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The Long Way Home: Danger Defines the Meaning of Safety

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Danger defines the meaning of safety

BUMPUS BROOK DRAINS SNOW AND RAIN BELOW MOUNT MADISON IN New Hampshire's White Mountains. The brook rolls south through a remote ravine called Bumpus Basin, rushes over boulders just west of Howker Ridge Trail, and soon drops 30 feet over a cliff known as Hitchcock Fall. Below that waterfall, Bumpus Brook rushes over the trail to which it was, moments before, flowing parallel.

At the trail crossing, the brook drops fast between rocks. Hikers must jump across them. Some of the rocks look round, old, and slimy. Others appear dry but very smooth and pointy. Bumpus Brook resembles hundreds of others bigger and smaller in the White Mountain National Forest. Rock-hopping is the way over most streams in the Whites.

On June 15, 2022, at about 3 P.M., I headed up Howker Ridge Trail intending to veer off to an overlook called Dome Rock. I wandered alone along the lower mile of Howker Ridge Trail, not paying close attention, lost in a literary problem. Warm sun moved in patterns on the ferns. I swatted at a few black flies and mosquitoes. At one point I crouched low, watching a toad hop through leaf duff. "It's OK, little one," I said out loud. I doubt the toad felt comforted. Minutes later, the brook's rushing sound came into my hearing—and I don't hear well, so I know it must have been loud.

Howker Ridge Trail hairpinned left and slightly uphill, halting below a painted wooden sign marking Hitchcock Fall just above it. This was not a very wet spring, but the waterfall crashed dramatically, and I stood to admire it.

Suddenly, I thought I was standing at a different intersection. I was in my mind standing just west of here, where Snyder Brook rushes fast over Inlook Trail. Similar situation, different brook. That trail goes up to Dome Rock too. One time I'd gotten most of the way across Snyder Brook, stood in up to my thighs, and beckoned to my little poodle, Talley, who stood on the bank refusing to budge. The dog would not go. So that day we retraced our steps.

A decade had passed. I stood alone at Bumpus Brook but thinking I was at Snyder. It looked tame enough to cross, but as I studied it, it seemed

impassable. I had left my hiking pole in the car, thinking I wouldn't need it. I tried to guess the distance from the bank to the first rock—a long thing sticking out of the water with a narrow ridge atop. I envisioned jumping from that rock to the next one, which was a peaked boulder standing firm in rushing water, with not much space for a foot.

I stood on that bank for many minutes—it felt like an hour—watching Bumpus Brook pour around the rocks. I walked the bank upstream seeking some other way. I returned to stare at the first, long rock.

THE PREVIOUS WEEK I'D BEEN RUNNING ON A PATH NOT FAR AWAY CALLED Sylvan Way, pausing to admire other waterfalls. A pleasant older woman and man were standing looking at one of them. She asked me if there were more waterfalls down Brookbank Trail. I wasn't going that way but said yes. The next day, I read news reports of a woman in her 70s who'd fallen and injured her leg on that trail, requiring rescuers who—the paper said—she'd thanked graciously. I was sure I'd met her. I had witnessed her joy in exploring—before her slip.

Now I teetered on the bank of Bumpus Brook imagining tumbling off the boulders with no one to hear me. This was a barricade in my life, an obstruction of the sort I'd gotten past a thousand times. I knew what I must do. I would not cross today. Something wasn't right. A small sob rose out of my throat, and I ignored it.

A short while later, heading back the way I'd come, I came to the intersection with Kelton Trail. I looked at the turnoff and remembered that I had meant to go up that trail. Kelton Trail was the way to Dome Rock from this area; I had never intended to cross any brook. I was running out of time but decided to turn up Kelton Trail for a while. I climbed to Kelton Crag. I admired the rough bark of the red spruce trees and the small opening in them that revealed wispy clouds above a distant hill. And then I walked down.

—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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