soon arrived, and as we wended our way south on Route 302 back to North Conway, Matthew fell asleep. His long lashes blanketed those brown eyes, just as they had when he had been a baby. He slept the deep sleep of an angel, and Barbara kept the car steady through the gathering dusk as we wound our way out of the mountains.

This day had redeemed me. The black dog had temporarily disappeared, and I felt alive from having shared the experience of a beautiful place with

a son who was brimming with the possibilities of life. The green pool at Arethusa Falls, the pine clinging to the granite cliff, the hawk riding the up-currents, the soaring mountainscape—all had touched a place in me that had been buried for too long. To be sure, my black dog would reappear, and ultimately I would require the skills and insight of a professional to make the beast disappear with only an occasional growl. But on that day spent with Matthew, I had learned that the black dog was malleable. I had learned that it could be tamed.

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CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON of Evanston, Illinois, spent many years in New England and has written often for *Appalachia*. He and David Govatski coauthored *Forests for the People* (Island Press, 2013), an outgrowth of reporting they did for their story on the Weeks Act (*Appalachia*, Winter/Spring 2011, LXII no. 1).

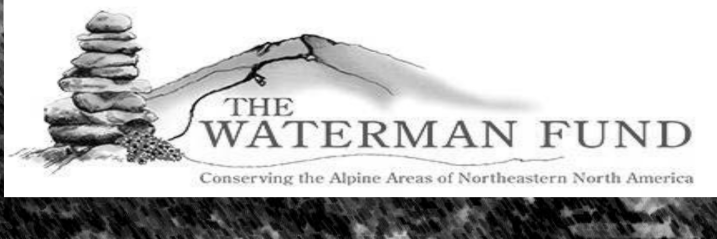
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The Waterman Fund seeks the submissions of essays for its annual Alpine Essay Contest. Guy and Laura Waterman spent a lifetime reflecting and writing on the Northeast's mountains. The Fund seeks to further their legacy through essays that celebrate the spirit of the Northeast's mountains. Thus, the 2014 theme centers on the relevance of wilderness ethics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Aldo Leopold wrote, "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value." Leopold was not talking about economic value here; he meant value in the philosophical sense. Do Leopold's words have relevance today? What does a land (wilderness) ethic mean as we move into the first quarter of the twenty-first century? Can people and "progress" and wildness co-exist? Is there hope for wild places in today's world?

The winning piece will be published in *Appalachia Journal* and shall receive \$1500. For contest details, please visit us at [www.watermanfund.org](http://www.watermanfund.org)



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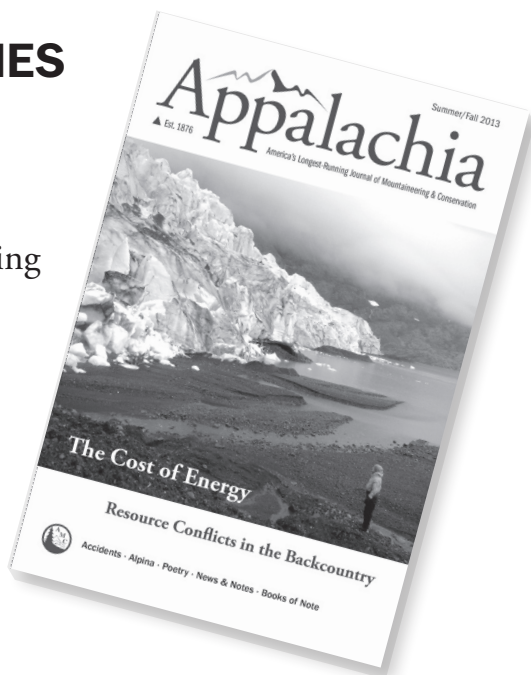
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