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The Stranger on Moosilauke

A hiker revisits the haunting tragedy of a frigid day

Jeannie Oliver



ON MARCH 14, 2021, ROY SANFORD, 66, OF PLYMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS, disappeared on Mount Moosilauke, in the western White Mountain National Forest of New Hampshire. Sanford had planned to hike up and back on Glenciff Trail and return home to his family that evening; at 7 P.M. his wife reported him overdue. Search-and-rescue efforts were initially hampered by what a reporter called “blizzard conditions with snow, heavy wind gusts, and below-freezing temperatures right from the trailhead.”*

We met him about a mile into our hike. We were moving quickly, thanks in part to the upward assist from my dog (who was not well trained) pulling on his leash. We caught up to the man at the top of a rise, where he had paused to take a drink and peel off layers; despite the damp conditions, we had all warmed quickly on the first hill. I remember he looked about my dad’s age and had a friendly manner. We didn’t stop to talk, maybe a quick “hey there,” some obligatory comment about the crappy weather, and a parting wish to enjoy the hike—standard mountain small talk.

That morning, I’d awakened in the dark, hastily thrown layers in my backpack and hurried the dog out the door before daybreak. “Running late,” I texted my hiking partner, Angela, pulling my Subaru out into a wintry mix. “More snow than expected, roads bad,” I texted as I set out.

We had checked the weather the night before; it hadn’t called for snow or sleet, and I’d been surprised to find the roads slushy and slick. We had banked on relatively warm temperatures, morning drizzle clearing, and possibly strong winds on the summit. We would be sheltered in the trees most of the way. We had also checked online for recent trail conditions, reading that snowshoes probably weren’t needed. *Good, one less thing to carry.* We had chosen Mount Moosilauke, New Hampshire’s westernmost 4,000-footer, for its relative proximity to the Upper Valley. Still in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and as a habitual rule follower, I was reluctant to flout Vermont’s strict rules against traveling in and out of state. I did, however, make exceptions for the mountains, for their reassuring sense of normal during a time of

*Jeffrey Hastings, “Mass. Hiker Found Dead on Mt. Moosilauke after Hiking,” March 15, 2021, patch.com. Julia Stinneford, “Solo Hiker Failed to Return from Day Hike on Mt. Moosilauke,” *Concord Monitor*, March 16, 2021.

Snow and rime ice obscure the summit signs on Mount Moosilauke in this early spring scene—a reminder that even when winter is receding in the valley, winter persists up high. DANIELLE DUROCHER/AMC PHOTO CONTEST 2017

social isolation and virtual reality. In 2020, I'd probably made more than 40 exceptions and was well on my way to completing all 48 of New Hampshire's 4,000-footers.

But this Moosilauke climb would be my first hike in three months, the first since that morning in December when my phone had lit up beside the bed and cast a shadow across my life. "I have bad news," I had heard my mum say over the phone from New Zealand. "Your dad died last night, massive heart attack." Dad, a fit 67, had slipped out of my life mid-conversation, his departure unexpected and abrupt. I was not doing well.

For three months I had sat stupefied and silent in my grief, unable to travel home and unwilling to accept or participate in a life that could go on as normal. In the privacy of solitude, I thought about him constantly, replaying our last conversation, imagining his last moments of existence, remembering, regretting, and crying. Now it was March, and Angela, who had lost her own father just four years earlier, reached in. "Welcome to the dead dads club," she had said, the only person who could possibly communicate compassion in such a statement. "No pressure, but let me know if you think you're up for hiking Sunday." Mount Moosilauke was barely a trespass across the border.

If this hike was supposed to save me from myself, the weather was doing a good job at sabotaging that plan. *At least I can't be deported*, I'd think to myself a little bitterly, imagining flashing lights and sirens escorting me back across the river. *New Zealand won't let me in*.

It was damp, gray, and chilly when I pulled into the small parking lot at the Glenciff trailhead at 8:15 A.M., fifteen minutes late (as usual), hardly inspiring a day in the outdoors. Angela, who always arrives on time, was waiting in her car. "What's with this weather?" I asked, getting out of my car. "I know," she chuckled, enthusiastic in almost any condition, "I didn't think it would be this bad." There was only one other car in the parking lot—Massachusetts plates—and I thought, *Who else could possibly be mad enough to hike in this?*

"Did you see Massachusetts?" I asked, gesturing toward the other car. She said she'd watched him putting on his boots and microspikes. He had set off alone not long before I pulled in. I put on my own microspikes and leashed my dog. As we started up the trail, my ski goggles and neck gaiter sat forgotten on the back seat of my car.

After we passed the man and exchanged those few words, we left him behind as we moved higher up the trail. We encountered a minefield of knee-deep postholes frozen solid in the cold and rain. *Ankle-breaking postholes*, I

thought. They slowed us down. The drizzle showed no signs of the clearing we had expected. The weather was progressively worsening, and we knew an injury in these conditions would be bad news. I wished I'd brought my snowshoes.

By the time we reached the junction where the Glencliff Trail meets the Carriage Road and the spur to South Peak, the temperature had dropped considerably, the rain had turned to snow, and the wind blowing in the treetops overhead sounded like waves breaking on a stormy beach. It was 10 A.M. We stopped here to put all our layers back on—I pulled a synthetic hoody over my merino base layer, zipped up my down jacket, and sealed myself inside my raincoat. I tugged all three hoods over my beanie, wrestled my dog into his own fleece jacket, and slipped my gloved hands into down mittens. Angela pulled her neck gaiter up over her chin and set her ski goggles on her head. We pushed on along the narrow spruce corridor.

WHEN WE EMERGED OUT INTO THE OPEN ALPINE, THE WIND WAS ROARING UP the western side of the mountain, blowing away our footprints and whipping snow up in our faces. It was my first ground blizzard, and it was a complete whiteout. We had hiked this route before, so we knew the summit was right there, less than half a mile in front of us, but we couldn't see it or the cairns that lead to it. We could barely see an arm's length. "We can decide to turn back," Angela said—out of character. I could barely hear her over the constant whirr of the wind and my hood slapping in my ears. We had never turned back before reaching a summit, but we were wet, cold, and tiring quickly against the wind's force. Even Angela seemed to be struggling to maintain enthusiasm. Later she would tell me she had looked down at my dog, who looked confused and reluctant, and at me with no ski goggles or face covering. She worried about losing the trail and thought about others whose stories she had just read who had died in these kinds of conditions.

We continued for a few minutes, not talking, our bodies bent into the wind, the left side of my face raw and my eyeballs frozen dry. Not far ahead, perhaps on the last rise to the summit, a skier materialized out of the fog. We hadn't seen any tracks on the way up, and the skier's sudden appearance surprised us. The person turned and looked back at us, as if to ask either, "Should I keep going?" or "Are you seriously following me up here?" Then we lost sight of the skier.

Something about this moment scared me. How easy it would be to disappear up here with no one to carry us off the mountain. How easy it is to die; I

was thinking about my dad, gone in an instant. I looked at Angela and yelled above the wind, “I think we should turn back!”

When I thought about it later, I wondered if I would have had the courage or humility to abandon the summit if I’d been alone or if Angela hadn’t suggested the possibility or affirmed my fear. A born worrier, I had trained myself over the years not to trust my fears. I learned to push through them, perhaps sacrificing sound judgment in the process.

We turned back. At the edge of the spruce corridor, I pulled out my phone to take a photo of the conditions, to document how bad it was. It was 10:37 A.M.

Retreating into the treeline, my mind turned to the man we had passed earlier and who presumably was still hiking up. “We should warn him about the conditions,” I said. I was worried that he would venture out into the blizzard, lose his way in the fog, get hurt, get cold, disappear. We had encountered hikers who had worried us before—hikers we might later expect to see on a search-and-rescue post. I had never stopped to intervene or offer unsolicited advice, there had always been plenty of other hikers around, and it hadn’t felt like my place or responsibility. But this man today would be alone on the mountain once we got down—other than the mystery skier who would be long gone by now. It was just the three of us there in questionable conditions, and I felt responsible for him.

As we descended past the low, wind-scraggled spruces to the sheltered section of the Carriage Road, we met him again. He was stopped, looking at the low spruces, rocks, and wind he would soon step into. He wore an oatmeal-knit hat that was collecting snow and beads of moisture. His cheeks were flushed red, probably both from the effort of the climb and the cold. I could see that even in the relative shelter of the trees here, he was already feeling the bitter temperature. I noticed his hands balled up inside his red fleece mittens.

“It wasn’t a summit day today,” I said. “The conditions are terrible out there! We had to turn around.”

We stood there chatting for a while. He seemed cheerful despite the conditions. He told us that he had recently retired and just gotten back into hiking. He told us that last weekend he’d hiked Mount Monadnock. Moosilauke was only his second mountain in recent times. But he said he used to hike a lot more. He’d hiked some big mountains overseas. He told us about a friend who had turned around 100 feet before the summit of Mount Everest because his feet were cold, reasoning that the mountain would be there for him another day, and he didn’t want to lose his toes. We talked about

the frozen postholes, how deep they were, how hard they'd been to navigate without snowshoes.

He admired my dog and praised him for being good; he had a Labrador retriever at home, he said, but she wasn't one for the mountains. I think I then said mine wasn't either, that I normally left him behind because he tended to misbehave. Yet my dog sat obediently at his feet, enjoying the pats. We were getting colder and needed to get moving again.

"How much farther to the summit?" he asked. "Not far," we said. "Half a mile, maybe only a quarter after the treeline, but it's easy to lose the trail once you get out in the open. The summit isn't worth it today."

He said he had goggles and a balaclava in his bag. He said he would poke his nose out of the trees, see how bad it was, that he'd probably turn around. He wasn't a novice. It seemed he knew what he was up against, knew what he was doing.

We could also see that he wanted the summit. He had worked hard for it, driven here with purpose. We left him there to make his own assessment and started to head down the mountain as he walked on into the fog. It was sometime between 10:45 and 11 A.M. I continued to worry about him on our hike out. "Do you think he'll be OK?" I asked Angela. "He



The author and her friend posted to Instagram about their decision to turn around. COURTESY OF

JEANNIE OLIVER

didn't seem like he wanted to turn back." Soon we met three other parties hiking up the trail. The clouds lifted and brightened momentarily, easing our concern. "No one dies on Moosilauke," Angela said, and we began to question whether we'd been too hasty in turning back, our egos starting to sting.

We arrived back at the parking lot at about 1 P.M. As miserable as it had been, it had felt good to be out in wild conditions, the physical discomfort and happy company a brief reprieve from my grief. When we looked up at the mountain, we saw that it was still socked in, and Angela remarked that it looked ominous. I thought about the man, wondered if he had made it to the summit, and if he was on his way down. I thought about leaving a note under the wipers on his car—"Please let me know when you're down safely"—but felt silly, that maybe I was overreacting, and I talked myself out of it.

Later that day, I posted a photo on social media of Angela and me wearing the entire contents of our packs, grinning into the phone with a swirl of fog and snow behind us—the obscured summit of Moosilauke just a short distance beyond, but invisible. "Sometimes you turn around before the summit," I'd written, "because the mountain will still be there next time if you are." That's what he had said to us.

I didn't think about him again until my friend and one of my other hiking partners, Jen, sent a text message at 6:45 A.M. two days later. "Glad you two turned around!!!" Jen's words exclaimed. She sent a link to an article, "Mass. Hiker Found Dead on Mt. Moosilauke after Hiking."

She went on, "That peak is not one to tangle with. In all my hikes it's the only peak I have ever turned back on. Very sad story."

Oh god, no! I thought, *it's him—he didn't turn around.* We had watched him walk away into the fog, we had let him disappear.

I couldn't stop wondering about him. Had he reached the summit? How did he get off course? Had it been deliberate, to avoid walking back into the wind? Had he known he was lost? Had he been too proud to call for help? Hadn't the other parties seen him? Had he underestimated us, and had our conversation taunted him as he walked deeper and deeper toward his demise? How long before he sat down to wait, for rescue or death? What had it been like for him, out there alone in the fog and cold and darkness?

We pulled apart everything we had said to him, wondering if we hadn't said enough, hadn't said the right words, if we could have stopped this, if we were responsible in some way. We pored over the news reports, looking for answers to questions that had none. I thought about his children, too. The phone call they must have received from their mother, their disbelief, the

disorienting tilt the world takes on when you lose someone you love without warning on an otherwise ordinary day. When had they last spoken to him, what had they said? Had it been more profound than the last conversation I'd had with my dad just hours before his death? Dad and I had texted about the weather, his morning coffee, my morning coffee, his grandmother's bookshelves, sausages for dinner. I'd sent him a photo of dead sunflowers set against a silver sky on the verge of snow. He'd responded with a music video, as he so often did: The Byrds, "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To everything there is a season)." Dad had written, "Always an appropriate song," his last words to me forming a permanent musical ellipsis. Imagining their pain now magnified my own. *A time to die . . . A time to weep . . . A time to break down . . . A time to mourn. . . .* It was hard to imagine any other season.

IF HE'D TURNED AROUND, AS HE HAD SAID HE MIGHT, I PROBABLY WOULDN'T even remember him now. Still, the Moosilauke hiker, Roy, is a stranger; I have no claim to his story, and his death was not my loss to mourn. But I grieved hard for him, carrying him in the same space I carried my own father.

Even now, I think about Roy often. I think about him when I prepare for my hikes, packing far too much *just in case*, or when the weather closes in and I confront summit fever again, reminding myself that *the mountain will still be here another day*. On the summit of Mount Moosilauke, Angela and I remember him and his quiet joy at being out in the mountains on a miserable day. We still ask those questions that have no answers, and we thank the universe for the friendship that kept us safe that day. On Father's Day I think about his children and hope that the season is turning for them, as it finally is for me. In 2022, New Zealand ended its pandemic border restrictions, and I was able to travel home to be with my family, to feel the physical weight of my dad's ashes in my arms before releasing him into the ocean; reassurance that he existed, proof that he is gone. *A time to heal.*

When a stranger disappears in the White Mountains, our hiking community leans in and holds its collective breath. *Please let them be found safe*, we plead, *let them be found safe*. We watch for updates while the search-and-rescue teams exhaust themselves through the days and nights, through snow and fog and winds that blow them sideways, while the person's family waits helpless, caught in a dance of hope and despair. We cannot look away. But they are rarely found safe. Online posts fill up with sympathy and hypotheses and judgment. It's easy to think that we, in those situations, would have made different decisions. We would have seen the forecast and chosen not to

go, or we would have turned back sooner, or pushed on just a little farther to the safety of treeline. We would have dressed for the conditions. We would have carried a spare headlamp, extra clothes, extra food, shelter, snowshoes. We would have listened to the warnings. We would have survived the night.

But if we're being honest with ourselves, in their stories we also see our own mistakes and near misses, the dumb luck that let us learn, grow wiser, and hike another day. How many times had I pushed my own limits, made unsafe decisions, beaten the odds and come out with giddy tales of "type two fun"? (That is, fun only in retrospect.) I could think of a few. Each time a stranger disappears in the mountains, it serves as a cautionary tale.

JEANNIE OLIVER is originally from New Zealand, has worked in environmental law, and is senior director of ROC-NH, a program of the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund that helps residents of manufactured-home parks acquire and operate their parks as ROCs (resident-owned communities).

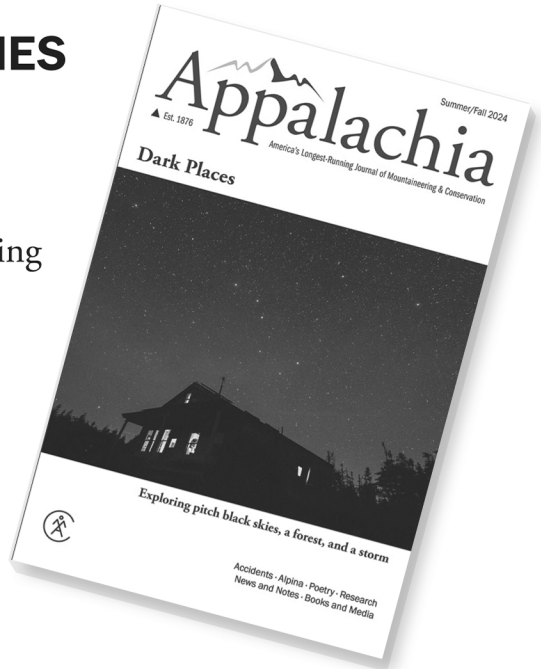
Editor's note: Whether Sanford reached the summit is uncertain, but it seems he did try. Rescuers searched for him that night, to no avail, and the next day, New Hampshire Fish and Game conservation officers found him in the drainage of Gorge Brook, which lies south and downwind of the summit area. For more, see "Cold Story," Accidents, Winter/Spring 2022.

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