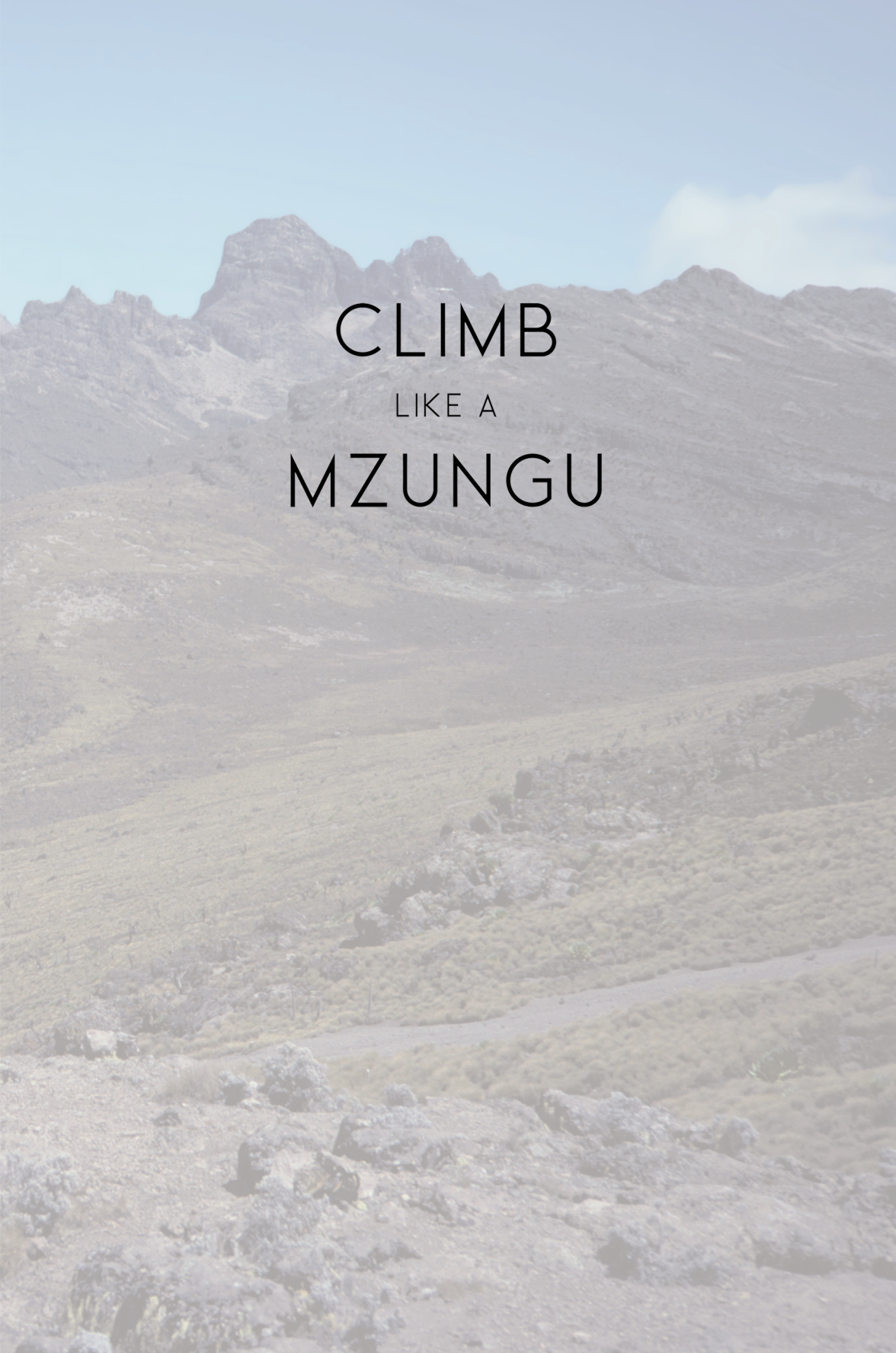


A silhouette of a person climbing a dark, jagged rock peak. The climber is positioned near the top, with arms outstretched in a celebratory gesture. The background is a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall mood is adventurous and triumphant.

DAVID FLINN

CLIMB
LIKE A
MZUNGU

LIVE AN
ADVENTUROUS LIFE



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Climb Like a Mzungu

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For my children, Eli and Rosalie, it's your turn to be Mzungus.



*To the memory of Ed Aalbue, Wes and Nancy Pfirman, Patti Saurman,
David Vadnais, Marla Silver-Wheeler, Bill Wilson,
and my parents, Rosalie and Seymour Flinn.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



This book is a creative nonfiction piece based on memories of events that happened in my twenties between 1980 and 1990, including places, activities, people, and experiences. I've tried my best to tell a true story using old journals, photographs, friends, and siblings to confirm its accuracy. Some information has been lost to the passage of time. In each of these instances, I have rebuilt scenes or events with the thoughts and feelings of those who shared the experiences with me. Some names and identifying information have been modified to protect the privacy of real people. A few companions have been left out to streamline the story.

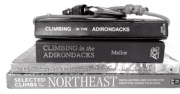
While I choose to climb mountains, I encourage you to travel your own path and live an adventurous life.



Joe starting *The North Face Standard Route* on Mount Kenya, July 1989

GUIDEBOOK

JULY 1989



“**M**zungu!” bellow the children as I climb out of the safari truck, my long legs grateful after being crammed in the back seat. Dust swirls fleetingly, stirred up by all the commotion, as my colleagues scamper into the store. The children circle—wild animals toying with their prey.

Mzungu [ma-zun-goo] comes from the Swahili verb meaning “to wander aimlessly,” describing the seemingly pointless travels of early explorers and missionaries. These days, the word refers to a white person.

It must be my fair skin that sets off the children’s chanting. Born twenty-eight years ago in Uganda, they don’t realize I’m their next-door neighbor, not just another foreigner, but an adventurer, wandering with purpose.

I take off my hat, revealing my blue eyes and thick, brown hair. They stop and huddle closer in anticipation. Mount Kenya’s twin peaks of Batian and Nelion glimmer to the east, with patches of snow that sparkle in the midday sun. Pointing first to my chest, then to the mountain, I say, “Mzungu nenda mlimani.” *Whiteman goes to the mountain.*

The horde murmurs, “Jasiri, mzungu, jasiri,” as they break up and drift away, realizing no handouts are coming. I don’t feel *jasiri* (brave).

Turning to enter the store, I notice a small boy, about six years old, standing nearby, not yet ready to leave. His clothes are worn and mud-splattered, and his black skin contrasts with the brown dust wallowing at his bare feet. I squat and gaze into his eyes. He tilts his head back, nervously pivoting on his left foot, ready for flight.

The wind gusts, unbalancing me. The young boy watches warily as I rise slowly and say, “Rafiki yangu,” calling him *my friend*. I wave and head into the store. My climbing companions are at the counter, haggling over prices while I wander the aisles and snag some *chapatis* (African tortillas). Noticing a lonely tin of crabmeat on the shelf, I grab it on impulse and plunk my goods on the counter.

The lads retrieve the bag of provisions and head out to the vehicle, Tusker beer bottles clinking. Paying the bill, I thank the shopkeeper, “*Mzuri sana, bwana.*” Cross-cultural communication is a lost art.

Returning to the truck, dust billows behind me. Joe lounges on the tailgate while Andrew and Francois engage the children. Noticing my rafiki standing nearby, I head over and say, “Naitwa David. Twende, namba salama rafiki.” *My name is David; It’s time to go, be safe, my friend.* He smiles and runs off with his pack. As they go, they scream in unison, “Mzungu!”



TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS EARLIER, in November 1960, I was born royal blue, with my umbilical cord wrapped around my neck. The British doctor at Kampala’s Mengo Hospital quickly unwinds it, allowing me to gasp my first precious breath. As oxygen courses through my body, the bluish tint turns the usual pink, and the African nurses smile and relax.

Uganda is on the equator, so the night is warm, crickets chirp, and doves coo. Dad sits on the edge of the bed as Mom cradles me in her arms—a cozy welcome into an exciting new world.

My parents came to Mbale, a small town near the border of Kenya, in the fall of 1959 as Anglican missionaries. When my birth date drew near, they traveled to Kampala over the bumpy dirt roads to the only western hospital in the country.

CLIMB LIKE A MZUNGU



My Dad and I visit the equator in Kenya. Photo by my Mom, Rosalie Flinn, August 1961.

We're the lone Americans, smack dab in the middle of the British Empire, joining doctors, scientists, and schoolteachers trying to bring first-world benefits to the wildness of Africa.

Consistent with immigrants everywhere, my parents flock together with the British to celebrate Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving holidays. When living in a strange land, familiar cultural rituals help take the edge off daily life among the Ugandans.

Every Sunday, Dad scoots over to St. Andrews Cathedral next door. The church has a modern design with a large, welcoming space.

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My father and I were at a political rally in Mbale, Uganda. Photo by Rosalie Flinn, April 1962.

He helps the local deacon with the 9 a.m. mass, but his knowledge of the Lugandan language is limited. Since the bulk of the locals wish to learn English, Dad's 11 am service is always full.

Three years later, my sister was born in the summer of 1963. I'm happy to have a sidekick, and she's a cute little thing. I get to babysit, trying to keep her from eating the lizards that rummage around our flat. My family has settled into life in Africa. We take trips to different parts of Uganda and Kenya when my parents aren't busy with the church, wandering around like good mzungus.

One day in early 1965, my friend Michael and I play outside my house. The jacaranda and flame trees are in full bloom, glorious with intense reds and purples, juxtaposed with orange-brown soil.

Five-year-old Michael speaks English, teaching me Swahili and Lugisu, the local tongue.

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My Mom and I in Mbale, Uganda. Photo by my Dad,
Seymour Flinn, June 1963.

Because Mbale is on the border between the Nilotic and Bantu language groups, English is commonly used because it is easy to learn. Who would have thought the mzungu tongue would mitigate tribal rivalry?

With buckets and shovels, we move the dirt to build a city for our Corgi trucks. Engrossed in construction, we don't notice the group of teenagers that slowly materialize.

"Unafanya nini na mzungu!" they yell, demanding to know why Michael is playing with me. They surround us, chanting, "Mzungu, mzungu."

Michael is quiet, continuing to bulldoze the road to his majestic dirt castle. I ask what they're blathering about.

"They're bored, bothering us. They'll leave soon."

Looking up, my pale skin is covered with brown dust, my blond hair glistening in the afternoon sun, blue eyes wide open, calmly looking at

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one of the older boys standing over me. I smile and volunteer my shovel, inviting him to help.

He kneels and says, “*Mjinga* mzungu.” I have no idea he’s calling me stupid. We look into each other’s eyes as the breeze rustles the jacarandas, and a smile forms on his lips. He gets up, tousles my hair, and yells, “*Twende!*”—Let’s go—to his pack. They drift away as Michael and I continue to plow the dirt.



MY FAMILY IS ready to leave Mbale after the birth of my brother Andy in November 1965. From the nearby Tororo airport, we fly back to the United States. Thankfully, our departure occurred just before a major purge of foreigners.



My friend, Michael Masaba, and I in Mbale, Uganda.
Photo by Seymour Flinn, January 1965.

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Since the country's independence from the British in 1962, Ugandan lawmakers have been negotiating with the Buganda king to establish an acceptable administration. Unfortunately, it would take twenty years to resolve the situation.

We return to Wilmington, Delaware, where Dad's family has deep Revolutionary War roots. Like my forebears, who came from England and France, I'm also an immigrant. It's a new world to learn, full of strange things like snow, asphalt, and lots of white people.

Dad's away trying to find a job, and Mom's bogged down with Lissa and Andy. Being the first one through the gauntlet, I'm the parenting experiment. Will I listen? Eat yucky vegetables? I do an excellent job since my parents often leave me alone.

On a sunny day in the summer of 1966, pulling weeds and trying to build a wall around some uncooperative ants, I become aware of a subtle gurgling. While building forts is a good thing, the bubbling noise piques my interest.



The Cathedral staff of Saint Andrews and I were at the Tororo Airport the day we left Uganda. Photo by Seymour Flinn, December 1965.

Tromping across the road and into bracken woods, I discover the Brandywine River a few blocks from our house. Oh, what a great place! The river chortles, ducks quack as they land, puffs of wind rustle leaves, and the sun dapples across the rocks.

There must be frogs out there, amongst the fish wallowing in the pools. Hey, what about turtles? I pick up a stick and meander along without a clue that this river once cooled the furnaces at the DuPont gunpowder factory where my ancestors worked during the war.

Time stands still for me, engrossed in the fun of exploring. At the moment, the subtle sounds of nature soak into my body. Time slips slowly by, trapped in the eddies and currents. Meanwhile, for my father, it races rapidly, threatening to overwhelm him in one horrible crescendo.

Naturally, I'm scared when I hear Dad yelling my name. He runs to find me on a rock, white water rippling by, totally pleased with myself.

Uh-oh. Dad looks mad. I wonder what all the fuss is about.

"David, come here right now. You could fall in and get hurt."

A bit perturbed since Dad never yells, I begrudgingly hop off the rock to join him. The scolding continues as we march back home. But the wilderness continues to ripple through my soul. The explorer in me has awoken.



THE TRUCK DOOR slams as Francois jumps in, and Joe starts up the engine. Nanyuki is a small village that has atrophied like the rest of Kenya. My Lonely Planet guidebook notes that after World War II, the British built buildings in the style of civilized London. While suited to the climate and pleasant to look at, things fall apart.

Africans don't seem to care about fancy things. They're more practical, living in the moment, and don't manicure their world. As we drive out of town, I notice the paint peeling from the sides of buildings, shingles missing from roofs, broken glass windows, and trash swirling around the street. It takes getting used to, but realizing it's small stuff, I don't sweat it.

The farmland transforms into a forest, and the houses thin as the

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trees take over. We leave the pot-holed streets behind and bounce up the dusty road to Sirimon Gate, the entrance to Mount Kenya National Park. I'm grateful for the Mitsubishi four-wheel drive that shortens our approach.

Africa reaches up and grabs the vehicle, stopping it dead in its tracks. The mud swallows the tires, and we bustle out to free it. Fifteen minutes later, we realize that it's hopeless.

So much for four-wheel drive. We unload our kit and get cracking. We'll deal with the truck when the climb is done.

The trees of the timberland forest are sparse, transitioning into chaparral as we hike higher. The view of the valley flickers through the fog as it rolls and swirls around us, eerie in the silence but refreshing as the hot sun occasionally blasts through, only to disappear again.

I stop, panting, and turn to Joe. "Wow, we're much higher than I thought. Didn't expect the impact of altitude. No running up this trail."

Joe is wiry, a few inches shorter than me, but with a nicely cropped brown beard and mustache. His studious look is capped off with wide, thin-framed plastic glasses.

"We started at almost nine thousand feet," Joe laughs. "Should have hired an elephant to haul our stuff." Mount Kenya tops out at 17,057 feet. Yikes, only 8,000 more to go.

"Hey, Joe, you never told me where you're from." I met my colleagues in Nairobi at the Kenya Mountaineering Club. None of us knew each other but rallied for the sake of the climb.

"I grew up in northern California, in Berkeley, of all places." He stops, huffing a bit, sucking in oxygen. "Life was good, my parents happy, pretty basic stuff. You mentioned you used to live in Uganda?"

"Yeah, not too far from here. My Dad was a missionary helping the church."

"Wow, that's wild. When did you leave?"

"My father's contract was up in late 1965, and then we headed back to the States. Life in America was still strange years later. Growing up in Greenwich, Connecticut, many high school classmates drove BMWs worth more than my father's salary."

I was preoccupied with belonging and being accepted. A gangly

four-eyed nerd who used sports to bond with his peers. Clueless. A wide receiver playing football who refused to wear glasses because they could break when tackled. As if I ever got the ball.

“I hated high school,” Joe replies. “Everyone was trying to impress each other. Too much boasting and bantering for me. Glad I joined the Boy Scouts to escape to the woods. Where did you learn about the outdoors?”

“My middle-school bud, Larry. His dad took us backpacking. A hardworking, rugged guy at home in the woods. Luckily, he showed me a better way to avoid school social drama. The crackling of a campfire and smores dripping with chocolate, sealed the deal.”

“Amen to chocolate. You got any handy?”

Pulling out a Kenyan version of the Cadbury bar from a pocket attached to my hip belt, I pass it to him. We plod on, hoping to catch Andrew and Francois, galloping ahead. The trail winds through large chunks of volcanic rock scattered by glaciers with remnants of snow tucked away on their northern sides.

As we pause next to a boulder, I ask “So how did you get to Kenya?”

“This spring, I was looking for job at a large advertising agency. They offered me a freelance opportunity to photograph the truck in the wilds of Africa for Mitsubishi North America.”

“So you’re here on a boondoggle?” My jaw drops processing this news. And I thought I was good at convincing companies to pay for my trips.

“Well, yeah, it’s stupendous having an expense account. But I need to get to the game park after this climb. Although Africa appears to be a long way from Los Angeles, my boss is impatiently waiting for DHL to deliver my exposed film.”

Crossing a stream that trickles down the valley, I say “In that case, better not send them any pictures of the truck stuck in the mud.”

“Not a chance of that, I need to keep this job. Especially since the truck makes getting around Kenya so much easier.” It beats traveling by matatu, the infamous African private taxi. Joe continues on while I gaze at the unique shrubs that line the stream.

An hour later, we catch up with the other two at the ridge top, where the glorious peaks of Mount Kenya flit into view, mist swirling.

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Andrew looking northwest over the plains on the Sirimion trail of Mount Kenya, July 1989

The lobelia shrubs, an alpine wonder, are scattered along the path, different from their desert cacti cousins. They sprout out of the ground, surrounded by scrub grasses, volcanic rock, and hoar frost that nestles in the shadows. Batian, the taller of the two peaks, pops up a glimpse and disappears back into the clouds.

Dumping my moose of a pack to forage for a jar of peanut butter, I open it with a flourish, offering some to Joe. “Have a snack and enjoy the view. I’m psyched to be here with you guys.”

Joe passes the PB to Francois, who slathers it on his chocolate bar, munching as he says in his French accent, “The mountain is amazing, beautiful. I’m off to the hut. Anyone else?” He throws on his pack.

“I’m game.” Joe jumps up, and poof, they’re gone.

Andrew takes a photo of the shrub next to us. “I just love these lobelia.” He has bouncy curly hair and a clean-shaven face as I do. He’s a few inches shorter, and his enthusiasm makes him a great teammate. I like his glacier glasses; very snazzy as my Mom would say.

I agree. “These trees are right out of Dr. Seuss. Like the Joshua tree

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in California.” The groundsels resemble giant artichokes, rainwater pooling in their leaves.

Andrew nods. “Totally stellar. Nothing like this in the UK. I’m happy to stroll and enjoy the shrubbery.” His English accent is crisp and clear.

“What brought you to Kenya?” I ask while taking a closer look at the nearest groundsel.

“After graduating from the University of Reading in England, I’ve been working in Nairobi for three years. I’m taking a short break from my research for this climb.”

“Wow, so this is just a long weekend for ya, huh?” What a life to get a job in Africa.

“It’s bonny excellent to get away. Nairobi is like all cities, one big rat race. I’m glad to unwind amidst these lovely plants.” He stops to peer into a lobelia. “Incidentally, what brings you here?”



Francois snapping pictures of the shrubbery with Mount Kenya in the distance, July 1989.

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I join him in examining the large shrub. “I’m going back home to Uganda; this is just an excellent diversion.”

“You used to live in Africa?” Andrew seems puzzled to learn an American has roots here.

“My folks were missionaries for the Anglican Church when I was born. And now I’m back!”

“Seriously? That’s cool. Welcome home!”

Another lobelia looms nearby, over ten feet tall. Snap goes my camera. Surrounded by my new friends and stunning scenery, I’m blown away by my luck. Six months ago, camped out on Dad’s couch, the guidebook described what I could see and do in Africa, cautioning about the hazards while highlighting the rewards.

Although books help provide direction, it’s up to me to travel my own path through life. Looking up at the clouds swirling between Mount Kenya’s twin summits, I realize it’s been an extraordinary journey getting here.

As the mist entwines the mountain, the lobelia stand watch. This grateful mzungu is ready to climb the most badass peak in Africa.



Ken approaching Huntington Ravine, Mount Washington, February 1986

APPROACH

JANUARY 1980 – JANUARY 1983



With a running start, I jump into the bow of the canoe. Gathering speed, fending off rocks using my paddle, the metal bottom lets out a high-pitched squeal as it plows through the snow. Risking a glance behind me, John is balanced precariously on the stern. At our current speed, careening down the ski hill in the dark, with the wind whipping through our hair, flipping the canoe over would be disastrous.

The moon peaks out from behind the clouds, glistening on the snow, reflecting a pale-yellow stripe down our path. Imagining a roller coaster, I hang on and howl when reaching the bottom of the hill. Suddenly, a road jumps in our way, and the canoe throws sparks as we bounce across the pavement. More asphalt draws near, and we launch, aluminum screeching, to the other side, stopping in the snow. Raising our paddles, we yell “Yes!” in unison.

It’s January 1980, halfway through sophomore year, and tonight is my introduction to the Syracuse University Outing Club (SUOC). John is president and sure knows how to throw a party. The club, a co-ed collegiate equivalent of the Boy Scouts, encourages students to appreciate the great outdoors by exposing them to rock climbing, caving, canoeing, hiking, and skiing.

The meeting is hosted at the E-Room, an equipment room in the basement of the ski lodge on the edge of campus. The lifts have been quiet for years, the machinery long since rusted, downhill skiing having moved on to steeper terrain. Rarely used by the university, SUOC has full reign of the lodge, brainwashing beginners with stories of glory in the wilderness.

After the excitement of my first SUOC adventure, we stow the boats away. Naturally, there's a beer keg, and the party starts. Sitting on a canoe, I start chatting with Eric.

"How did you learn about the outing club?" he asks.

"It's a long, sordid tale. Nothing as thrilling as canoeing down a ski slope."

"We have time. There's a lot of beer in the keg." Eric adjusts his glasses and smiles.

"I went to school in Connecticut but didn't do much outdoors. A few church downhill ski trips, a backpack or two. Mainly neighborhood sports. High school drama was way too stifling. I had close friends, but most of them moved away."

"Any girls, man?"

Groaning about the girl question, it's time to chug my beer. Eric is handsome, with a solid lumberjack frame and a smile surrounded by a bushy beard. Girls must fall at his feet.

"Nah, nothing happened. I had Coke-bottle glasses for years. Surrounded by girls in the French Club and Yearbook Committee, but too shy. And the prom? Forget that." There it was, the whole uncomfortable virgin topic. I hope we don't dwell on it.

Eric nods. "Well, I had one girlfriend, but we drifted apart. How did you get to SU?"

Grateful he doesn't drill into my girl-free world. "My family moved to upstate New York my senior year, and I stayed with church families to finish school. Clueless, I applied to three architecture programs, not realizing it's one of the most grueling majors on the planet. The College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse accepted me."

"Well, you must have some smarts. I transferred to the Forestry School after finishing my associate's degree in New Paltz and now going

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for Forest Engineering. The outing club rounds out the experience. Do you live on campus?”

“Yeah, up on Mount Olympus in Day Hall. Fortunate to meet good people, lots of girls. They know I’m sweet; that’s what they tell me; I’m always stuck in the friend zone. Still better than living in a monastery.”

“Ah, the benefits of dorm living. I punted and found a place off campus. College is wonderful; everyone has an open mind. It’s electric, none of the silly high school games.” Eric finishes his beer.

Nodding in agreement, I say, “And there’re a zillion things to get sucked into—sports, book clubs, jobs, dancing. Last year, I organized downhill night skiing trips. Too freaking cold, and barely able to see the poorly lit runs.”

Eric laughs. “Downhill canoeing is way more fun. So, last question, what’s your major?”

“Now, that’s a complicated answer. Last year I studied Arts and Sciences, and now I’m in the School of Art, hoping to make it into Industrial Design. Abandoned my books for oil paint and colored chalk.”



Eric waiting to climb at Seneca Rocks, West Virginia in March 1982.

Eric cracks a grin. “And those artsy girls. Nice move.”

Standing to stretch my legs, “I’m stoked to have met you. This party has been awesome. Time to head out; got an art history exam tomorrow.”

“I’ll bail with you. Need a ride down the hill?”

“That would be amazing; saves waiting for the bus.” As we head to the exit, John stands by the door, nursing his beer. Shaking hands, I say, “Thanks for inviting me. Looking forward to more adventures.”

His elfin smile lights up his face. “I’m glad you showed up. Tuesdays are trip signup nights, so keep that in mind.”

Unfortunately, the following weekend, a girl pitches over in a canoe and tragically snaps her leg. After the ambulance leaves, the tobogganing season is over. John promises the campus police that the canoes will remain on the river. We need to maintain a low profile and let them worry about the football team tossing beer kegs off dormitory roofs.



MY FIRST CHANCE TO run a river comes a few weeks later. Most SUOC boats are banged up, but that’s to be expected when used as toboggans. Kayaking magazines describe whitewater rivers full of frothy waves with big rocks that want to crunch boats. This river is supposed to be mellow. Better be.

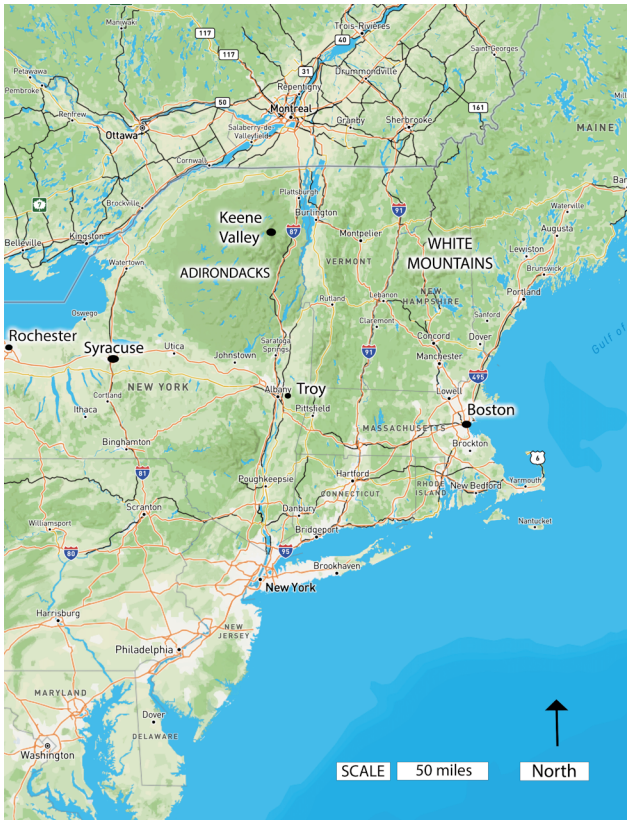
February is a strange time to paddle a river, but John explains the rationale to me over beers at Hungry Charlie’s, the pub for post-SUOC-meeting revelry. Lucky for me, New York’s drinking age is 18.

“You need to practice the real thing before Spring,” he lectures. “The best time to kayak is when the rivers are raging due to the winter thaw. You want to have fun, right?”

It’s hard to dismiss the logic, but I have more questions. “Couldn’t we start in a pool or someplace a bit warmer? Perhaps go skiing instead of kayaking?”

“Bah. You need to get into the swing of things, and this Class II river will be a piece of cake.” John changes tack. “You handled your first canoe ride famously. You’re a natural.”

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I lived in Syracuse, Rochester, Keene Valley, Troy, and Boston throughout this story.

Going for passion works, as I agree to show up on Saturday.

After helping unload the boats from John's Pontiac station wagon, it's time to gather my gear. The wetsuits are a smorgasbord of sizes with strips of duct tape in odd places, providing more mental than practical warmth.

I haul my boat to the edge. The winter-gray sky blends with the dark water around me. Squeezing into the kayak cockpit, I launch into Chittenango Creek¹, getting comfy. Trying to relax, wiggling my big toes in the neoprene booties that, thankfully, have no holes. Paddling upstream, I wait for the other three beginners to join me.

"Okay, people," John calls, "gather around. We need to review a few points before getting y'all going." Like ducklings attending their father,

we careen around and line up facing him. “You seem to have the basics of paddling; that’s good. But before we proceed downstream, you need to demonstrate that you can evacuate the boat if it capsizes.”

Losing one’s balance can cause a kayak to flip upside down, which is a frightening thought. While inverted and without exiting the cockpit, I’m supposed to use the paddle to roll back up. It might be possible in a pool, heroic on a frozen river.

The dorky spray skirt has elastic to keep it snug against my belly, meant to bond me to the kayak and prevent water from gushing in and sinking the boat. Yes, I go there and ponder waves crashing, dragging me to the bottom, bouncing off rocks and tree stumps. In theory, the helmet is supposed to prevent a broken skull.

With a suspicion forming in my mind, I ask, “Do you expect me to dump over, upside down, and wiggle out of the kayak?”

“Yes! That exactly.” John laughs. “Seriously, if you flip over in white water, I need to know you can get out safely. No drowning is allowed on SUOC trips.”

“Ah, right. It’s freezing out. There’s no other option?”

“Since you missed the pool training sessions last fall, you need to show me a release, or else you’ll have to stay here.”

A splash spooks me as one of my colleagues gets right to it, tips his boat over, dunks himself, pulls the spray skirt, and pops up, gasping for air.

“Don’t let go of your paddle and grab the boat! You can’t lose them in white water,” John says. “Excellent. Swim back to land.”

A wailing builds inside me, but I do the exit flawlessly. Staggering back to shore, like a drowned dog freezing, I wonder what I’ve gotten into. Jaws chattering, I slither back into the kayak and head downriver. Eventually, my wetsuit warms up, allowing me to enjoy the adventure. The river gurgles and the eddies are chock-full of ice, reminding me of wind chimes as they gently nudge my boat. Getting the hang of things.

After paddling for a mile, it starts snowing. The icy water chills my hands clutching the paddle, and I try to imagine a friendly, roaring fire. As if that isn’t enough, I can’t feel my toes. Wedged into this tiny cockpit, my long legs don’t appreciate the awesomeness of kayaking and have gone to sleep.

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The snow trickles down in the calm gloomy sky as we finally reach the take-out. I crawl away from the river like a salamander, barely able to walk. It takes twenty minutes for my toes to return to my body. Later that night, all is well at SUOC's best party house, equipped with a sauna in the basement. It's rickety-looking, but the cavers know a lot about gas-fired furnaces.

The outing club has four primary cliques: cavers, climbers, water rats, and normals. The first three splinter off into their factions, while normal members stick to skiing and hiking, creating a fascinating example of group dynamics. Rivalries exist, each clique bragging about its glories. The refreshing part is that nothing is personal; it's all bantering and boasting. I appreciate these tribal intensities, competitive but not nasty.

After the sauna brings me to a cozy inner glow, a back rub by a caving girl caps off the evening. I can't remember her name, but I'll never forget the soft, strong fingers caressing my back. Sex has been non-existent; being touched this way is fantastic. I love this place. Coming out of my back-rub fog, John sits nearby.

"Yo, Flinny, life is good, eh?"

"Life is magnificent," I reply blissfully, lying on my tummy, arms by my sides, feet spread wide, warmth coursing through my skin.

"Good to see you enjoying the SUOC lifestyle. A snowy day on the river, followed by a toasty sauna. Almost makes us forget about studying." He shifts, placing his beer can next to his knee.

I roll over and sit up next to him. "Thanks for a great trip today. I've been wondering, why do you love kayaking? Can't see anything squished into that low cockpit."

"Ah, good question. The short answer is that it's the same for any sport; you gotta put in the time. Being a beginner is hard since nothing is in sync. Relax, learn, and it grows on you." John sips his beer.

"Okay, I get that you need to be good to have fun. But what keeps you going, especially after getting tossed in the water, bouncing off huge rocks inside nature's washing machine?"

"The thrilling rush of a big wave forces me to focus. My worries fade away, and I emerge revitalized, ready for the next adventure, whether in the wilderness or in the classroom."

John's enthusiasm is intoxicating, stimulating my mind with the possibilities, but my legs have declared that the kayak is not for me.



IN LATE MARCH, I receive a letter from the Industrial Design department. Cradling it between my fingers, its thin, crisp type beckons opening. Heading back to my empty dorm room, I perch on the bottom bunk and fondle the envelope, my belly crawling with anxiety. Fingers sweat; destiny awaits.

Fifth on the waiting list. Dang. Not bad, considering there are forty slots for two hundred applicants. It's rare when anyone backs out, so I'm toast. It's great to be close, but this far away sucks. The room is quiet as the letter slips to the floor. While a bold attempt, I wasn't good enough. The competition has been at it for years, not a mere six months. My architecture skills are solid, but my creative drawing stinks. Being results-oriented, I look at it simply: I tried but failed. Now what?

It takes me a few days to get the courage to call home and check-in. The dorm pay phone is near the elevators. Luckily, no one else is camped out chatting.

"Hey, Dad, how are things?"

"Busy as always at church. The usual political drama, but it seems the chaos is under control."

Dad has been at it for three years. His parish is in Troy, New York, the poor part of the city. The previous rector was a drunk, the church barely functioning. It's a depressed city with fierce race wars, so my siblings attend private school. I thought we left the battles back in Africa.

Then I tell him. Silence. Crickets chirp. I can't bear it. "I'll meet with my Arts and Sciences advisor after the semester to figure out my next steps. I don't think art school is for me."

Dad's not mad. Bet he knew how it would go. "Get a degree; that's all we want. College is important."

"Thanks for not being angry. I'm committed to graduating, but what major is the question. How is Mom feeling?" I worry since she hasn't been working much lately.

“She’s still tired. The doctor says it’s arthritis, and that’s why her hip hurts.”

“What does Pop-pop think?” My grandfather is a big deal in the Delaware medical world, running one of the largest hospitals in the East. “He must know someone who can help her.”

Dad sighs. “He’s working on it. In a few days, we have an appointment with an arthritis specialist.”

“Can I chat with Mom?”

“She’s resting. I can have her call you when she’s able. Hey, here’s your sister.” Dad hands the phone to Lissa, and we catch up, but I’m distracted and worried about Mom.



THE SEMESTER ENDS in early May 1980, and I move into a big Victorian house ten blocks from campus with six other characters from the dorm. The house phone has a humongous cord, allowing me to chat with Mom in my room.

“I’ve decided to switch my major to Geography,” I tell her.

“Why Geography?”

“Creating maps seems cool, and I can get a job in the Cartography lab, thanks to my drafting skills. My advisor recommended this approach, and I agree it’s a great idea.”

“It does seem logical, especially with your architectural background. How do you feel about it?”

“I’m happy to have a solid plan to graduate, even if it means one more semester to make up for the art school credits. I’m drawn to maps and nature, so Geography makes sense.” Continuing to chat with Mom, I dance around the girl questions and don’t tell her about the crazy parties we have.

It’s a hot and hazy summer in Syracuse. My housemate Steve and I both have rooms on the first floor. He’s going to the Forestry School and is from Long Island. He’s taller than me, topped with a large bushy afro and a thin mustache.

He works at the hospital downtown, tormenting rats for some odd research purpose. I’m a delivery boy for Acropolis Pizza at night. We go

hiking a few times but mostly hang around Syracuse, enjoying life outside of the dorms.

The transition to Geography is not so bad. School is school, and when drawing maps, using ink is not that different from paint. Working in the Cartography lab ten hours a week helps earn some cash.

In October, the climbers invite me to the town of Little Falls, home to Moss Island,² on the Erie Canal. We siege the fifty-foot crag, rigging three top ropes to get folks climbing quickly. Our climbing leader is Bob, a rugged Wildlife Bio major with an enormous brown beard, reminding me of a young Santa Claus. He explains that each climb has a name, indicating a sequence of moves called a “route.”

We start on the classic *Jeff Loves Eileen*, the words of graffiti spray-painted on the wall by a passionate Jeff years ago. Bob is assisted by his girlfriend, Marla, who wears tight yoga pants. She has big hair, glorious brown curls, an elfish smile, and a twinkle in her eyes: tiny, barely over five feet, a gymnast in high school.

Bob and Marla launch into teacher mode and explain the main principles of climbing: anchors, ropes, and belays. Anchors can use trees or are constructed with gear called protection. Today we are using trees as anchors, which Marla calls a *top rope*.

A new friend, Gaston, is climbing, with Eric belaying him. We’ve learned safety requires a rope that keeps the climber from falling. Think of taking a leashed dog on a steep walk: the owner is the belayer, and the climber is the dog. As the climber moves up, the belayer draws in the rope, keeping it taut.

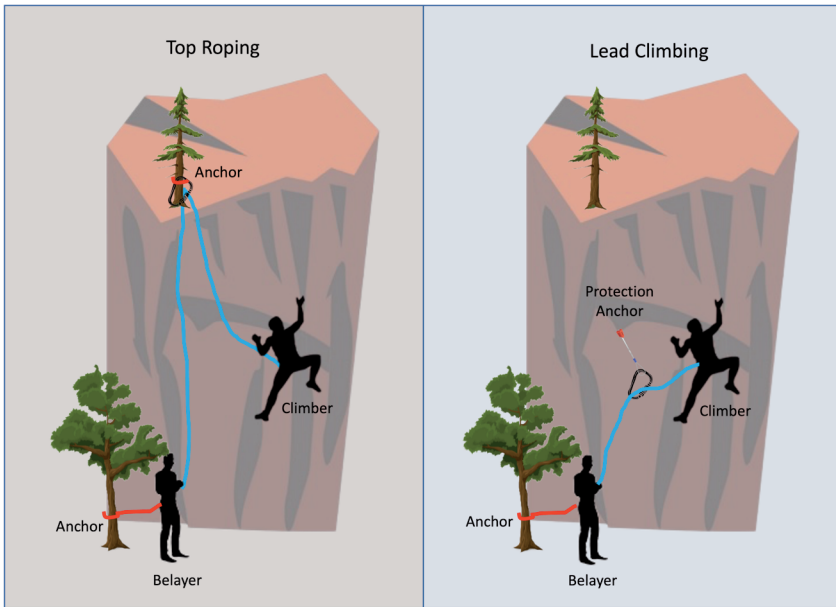


A figure-eight knot tied into my harness, Fall 1987.

If the climber slips off, the belayer locks the rope as the owner tightens the leash.

“You got it,” says Eric. “Climbing is too easy for you with those super-long arms.” After a few minutes, Gaston waves from the top, indicating he’s done climbing. His bright orange tights make me squint.

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Top roping and lead climbing are the main types of roped climbing.

Marla helps Eric adjust the rope and hands me the end. Remembering my lesson, I tie a figure-eight knot that attaches the rope to my harness.

Marla looks up and says, “You tied it right. Great! Up you go, and remember to think about your feet. Look down and find the right spot.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, cautiously stepping up to the rock wall.

The climbing harness fits me snugly like a diaper. The dog leash slithers to the top of the wall, where it goes through a ring called a carabiner, anchored to a huge tree. Eric—the dog owner—has hold of the other end of the rope.

Wedging my foot in a crack, I stand and get on with it. The rock feels rough against my fingers, but I appreciate the solid texture. Wiggling my tips into the crack seems sensible, and my feet pivot sideways to fit the horizontal ledges. I move one limb at a time, making progress, searching for significant footholds to stop and shake my arms. This is fun.

The dangled rope gets in the way, since it tends to follow the crack, almost as distracting as my sweaty palms. Growing up, I always climbed

trees, but this is way different. Instead of standing on branches, my toes are crammed into this crack. At least there are decent ledges to rest on.

Before I know it, I'm sitting at the top beside Gaston, soaking in the view over the Erie Canal. He's four inches taller than I am, thin but ripped with wiry strength, and has blond hair trimmed short. He's studying Wildlife Biology, crushing his grades but not exactly sure of his path, like many of us. Sometimes he pretends he's Gaston Rebuffat, one of mountaineering's legends, using a French accent to imitate his idol.

"Do you like climbing?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's cool. I love the giant puzzle, never following the same, boring line."

I agree. "It's fun. Different from the speed rush of downhill skiing, more serene. There's a lot to think about, and I like the physics and complexity: climbing, belays, anchors, gear, all of it. Not thrilled about falling. Heard that people can slip out of their harness and crater to the ground."

"Splat city kitty." Gaston laughs. "Yeah, falling can be a bummer, but the rope makes it less terrifying."

"Ha, you admit it's scary."

"Absolutely. But heck, I could get hit by a bus walking to class tomorrow. I'd rather be in control of my destiny." Gaston stands, reaching for another rope. "Time for a rappel!"

Zoom. He motors down the cliff, a marine bouncing out of a helicopter, gliding in total style. Rappelling—the opposite of climbing—requires sliding down the rope. A figure-eight friction device, a tricked-out paper clip, controls the descent.

I peek over the cliff edge. Big air unnerves me. Imagining Wile E. Coyote, with legs whirling to find traction, my mind maps the trigonometry in an instant, fear fluttering in my tummy. Climbing up is one thing; going down is another. I should walk off and leave the exposure behind.

Years earlier, I stood on a house deck twenty feet over Maine's calm, deep-blue ocean. Vertigo crept in as the dread of falling swelled, the ocean beckoning.

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Gaston always dresses colorfully. Notice the rope tied through his harness. Moss Island, Little Falls in 1981.

Gripping the railing, part of me wanted to jump, to spite it, to refuse to succumb to fear. To show I dared to take the challenge and push the envelope. Be a man.

I'm scared of heights. Of falling. Of dying and going splat city kitty, mashed under the wheel of fear.

"Flinny," Gaston yells. "Stop spacing and get going." The rope ripples impatiently.

I breathe deeply, clip in, turn around, and don't look down. My mind chills, and my body takes over, welcoming the exposure, the rush of this experience animating my being.

Snug in the diaper, walking backward, my weight pulls the rope through the paper clip. Screw being scared; it's time to just do it.



I HEAD HOME for the short Christmas break, thrilled to score Dad's old Ford Maverick. Tan with two doors and automatic transmission—

the perfect cruising machine. It's great to have wheels and the freedom to drive on SUOC trips.

In late January of 1981, I sign up for ice climbing in Ithaca, only to discover John's car has broken down, and we can't fit the horde in the Maverick. Milling around the E-Room, we opt for plan B.

Weeks ago, John rigged a garden hose to drip water down the hay silo attached to the ski lodge. Imagine a twenty-foot wall of ice providing the perfect practice climb. After a few hours of engineering attempts, we conclude rigging a top rope is a fail. Plan C leads us to grab a keg of Genesee Cream Ale, and our discussion turns to spring break.

SUOC sponsors a trip to Franklin, West Virginia, an outdoor adventure playground, every March. Seneca Rocks, a premier climbing mecca, is minutes away. The region has the best caving in the East. The Potomac River is nearby for the water tribe, while the Dolly Sods Wilderness provides great backpacking for regular folks.

Cruising south in John's station wagon, stuffed to the gills with caving, climbing, and canoe gear. Surprisingly, nothing flies off the roof, and we pull into the Thorn Spring Park driveway right before dark. During the ride, John tried to convince me to go caving. Sitting around a campfire outside our cabin, the cajoling continues.

"I get that you prefer climbing," John says, "but you should try caving. SUOC is about experiencing all the sports. Besides, we'll rappel into the cave."

Cautious reply. "Well, I want to climb *The Gendarme* at Seneca Rocks."

"You will, but caving is wild. Think of it as more rope practice. Right, guys?"

When John gets on a roll, he's tough to resist. His logic appears sound: better to try it to make sure. Yep, I agree to go.

The name "Sites" is more appealing than caves with names like *Hell Hole* or *Schoolhouse*. The entrance is a hole in the ground—not that I'd stumble into it, a scene from a Hollywood horror movie. Two hundred and twenty-five feet down, the bottom is covered with dirt and rumored to have a bat-poop pyramid.

We anchor a Bluewater nylon rope to an enormous tree and use a kick-ass device called a descender's rack. The rope slides through six

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rungs, applying friction with the caver's weight to control the descent. It's a beast meant to handle all kinds of mud and muck.

With six of us on the trip, I'm the third to head in. The first half of the rappel is cake, walking backward down a hundred-foot section. Suddenly, the notch arrives, and, poof, I'm launched into space. Adrift, slowly spinning around, a timid spider hanging to a thread, my carbide lamp unlit, eyes yearning for light. At night, the outdoors can seem dark. Being in a cave a hundred feet down is really dark, like super-duper dark. My eyes trick me into thinking bats are nearby, but my ears tell me there's nothing but air. I spot my friends' ghostly glow as they encourage me down.

Off the rope, sitting in guano, waiting for the others. Realizing my mistake, I move to a pile of clean dirt to work on my lamp. Carbide rocks the size of blueberries mix with water to generate gas, which a striker sparks to ignite the flame.

Finally, my lamp lights, exposing the long way up, the rope jerking as another caver descends. The cavern is as big as a house, surrounded by drab, brown, and dark walls, with an occasional sparkle of white crystal.



My five caving buddies, John in the middle, after 16 muddy hours in Sites Cave, West Virginia in March 1981.

We spend hours wandering around on a “route,” assuming John knows where we are going. My carbide lamp gives off enough light to keep claustrophobia at bay.

The best aspect of having company is the ability to engage in distracting conversation.

“Hey, this formation is awesome,” I say. “It appears that muddy water drips from the ceiling to form the bottom, building a huge hourglass.”

“That is correct,” John replies. “The top part is called a stalactite, and the bottom is a stalagmite. It’s hard to believe it may be over a million years old.”

“Here’s another one,” someone says, pointing their lamp to the far right of us.

My colleagues’ voices and banter help push the claustrophobia away, making it tolerable. John knows this and ensures we don’t spend time alone. I’m trying to forget his earlier stories about swimming or spending days inside a cave.

Caving is what you’d expect: cold, dark, muddy, bats, balrogs, dwarves, and Gollum. I spent hours in high school reading *Lord of the Rings*, drawn into the fascinating world of Middle Earth. I’m in the Mines of Moria, slowly getting comfortable.

Sites should be called Sights. It’s fantastic to walk upright, gazing at incredible rock formations. Typically, caving involves crawling around in the mud and bashing skulls against a low rock ceiling. Guess the long vertical rappel skipped all the tight passages and slinking stuff; I can relax and enjoy myself.

After more exploring, we finally make it back to the rope. John is a purist and hasn’t let anyone whizz in the cave. Bouncing around, barely holding it, I beg to be first, having to go so badly. Gibb’s ascenders are a complicated but remarkable ascending system. One on my right foot faces inward. The next one attaches below my left knee and the last at my right shoulder. These three points connect to the rope and allow me to climb.

First, putting weight on the knee, then draw my foot up, move the knee next, finally the shoulder, and back to the knee in a cycle. Designed

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to inchworm up the rope, the ascenders hold me in place; as I crank, my brain focused on the need to pee, leaving no room for fear.

Popping out, yanking on the rope to indicate I'm done, then dashing to the surrounding trees for relief. My sanity returns with the loss of bladder pressure, and I notice the sun is down.

Yikes, we were inside for sixteen hours. No wonder I had to pee like a racehorse. This trip convinces me that climbing in the sun is better than crawling around in the dark.



IT'S FASCINATING, this whole clique thing. The outing club has a tussle between climbers, cavers, and water rats. Another division forms between the Syracuse students and the Stumpies who go to the Forestry School, a state-run campus next door. One would never know you've crossed the boundary, like stepping into your sister's room, the twilight zone.

Stumpies are the granola children, hippies with dogs running around, frisbees in hand, beards for men, and fur on the girls' unshaven legs. I gravitate to this crowd, repelled by the dolled-up girls at Syracuse with their tight Jordache jeans.

After the West Virginia trip, I'm elected Vice President of SUOC. The responsibility includes managing the weekly meetings and helping with the annual budget process. I'm secretly happy at the recognition; it's dandy to be wanted. Being part of the inner circle is a great feeling that my effort is appreciated. It's wonderful.

With junior-year finals approaching, my housemate Steve and I dream up the most excellent plan. After discovering that Rick and Billy are graduating and driving west for summer jobs with the Forest Service, an idea percolates in our skulls.

At Hungry Charlie's, the post-SUOC meeting watering hole, I beg Billy for a ride to Wyoming, explaining that we'll hitchhike around the west, visiting friends. Steve and I want to see the sequoia trees found in the Sierra Nevada of California. It seems a good plan as any.

With bated breath, waiting for Billy's answer, topping off his beer

with a small, imploring gesture. It's his car, after all. He reaches for the mug, takes a big swig, then nods his head in agreement.

Yes! The Trip to Kiss Sequoias is coming together.

Hanging out in the E-Room after a run to Little Falls in early April, it's time for some fun. The party swells with dozens of Deadheads, Stumpies, and the full complement of climbers, cavers, and water rats, all brimming with wool sweaters and hiking boots. Nary is a disco song to be heard, and beer is swilled with gusto. Most of the walls have predictable posters of European ski resorts and Yosemite Valley, augmented with ice axes plunged tip-first into the wall.

I stroll over to Eric. "This is wild. Love this outing club. Somehow everyone gets their studying done and still has time to party."

"Ready for your trip out west?" Eric asks.

"Absolutely. I'm worried Rick and Billy will bolt out of town without us." I guzzle my beer.

"Well, that can be resolved. Camp on their porch," Eric chuckles. "Hey, what's that noise?"

Lounging against the wall near the kitchen, I look around. "It's getting louder. And closer. What the hell?"

Suddenly, a Stumpie barges up the outdoor stairs with his chainsaw roaring. The panicked crowd crushes against us to get away from the crazy loon. He stops at the door and turns it off, grinning madly as a wild man; he runs his hand along the metal, the blade removed for this stunt. Eric and I shrug and trudge past Chainsaw Guy, heading for the keg.

Having grown up in a staid high school town, the greatest gift of SUOC is the warm, welcoming embrace. My friends become my extended family, an invisible connection forged by wilderness adventure.

Regardless of personality, SUOCers are inclusive, providing the comfort of belonging. I get to choose these people as my best friends, and they choose me. This is my tribe, and it unknowingly launches me on my path to going mzungu.



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THE BEAST IS READY. Billy's white station wagon, overloaded with four six-foot-tall dudes, heads north to Canada. While traveling west, the two possibilities are I-90 across the United States or the Trans-Canada Highway. With the option for potent Canadian beer, our route choice is obvious.

When arriving at the border, three things happen. First, the officer asks where we were born. Mentioning Kampala, Uganda, earns me a "Are you kidding me?" look.

Then he asks about firearms or weapons, and we snicker to ourselves, thinking about the Roman candles buried in the back. Oh, nothing, officer. The final straw is Billy's turntable in the rear window. "Over!" the officer yells, pointing to a parking area.

It takes forever to uncover the issue. It seems odd, but Canada is worried he'll hock it for cash. It's some customs thing. He needs to pay a \$250 deposit or they'll confiscate the stereo. Disgusted, Billy gives them a check, and we bolt to Toronto, visiting as many breweries as possible to assuage our trauma.



The Beast getting unloaded to repair the rear shock, near Soo Locks in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, June 1981.

The first stop is Molson's for Bradors and Porters. Next to the Old Vienna Brewery and a dead end at Labatt's. Stocked with three cases of the best beer this side of Germany and tins of Skoal, we are ready to roll.

Somewhere in Ontario, the Beast blows a shock. We bounce along, nearing the border of Michigan, hoping to make it across before the car breaks down.

"Let's toss firecrackers at the buggers!" I yell over the music, "Can't let the cops push us around."

Steve chimes in, "Let's show these Mounties some real American stereo justice."

Billy slows the car, asking, "You wanna? I can pull over."

Rick shakes his head, eyeballs rolling.

Wisdom rules, and we cross over like everyone else and stop in Soo Locks, Michigan, to buy a new shock. The repair begins at a nearby scenic park after emptying the Beast. I can't believe this much junk can fit into a car.

After a swim in the conveniently located lake, we push on, spending the night in Wausau, Wisconsin, on the side of the road. We never thought of staying in a motel. Sleeping out under the stars is the SUOC way.

Saturday takes us to the Badlands, where we bake in the sun, ogling at the vibrant red, orange, and yellow colors in the arid land. We blast to the Black Hills and camp under a much more excellent grove of Ponderosa Pine trees.

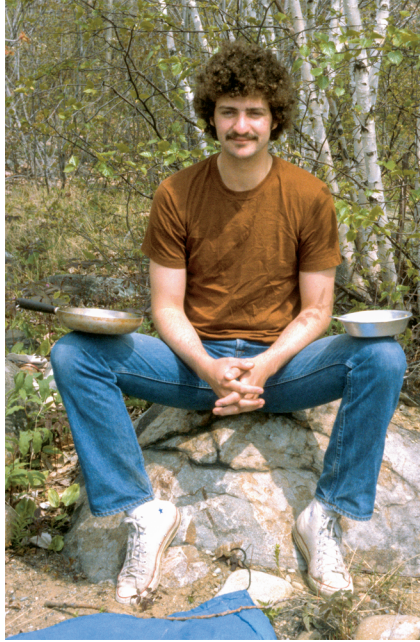
After dinner, we head into Deadwood and cruise the bar scene. It's fun to think we're modern cowboys, sitting in the seats of Jesse James and Billy the Kid, quaffing mugs of beer and shots of whiskey. Too much playacting for me, and feeling woozy, I head back to the car and crash.

"Flinny, wake up, you clown!" Steve's voice stirs me from a comfortable slumber. "You're lucky you bailed. Fifteen minutes after you left, the cops checked IDs at the bar."

Rubbing my eyes and sitting up, "Holy crap, my spider sense must have been going gangbusters. Thank God." I'm the young one, still not twenty-one.

Rick laughs. "You would have been dragged off to jail, for sure."

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Steve anxiously waiting for dinner outside Soo Locks, Michigan in June 1981.

I move over to let him sit down. “Sometimes too many drinks are a good thing.”

The next day we tour the Black Hills, Custer State Park, and Mount Rushmore. Monday takes us past the Devil’s Tower, where Rick and Billy drop us in Buffalo, Wyoming.

After a round of hugs, they drive off, the Beast riding a bit higher as smoke belches from the muffler. With the easy travel over, Steve and I are on our own.



STANDING on the side of the road, the reality of our plan dawns on me as another car zips past. I imagined buzzing around carefree, bumblebees hopping from car to car, darting from town to town, the miles ripping by.

“Sorry, man,” I say to Steve. “Hitchhiking seemed like a good idea

back in Syracuse, enthralled by *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. The lure of the open road, charting my own path to create structure in a chaotic world. I didn't plan on having to wait for a flipping ride. Expectation is failing to match reality."

"Yeah, it's a drag standing around chewing tobacco to pass the time," Steve agrees. "Beats sitting in Organic Chemistry with some boring TA droning on. Don't worry; someone will stop." Steve's the best; he always has a sunny outlook.

I scuff my boots against the asphalt. "Of course, two big scruffy guys with backpacks have nothing to do with our luck." A gust blows dust in my face.

I spent Thanksgiving at his parent's house last year. It was a madhouse, packed with relatives in a comfortable home in Queens, an easy subway ride from Manhattan. Not having this experience growing up, I loved the chaos of the large Italian family. Most importantly, I learned spaghetti sauce is called "gravy."

Finally, we get a ride in a tricked-out Bronco, loud disco Bee Gees blaring. The guy riding shotgun nods off, ripping a snore as he snoozes. The driver reaches over and jabs him in the ear. After asking where we're from, he pontificates, "New York, yep, New York. That place, it's a jungle." They let us off outside Cheyenne, where we spend hours waiting for the rain or a ride. The ride wins.

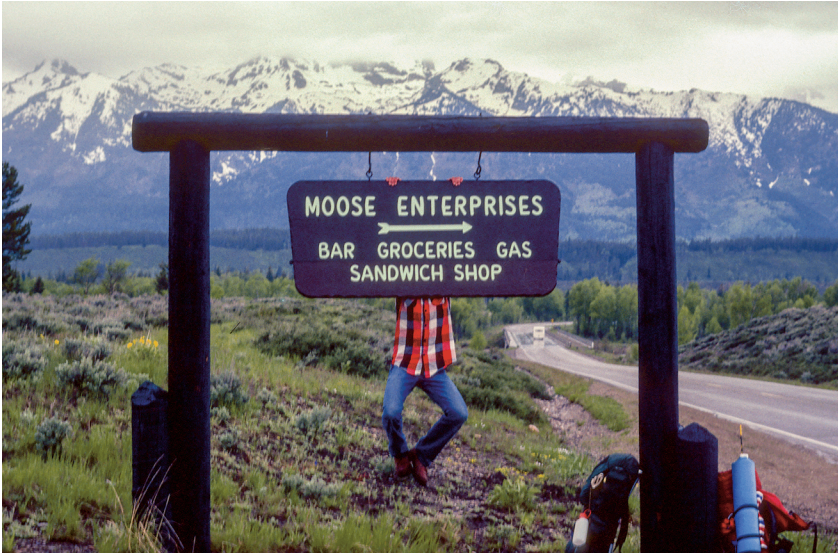
A California girl picks us up in a Toyota. She wears Red Baron sunglasses and drives us to the mountains. Camping under lodgepole pines with a smattering of Douglas fir, the sagebrush smells pleasant when smushed. A hearty spaghetti meal follows. We sleep by a raging river roaring as loud as a freight train.

In the morning, blisters the size of mongooses appear on my heels. I diligently paste them with Band-Aids before putting my boots on.

On our next hitch, the driver proudly discloses that he's been arrested for dozens of speeding tickets.

It gets weirder as we score a ride with a Hunter Thompson-like fellow whose truck is stocked with beers. "Damn Christians! I guess it's all right if you want tunnel vision," says the crazed swimming pool salesman from California. We appreciate the free beer but are glad to get out of the car in Jackson Hole, where the trail and rain begin.

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I was hanging out in the Tetons in June 1981.

We spend the day bushwhacking. Too proud to say I'm lost; at least my trusty map and compass give me a clue to where we are: somewhere in the Tetons.

I've never seen such a dramatic skyline as the sun goes down. Clouds encircle the jagged mountains; knife edges beckon the climber in me.

The rain descends, enclosing us in fog and drizzle, the glory of the vista dripping away. The mud gets worse, threatening to swallow our boots.

We reach an opening in the forest the size of a runway, fallen dead lodgepole pines scattered like matchsticks. Halfway across, stepping over a big tree, I glance up to see a moose ten feet away. His antlers are huge. We both have bug eyes, watching each other, wondering what to do.

Steve is quiet as we ponder our way out of this predicament. The downed trees make running impossible. Luckily, the moose snorts and steps away.

"Whoa, excellent," Steve says. "I could have reached out and touched his antlers. Almost peed in my pants."

"Did you see the size of his nose? Way more exciting than swatting

mosquitoes! Dang, I hate this rain. Can't it stop for a day?" I ask the universe.

"Lots of luck with that prayer. I bet my underwear is growing mold as we speak."

"Don't need that visual."

Our slog continues for hours, but we find the trail and stagger like zombies. Our food supply is low, and my attempt at fishing is a total failure. Drenched with rain and jittery from the moose scare, we're toast, dreaming of pizza.

My poncho is useless; I'm sick of being wet. Bedraggled like a drowned rat, this is getting old. Our tarp barely keeps us dry; my down sleeping bag is a lump of useless muck.

Stopping to wring out my shirtsleeves, lo and behold, I stumble upon a cooler. Unbelievable! Not hidden in the bushes as it should be, but smack dab in the middle of the trail, a glistening white Styrofoam gift from the universe.

We open it to discover steak, wine, cheese, Champagne, bacon, eggs, hot dogs, lettuce, and orange juice.

It seems the Ponderosa God is looking over us starving children. Mouth watering, I'm about to rip into the juice when a fellow in his late twenties jogs down the trail.

We apologize and mumble sympathies, but he isn't too upset. Instead, he gives us some hot dogs, cheese, and eggs.

I've learned to beware of temptation when cold and delirious. But still, he shouldn't have left the cooler in the middle of the trail, waiting to be pillaged by bears or starving hikers.

Tired of being cold and damp, we dump the hiking and return to hitching. "What's up with that dude and his cooler," I say as another car whizzes by, ignoring us.

Steve yawns. "I still can't figure out where he came from with all that food. To think of carrying a Styrofoam cooler for miles. Talk about glamorous camping."

"I'm fond of his style. Beats ramen noodles and peanut butter any day."

As another car ignores us, Steve belts out a comment that makes me chuckle. I can't imagine slogging through that rain-infested swamp of

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the Tetons without him. Even in the worst downpour, trying to keep a fire going to dry my sleeping bag, Steve is cracking jokes and making me laugh.

A boisterous and bubbly woman in a car smothered with Arizona WABC bumper stickers gives us a lift to Yellowstone, where we sweet-talk a rookie ranger into giving us a ride.

She dumps us off in West Thumb, and we camp at Duck Lake. I catch zero fish but enjoy a fine sunset in Yellowstone Park. The days start to blur into each other as we flit from car to car.



I'm trying to score a ride with a "Beyond Eureka" sign in Northern California in June 1981.

“HEY, SISTER DEAR, HOW ARE THINGS?” Wedged into a tiny phone booth, I’m pleased to hear Lissa’s voice.

“My job stinks, the boss is a bum, but it’s not that bad. Where are you?”

“Steve and I are stuck in some God-awful small town in California. I had to walk a ton to get here. At least this diner has a phone. Glad to hear you’re working. Someone has to since I’m screwing off. How’re Mom and Dad?”

Lissa sighs. “Mom’s back from the doctor. It’s not arthritis. The doctor says it’s something else. Dad doesn’t tell me anything.”

My usual bouncy self goes somber. Lissa is three years younger, has glorious strawberry-blonde hair and blue eyes, and melts the hearts of all the boys.

I used to call her Pest and pound on her as a big brother should. But I’ve grown up and learned to appreciate having a real friend. “Darn, it’s not fair. I hope the cancer’s not coming back.”

“I overheard Mom and Dad talking about it. I’m a bit scared, David.”

“Me too. Hey, is Mom home? I’m hoping to say hi.”

“Nope. They’re both at some church dinner. Psyched that they let me stay home. Those affairs are dull.”

“No boys your age, right?” I guess, smiling. “Well, I’ll try back in a few days. Time to get going. I love you!”

Placing the phone gently in its cradle, I face the grimy glass of the phone booth, the sun trapped behind the clouds in the west, thinking of Mom.

Standing on the highway, getting super weird looks as the hours ebb by. Wondering why I’m doing this for the tenth time. Pondering dire thoughts that maybe it’s time to jump on a Greyhound bus.

And so we did. After relaxing at a friend’s house in Berkeley for a few days, Steve and I get a sweet ride outside Monterey north of Big Sur. The van driver from Philly invites us to stay with him as he heads south to Los Angeles. We drop Steve at the airport days later to fly home for his job.

“It’s been a blast, man,” I say after giving Steve a goodbye hug. “You’re the best travel buddy I ever had.”

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My fuel truck with the Hughes 500D fire patrol helicopter at the Wind River Indian Reservation, Wyoming. August 1981.

“Ha, I’m the only buddy you ever had.” He punches me in the arm. “You’re lucky to have me. Be solid, and I’ll see you back in Syracuse.”

Steve grabs his pack and stomps off into the terminal. He stops at the door and turns back to wave. He’s right. I’m lucky to have such a wonderful friend, and I miss him already. Well, sort of.

Van Man and I drive to the Grand Canyon. After being a tourist gawking at the sights, I say goodbye and hitch north, heading to Yellowstone.

Outside of Lander, Wyoming, a radical change in plan occurs. I’m picked up by a Bureau of Indian Affairs fire patrol helicopter pilot. A few minutes into the drive, he offers me a job I can’t refuse. He needs a new fuel truck driver with an upcoming move to Montana.

I ponder this crazy opportunity for fifteen seconds and commit to five weeks before school starts. The next day, his company flies me round trip to Denver to sign some papers, and two days later, I’m on the job.

Stationed on the Wind River Indian Reservation, I work eleven hours a day, seven days a week. While it entails lots of sitting around

waiting for a forest fire to start, I'll clear \$1200 before heading back to school. Pay off my debts and still have \$500 in the bank. Sweet.

At the airport one day, after filling the truck with Jet A fuel for the chopper, I call home.

"Hi guys," I say when Mom and Dad get on the phone. "Happy twenty-second wedding anniversary!"

"Thanks, David. It's good to hear your voice. Are you safe and sound in Wyoming?" Mom asks.

"Yes, I'm still here. And it's funny you should ask. This morning I celebrated your marriage with a kerosene bath."

My parents immediately stammer in unison, "W-what? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. When refueling the chopper, I forgot to tighten the pressure valve on the filtration system. As soon as I started pumping fuel, gas sprayed out in an eight-foot radius, soaking me."

"You're not wearing those clothes, David?" Dad asks hopefully.

"The folks at the airport let me shower in their bathroom. I'm not the first one; it seems to happen frequently. Glad no one lit a cigarette nearby!"

"You're fortunate, and I'm glad you're safe," he says.

I continue chattering, telling them enough to make them comfortable, and they relax, happy I'm not hitchhiking anymore. Most parents prefer their kids to study or work. Hitching around the West is not high on their list of Experiences I Want My Child to Have.

One fine bluebird day—sunny with a clear blue sky—the pilot takes a couple of Shoshone up in the chopper, where they shoot an elk from the sky and land to retrieve the carcass. We sit around later, slugging beers and munching freshly grilled venison. Afterward, the Shoshone lads head home, and I'm left dousing the fire, watching the sunset's last pink and orange glow fade over the hills.

In mid-August, the chopper moves to Crow Agency in Montana. The gig is the same, but a local takes me to a Crow Pow Wow. I'm the only *mzungu* in attendance; I didn't even think about bringing my camera.

Overwhelmed is an understatement. A bit nervous at first, but I felt comfortable and welcome. So much to observe and absorb. Many folks

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are decked out in full garb, happily singing traditional Crow songs and marching around the huge bonfire.

Grateful for the trust in giving me a glimpse into their world. It seems so natural; I'm drawn to their connections with the earth and the desire to celebrate their heritage. I wonder if they have Pow Wows in Uganda.

Time flits by, and weeks later, I find myself on a plane out of Denver. Watching the clouds scud by the window as I reflect on the past few months. I loved the pace of traveling, hopping from car to car, meeting different people, building trust one hitch at a time, and making friends instantly. Schmoozing to obtain the best drop, avoiding town centers—the literal no-hitch zone—and plodding to the edge of town. Freeway entrance ramps are optimal, where cars go slowly, making it easy to see me and pull over. There's much to learn about life wandering around using my thumb.

When the landing wheels emit a loud clunk, as if they are falling out of the plane, I realize summer is over. Back to school and the real world. Bearable knowing that my adventures will continue, eager to climb like a mzungu.



MY SENIOR YEAR kicks into full stride as classes and SUOC fill my time. After a bunch of day trips to Little Falls, it's November, and time to head to the Gunks in New Paltz, a three-hour drive southeast of Syracuse. I'm still learning and getting used to top-roping, but my first foray into lead climbing will be a major development.

The Mohonk Preserve is a large, privately-owned park chock full of trees, trails, carriage roads, and some of the best climbing in the East. The Shawangunk Mountains form a ridge of quartz and sandstone, like a stack of pancakes, making for steep and overhanging routes. The horizontal cracks provide great holds and excellent anchors.

We're roping up at the Uberfall³, the prime area in the Trapps region, a short slog from the road. The easy approach makes it a dream for climbers, the gateway to single and multi-pitch lead climbs. A pitch

is a section partitioned by belay anchors, constrained by the length of the 150-foot rope.

Weaving a webbing harness around my torso and legs, I anchor the belay to a massive tree at the base. Since the club doesn't have protective gear, the leader must supply their own equipment.

Woody graduated from law school a few years ago but is happy to travel on SUOC trips. He's a great climber, and his focus and energy are welcome. Not to mention his gear.

The lead climber is exposed to a nasty fall without secure protection—temporary anchors that look like colossal machine nuts. Small pieces of nylon rope allow a carabiner to connect the pro to the rope. I get why Gaston calls climbing a puzzle; lots of nuance and tricks are required to make things safe.

I belay Woody as he grinds up the route. When it's my turn, it's like top-roping; the real work is for the lead climber. The rock is excellent, and the route can't be too hard since it doesn't take me long.

Turning around at the belay starts the ol' caterpillars a-crawling. Vertigo threatens—one hundred feet straight down—as climbers mill around like bugs on the ground. But the fantastic view makes the exposure worth it. Glad Woody's with me; I wouldn't want to be here all by myself.

Afterward, we visit the famous Rock and Snow climbing store in downtown New Paltz. John Bouchard, a rad climber from New Hampshire, presents slides of a bold ascent on the *Eiger North Face* in Switzerland. His alpine-style approach took only an impressive 15 hours, rather than the usual three days.

Fascinated, I ask what he carried with him on the climb after the show. He laughs and says, "Candy bars and sweaters!" I gather taking less stuff is the way to go. Lighter is righter.



AFTER A FESTIVE CHRISTMAS AT HOME, January 1982 kicks off with an ice-climbing bang. Supposedly, it's similar to rock climbing, with the same concepts of anchors, ropes, and belays.

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Eric getting the hang of things, Lick Brook Falls, New York. Note the use of ice leashes. February, 1982.

And then there are these things called crampons and ice axes, used to create holds by poking them into ice.

It's a cold Saturday as we trundle down the road, arriving at Tinker's Falls⁴ thirty minutes later. Approaching the ravine, the walls steepen slowly, ending at a cute 40' waterfall brimming with frozen wonder.

Thirty feet wide with a ten-foot vertical section, the ice looks like celery stalks stacked on top of car-sized broccoli crowns. Up close, the solid blue ice shows its strength, compared to the fragile white icicles that shatter when whacked with an axe.

To the right of the ice pillar, Bob and Marla guide us up the scraggly trail to the ravine rim. They rig a top rope around a lovely birch tree, planning to lower us into the ravine to climb. They don't want to mess around with rappelling to ensure we tie in correctly and get the hang of climbing. After, we can try the more advanced stuff. But first, a speech.

We gather around our teachers, fifty feet away from the edge, to avoid any chance of toppling off the 100' ravine wall.

Bob says, "Climbing ice is straightforward since you already know

the basics. Your ice axes are sharp, so please be careful not to whack the rope.”

“Focus on your toes,” Marla adds. “It’s easy to fixate on the axes; remember to set your feet shoulder-width apart and keep them side-by-side. Then swing away.”

Bob continues. “Place your first axe high, like trying to hit a nail with a hammer.” He demonstrates against a tree but is careful not to damage the trunk; he is a Stumpie, after all.

“Once the axes are planted, hang on your arms, bend your knees, kick one boot into the ice, then the other. Once set, pull up on the two tools, and stand.”

Marla says, “You need to be robotic, moving your hands first, then your feet. Very different from rock climbing.”

Bob concludes, “So that’s it for the lecture. Gaston, how about you first, then Flinny, followed by Eric.”

The ice flows down the eighty-degree slope, a carpet six inches thick, with the occasional tree hanging on for dear life. We give it a whirl; of course, Gaston is a natural.

It’s a bit awkward to get the hang of it, but I quickly learn to appreciate the wonderful *thwack* of the axe finding its home in the ice.

Dangling like a monkey, sticking my butt out, using the crampons take some practice. Marla’s right; it’s easy to get distracted whaling away with the ice tools.

Stepping on knobs of ice is easier than kicking; the sharp crampons bite quickly. Nearly fall after an aggressive leg extension. My right foot blows off, but I’m still hanging on, thanks to the tight rope. Phew.

On the way back to the cars, I ask Eric his thoughts on climbing ice.

“It’s almost as good as rock. Great that I can create my own holds. Danged gear is heavy, though.”

I settle my daypack, shifting the snowy rope looped over my shoulder. “Well, yeah. Anything more profound?”

Eric steps over an open spot in the frozen streambed, “I like the construction aspect of it. It’s fun flicking my wrist, using the leash to pivot the axe into the ice.” He demonstrates with his empty hand.

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Gaston climbing the ravine ice flows at Tinkers Falls,
New York. January 1982.

I reply. “Gotta try your trick next time; I was focused on my feet. One thing I don’t care for is waiting to climb in the frigging cold. Like hitch-hiking, too much standing around.”

Gaston says, “There is that. Perhaps you should try soloing. No more waiting.” Soloing is another form of climbing, leaving the ropes behind to save time and hassle. With the risk of plunging to the ground, splat city kitty.

I comment, “Heavy thoughts. I’ll stay on the rope, thank you; no

need to go hog wild.” The end of the micro-hike is near; the road noise is getting louder.

“Sounds like you’re going on the next trip, then?” Eric says.

Gaston pipes in. “Absolutely! I’m looking forward to trying one of the ice pillars.”

Two weeks later, we head over to Lick Brook Falls.⁵ The 140’ *Upper Falls* is an insanely steep portion of fat blue ice, huge bulges of cauliflower at the bottom, topped with vertical carrots. Come to think of it, more like Nature’s very own upside-down ice cream cone.

We watch some radical dudes go for the pillar. I’m not ready to climb such a monster. Fortunately, we wander down to the *Lower Falls* and set up a top rope.

The waterfall of ice flows like a staircase, vertical in places with broad landings to rest. It’s exposed, and I feel great out in the wild with no trees nearby. I don’t know why, but I feel safer without the bushes and rocks around me. It takes a lot of concentration to climb; I have to put my past and future worries aside and focus on the now.

Eric’s trick works. Holding the shaft with my fingers and the ice axe leash tight around my wrist allows me to flick my hand forward, sending the axe in a smooth arc, resulting in a solid thunk.

After my third try, the sequence of my hands and feet is starting to jell, where I’m in rhythm and having fun, splayed out like a gymnast on a balance beam.



THE BEAUTY of Chapel Pond unfolds at the parking turnout. A ten-yard stroll brings me to the snowy edge of the pond. Nestled in the High Peaks of the Adirondacks, I’m mesmerized.

Gazing to the right, the water drains out into Chapel Pond Canyon. Turning around behind me, the Washbowl Cliffs loom across the street; the hardest rock climbs around. Another ninety-degree pivot to the right, the famous Chapel Pond Slabs can be seen through the trees.

The cliffs directly across the pond rear up off the ice, steep and forbidding. *Chouinard’s Gully*⁶ is the prominent ice line where Bob, Marla, and I are going, my first multi-pitch ice climb.

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Marla after a great day ice climbing at Tinkers Falls,
New York, January 1982.

The day is gloomy gray, typical for winter in the mountains. We gingerly cross the ice, and I wonder if it's safe. The thought of falling in causes my stomach to rumble. Luckily, things calm down once we tie into the rope.

Bob is a confident Wildlife Bio Major. And it's clear he's going to work with animals. His white Samoyed "Bow" is the most mellow dog in SUOC. Bob is focused and driven to be the best, whether in school or climbing. Definitely from the "work hard, play hard" crowd.

DAVID FLINN



Bob belaying Marla on *Chouinard's Gully* in Chapel Pond Pass, Adirondacks February 1982.

He leads and sets belays with trees and ice screws as protection. These half-inch wide tubular metal cylinders are six to eight inches long. The screw threads on the outside twist into delicious fat ice and create an illusion of security. In theory, ice screws will hold 1000 pounds, but I don't want to test it.

The best part is the continuous nature of the ice flow. Top-roping is okay, but this longer climb gives me the true feeling of the sport. Instead of a short, repetitive activity, this is a real adventure.

Stopping to remove Bob's ice screw, I'm feeling good. The sucker is cranked in solid; a truck could hang off it, but a total bitch to get out. Guess that's the point. Making the mistake of looking down the gully, I can't believe I climbed so far. My belly gurgles, so I get back to business.

The value of teamwork becomes apparent when I get perplexed, and Marla boosts my confidence. The spruce thicket at the top leaves no room to hang out, so we thrash down climber's left (looking up at the climb) to avoid messing around with three rappels.

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Sitting in the snowbanks covering the boulders on the edge of Chapel Pond, I feel awed by my accomplishment. Recalling my twinge of fear at the ice screw, I ask Bob if he was scared on the lead.

“It’s a tough thing to admit, but yeah, a little. The challenge in climbing ice is that the leader really can’t fall. To prevent making mistakes, I go into the zone and avoid any mental distractions.”

Marla says, “I’m glad you didn’t mention you were scared.”

“Men aren’t supposed to show weakness, right? According to James Bond, never admit defeat, and you’ll always get the girl.” He reaches over to give Marla an affectionate bear hug.

Wow, what a life. I’m a little jealous—a girlfriend who likes to climb. Bob does have it made.



Salewa ice screws from the 1980s. Note the loop to clip a carabiner into a sling and rope.



MARCH ROLLS around with the annual West Virginia trip, where I plan to stay clear of caving. Driving down with Eric and two girls makes the eight-hour ride zip by. It’s great getting to know them; they’re sisters by the time we get there. It’s great not getting all sex-crazed and weird. Heck with all that.

I spend four days on Seneca Rocks learning how to set up top ropes. We siege the west face of South Peak and trundle up the *Old Man’s Route* to a vast ledge as basecamp.

Then onto the summit to rig ropes on *Critter Crack*, *Le Gourmet*, and *Crispy Critters*. Around the corner, someone named a route *Tomato*. Guess the first ascenders were hungry.

The sedimentary rock is similar to the Gunks but uplifted 90 degrees, white-boned granite that feels gritty as sandstone but with solid holds. Lots of exposure; the entire cliff is only 250 feet wide at the base. The top of South Peak forms a knife-edge ridge that narrows to the width of a sidewalk. Over 300 feet high, it’s safe but airy; I’ve no desire

to risk a tumble.

The trip's highlight is climbing *The Gendarme*⁷, a snippet of rock that juts up twenty-five feet, detached from the main cliff. Located in the center of the prominent gunsight notch, a SUOC leader establishes a top rope on *The Gendarme*, and now it's my turn to climb.

I've watched the others do it, but my belly crawls with tension, threatening to unravel. Partly a fear of failure, of being ashamed to fall in front of my friends. Mostly it's just plain scary.

Steadying myself, with hands on the rock, looking down at my feet, closing my eyes, and exhaling deeply. Knowing that if my friends can do it, I can, too.

Look down, use your feet, focus. Wedging my toes into the three-inch vertical crack, my hands clasping the flakes on the sides. *It's easy; you can do it.*



The Gendarme (it fell in 1987) in the gunsight notch of the South Peak, Seneca Rocks in West Virginia, March 1982. Note that the book's front cover captures me on top of *The Gendarme*.

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I launch, motoring quickly to pull over the top. Crouching down, the exposed summit is barely two feet wide. Gaining courage as I rise, hands outstretched in success. It feels incredible to stand on top of a pinnacle 200' off the deck. Ready to fly like an eagle.



PEER PRESSURE GETS me elected SUOC president for the next school year. The club knows I graduate in December, but they don't mind. I'm told this happens all the time. The glory of being a top dog must have got to me.

The warden at Dad's church found me a summer job as a supervisor on a work crew. It's a bit awkward bossing around people twice my age. Very weird. Making money, but I miss the everyday life of school and climbing.

Finally, it's time to head back to Syracuse for my last semester. The geography courses are interesting, and I knuckle down to finish my final papers. Luckily, I get a break and dash to the Adirondacks in October with Bob and Marla.

There's no better place than the Chapel Pond Slabs for long run-outs, low-angle friction, and hundreds of feet of pure fun. Boulders are scattered around the base of the slabs, a few over twenty feet high. There's a collection I call the Three Trolls, similar to those Bilbo found in *The Hobbit*.

Bouldering is a form of climbing that requires no ropes; the climber versus the rock. A fifteen-foot fall would snap an ankle, so I stay mellow and down-climb when I get scared. We sleep at the base, near the boulders, classic car camping. We can't belay from the car, but the road is only a few hundred yards to the Slabs.

Saturday morning dawns with a bluebird sky, perfect for climbing the *Regular Route*⁸. Bob does the leading, Marla goes second, and I climb last. Slab climbing is a ballet where balance is the ticket.

Marla is my kind of teacher. She grew up in a Washington D.C. suburb, and due to her compact frame, was an excellent gymnast. Burned out by the competitive nature of the sport, she gravitated to climbing and is excellent at teaching the importance of friction.



The French company EB produced the innovative Super Graton in the 1970s.

Unlike my climbs up till now, slabs require elegance, and brute strength is almost useless. Friction is the key, using my weight to force a precise foothold. Like ice climbing, sticking my buns out forces my toes into the smidge of a dent in the rock.

Luckily, a few weeks ago, I bought some EBs from another SUOCer. The tight-fitting climbing shoes are essential on the long route, a full day of eight pitches. Rappelling would have taken way too long. Fortunately, we

can hike off to climber's right.

Back at camp, we scrounge for wood to make a small campfire. Finally, I get the flame to catch and sit back on a small boulder, satisfied.

Marla comes over and hugs me. "Dave, any thoughts about today?"

"It was spectacular, so wonderful to have a long, sustained climb."

Marla laughs, "That's a bit vague; how did you feel?"

"Climbing takes all my attention. Every foot placement or handhold needs to be precise. Now I feel alive, energized, and ready to deal with the real world. The art of balance fascinates me, as does the capacity to trust my body to do the right thing."

Marla pokes the fire. "Exactly, just like gymnastics. It's all about the right kind of movement, a dance. I love the whole process. The planning, traveling here, and then the climbing."

Bob jumps in, "I love the doing part. I believe I'm achieving something that no one else can."

Marla adds, "Climbing's a philosophy where I treat my life as one big climb. Today was yet another cog in the wheel of climbing my life."

"Life climbing, I like that," Bob says.

Live to climb, climb to live—life in a nutshell.

And I'm the squirrel, gnawing on the nut, trying to break in and reward myself with the riches.



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NOVEMBER IS THE BIG MEETING, and I'm nervous. It's up to me to bag the loot. The president needs to lobby the university annually to justify the budget request. Club tradition uses personal transportation, freeing up university money for equipment. The meeting goes well, I answer a few questions, and the board approves the \$8000 cash. Sweet.

Celebrating at Hungry Charlie's with pitchers of beer, the tribe is in full force. A brown-haired girl sits next to Marla, and I plunk myself between them. She's new to SUOC, and her green eyes sparkle. The beer helps me chat normally and not be all shy as usual.

Filling her mug, I say, "We're going to the Adirondacks over New Year's. Skiing into Avalanche Pass to camp and climb *The Trap Dike*. Are you interested?"

Katy owns her neophyte status with style. "I hope to try cross-country skiing. I've done a lot of downhill."

"Well, you came to the right place. We have tons of skis." Finishing my mug, "You sure you don't want to try ice climbing?"

Katy chuckles. "You sound like Marla. Lots of subtle hinting. You guys are a cult."

"Great idea for this year's T-shirts: 'Join SUOC, the outdoor cult.'"

We continue chatting about the usual things, and the pitchers are soon empty. The crowd thins out, and it's time to go. "Katy, it's nice to meet you. Hope to see you out on skis after New Year's."

"Ditto. And you're not bad for a politician."

I give Katy and Marla hugs as they depart. The rest of the crowd teases me, but I don't care. Cute girls make everything better.



IT'S my second lap up the mountain, and I'm toast. No food since breakfast and my pack is stuffed with sixty-five pounds of climbing gear. I'm tired of being a porter. The lack of snow on the trail makes for an ominous premonition for New Year's Eve 1982.

Flummoxed by the unusually warm temperatures, Bob, Marla, and I moved our Adirondack trip to New Hampshire, bringing along six beginners. It's my first ice-climbing foray on Mount Washington, notorious for its annual death toll of at least one mountaineer.

Taking a break, munching on a Hershey's bar for an energy boost. The night is cool, the moon hidden behind the mountain. Wedged between rocks in the trail next to my boot, ice sparkles in the headlamp light. The thin crust of frost crunches loudly when I continue up the path.

My mind wanders with the realization that I've graduated and need to figure out what to do with my life. In high school, I caddied at Round Hill Country Club. That's no future. I could be a guide. Sell gear to the masses? Better to use my Geography degree and get a job building maps. Maybe find a sugar momma and play all day. My body plods up the trail while the possibilities mount in my brain.

Finding the right fork in the trail, I continue the grind to the Harvard Cabin, my Last Homely House, a basecamp to explore Mount Washington's winter wonderland.

With my career still unsettled, the glowing porch light beckons me like a moth to the flame.

Rhea and Bow, Marla's and Bob's famous white dogs, greet me at the door. The vibe is bouncy and upbeat. After easing the mammoth pack into a spot in the corner, I proceed with welcoming hugs to my friends. The cabin is cheerful, the wood stove at the back of the wall purring away.

The caretaker's closet of a room and tiny kitchen are nestled in the rear, the open space filled with two picnic tables and a few chairs. The sleeping loft is upstairs, where the heat settles and makes for a wonderful night's sleep that keeps winter at bay.

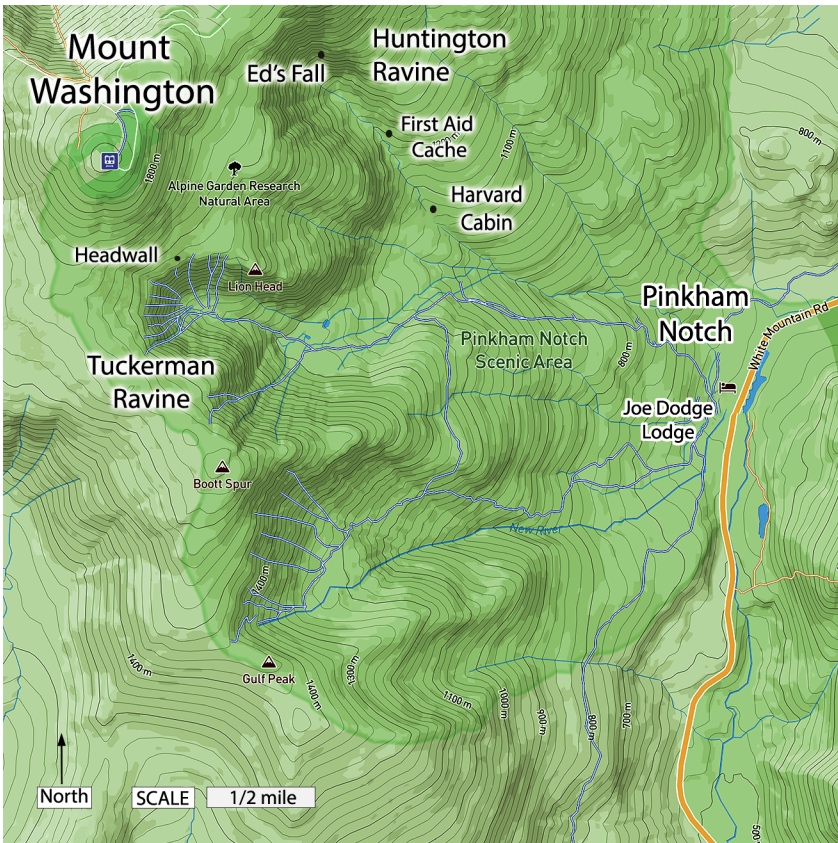
"Marla, where are the others?" I ask, starting to fill a large pot with water for pasta.

"Bob took them up *Pinnacle Gully*⁹ this morning. Thank goodness they got an early start. Three on a rope is slow. That must be why they're late."

Firing the stove and waiting for the water to boil, I look over at Marla. "You're not worried about them, are you?"

"Heck yeah, I'm worried sick. They should be back by now." She sniffles. "I know they're prepared, carrying bivouac gear and headlamps. Still, something could have happened to them."

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Mount Washington is a playground for wilderness-loving outdoor adventurers, including ice climbers.

“I bet they waited for the moon to rise. Climbing down must be a bitch without snow. Bob would sit tight and wait for the extra light.” I hug her. “Let’s eat something; I know I’ll feel better.”

She smiles half-heartedly, reaching for the spaghetti sauce. It’s wonderful being close to her, absorbing her life glow, making me happy. Platonic, yeah, but who cares? Life’s too short not to seize the opportunity. Marla could be my sister, a friend to cherish and appreciate. My bowl is quickly emptied as I scarf down the pasta.

Since our climbers have not returned, the leftovers wait on the stove. Being New Year’s Eve, out comes the booze, and the fun starts. I try my luck at checkers with Ed, a Freshman and one of the beginners.

“Have you ice climbed before?” I ask him, placing my piece forward on the board.

“No, not yet. I’ve practiced rock climbing at Little Falls, but never on ice. Heck, it’s the first time I’ve been further north than the Catskills.”

“Not many mountains in Brooklyn, I imagine.”

My smirk turns into a pout as Ed jumps my double black piece with his red. “It’s a bummer that winter missed the Adirondacks. At least it made it here to Mount Washington.”

“Marla took me up to Huntington Ravine today. We saw ice high in the gullies.”

As Ed jumps another of my pieces, my frown deepens. “I wonder if we can play in the ravine and practice glissades and self-arrests.”

“It looked possible to me. Marla mentioned it’s a good place for us to start tomorrow.”

“I’m looking forward to it. It’s my second year on ice, and I’m happy to take it slow and easy. Never been here before, either.” Finally, I make a move.

Ed grabs his piece and jumps me. “The ravine is awesome. Raw, intense, barren. We’ll have fun. Psyched to be here on this grand adventure!”

Pushing back from the table, I smile and stand. “Well, that does it for me. I always lose at checkers. It’s potty time.”

Stepping outside to visit the outhouse, its outline profiled against the mountain, moonlight peeking, throwing blades of light throughout the forest. Breath fogs my headlamp, adding to the spooky sense of it all. The door groans as it opens. I sit and respect the pee. Girls hate it when guys spray all over the seat. Fantastic to see Ensolite foam as a toilet seat liner against the chill. Ingenious to use a sleeping pad for tushy warmth.

The photo of a woman ice climbing decorates the inside of the door—motivation in all the right places. Smiling, I wonder if she would be interested in me. Perhaps soloing *Pinnacle Gully* to ski off the headwall, I can be her badass boyfriend.

Returning to the cabin, the moon lights up the landscape, and pools of ice sparkle in their reflections. It’s a memorable evening, a brisk

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twenty degrees, with no wind. The creaking trees reminds me of their struggle to keep the water inside their bark from freezing.

Back in the hut, Marla is getting worried. “Dave, we need to go look for them. It’s taking too long.”

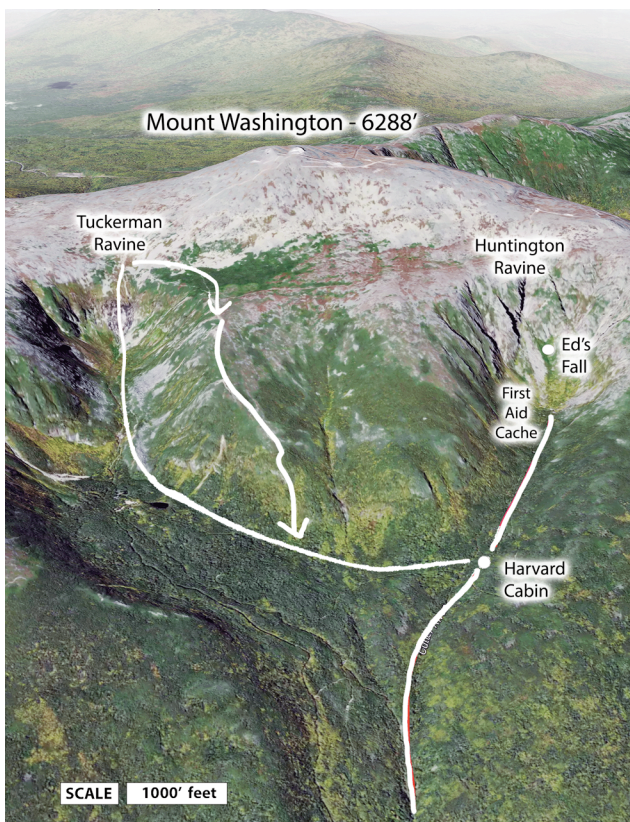
The hut manager agrees. “It would be good to have someone take a peek. No need for glory; simply see if everything’s okay.”

“How many should go?” I ask.

“Three would be good. Safe but fast.”

Marla and I chat with the others, and the search party is quickly organized.

“Head up to the first aid cache in Huntington Ravine and look around,” I tell the group.



Looking west towards Mount Washington's Tuckerman and Huntington Ravines in New Hampshire.

Marla adds, "We need to see if they are in trouble. Bob knows what he's doing."

The searchers get ready. Ed borrows my headlamp, and off they go, leaving heavy ice tools behind.

"Come here, Bow Bear." Marla reaches up and grabs the large white Samoyed. Bow is the most mellow and wonderful dog, always cuddly with six inches of fur, a small polar bear. Rhea weasels in, never happy to have Marla give attention to another. "Oh, Dave, I'm worried. I need to go look for them."

"Let's wait a bit more. The lads should return shortly. Fifteen more minutes, then we'll go." I try to speak with confidence. "They'll be back, I'm sure of it. When is the question?"

Dire thoughts trickle through my mind as the wind rustles through the trees. Standing on the cabin porch, looking back toward the ravine, the moon glowing as it nears full. I've never been up in the mountains in winter. The harsh alpine conditions bear down on me. This is not my intimate Chapel Pond in the Adirondacks.

Ice crunches, and one of the searchers runs up, panting, out of breath. I follow him into the cabin as he tells of lights to the right of *Damnation Gully*.

"The other two are trying to reach the three climbers. I figured I should run back."

"You did the right thing," the hut manager says. "I'll grab the portable Motorola radio and head up there. Anyone else?"

Marla jumps up. "I'm coming."

They leave quickly, and I'm reeling, sleepy and warm, trying to adapt to the situation. Still exhausted after my second run up the mountain, I opt to stay in the cabin, reluctant to become another tragedy. My worries unravel in my gut.



SOMETIME AROUND MIDNIGHT, Ed fell. What happened is pieced together from everyone's stories. The remaining two in the search party tried to reach the three climbers, scaling a talus slope to avoid the dense alder and spruce thickets.

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A hundred feet from the climbers, Ed slipped down a forty-five-degree ramp and fell off a twenty-foot cliff. The remaining searcher yelled for help. Bob directed the two climbers to continue to the first aid cache and began looking for Ed.

Bob found him lying face down on the talus below the cliff. When the last searcher arrived, they moved Ed to a more comfortable spot out of the alder brush. They cut off his backpack to administer first aid.

Bob noticed lights coming up the ravine and yelled to them. Marla and the hut manager raced up.

Seeing Ed's condition, he handed Bob the radio and ran back for the Stokes litter rescue basket at the first aid cache. Marla stayed with Bob as he talked with a Pinkham Notch ranger station paramedic.

They kept Ed company for an hour until the first EMT arrived, dashing out of his New Year's celebration and up the trail in less than an hour. More rescue volunteers came trickling up to help and begin giving Ed oxygen.

By 2 a.m., they began hauling Ed down the talus slope in the litter, trying not to jostle him. Thirty minutes later, the paramedic sent the exhausted and hypothermic Bob back to the cabin with Marla. No one from our club could help anymore.



THE SUN GLIMMERS off the loft wall, reflecting light into my eyes, and waking me. Marla and Bob slumber nearby. Life appears as it should be.

"Marla," I whisper, "it's time to help Ed. We should get up."

Even in her exhausted state, she opens her eyes, realizing I don't know. "Dave, Ed didn't make it. After you conked out, Ed died. His injuries were too severe. I'm sorry."

I'm crying, shocked by the news. Oh, no, please God, no. My mind ceases to function correctly, barely processing that Ed is gone. I pray he didn't suffer long.

Climbing downstairs to eat some cold oatmeal, the hut manager is thoughtful with his kind words. Full of anguish, sitting on the bench doesn't help me relax, so I grab my boots and trudge into the ravine.

Stumbling up the winding trail like a zombie, a rock jumps in front



The JustRite headlamp required 4 D batteries and was used by many SUOCers.

of my boot, causing me to stumble. The incident forces me into the moment, aware of the ravine unfolding before my eyes. The ice gully rivulets glow in the sun, bright white and blue contrasted by the ominous gray rock surrounding them. I hear boots crunch and look up the trail.

Four rescuers are carrying Ed, and I join them. The litter is heavy, the trail to the Harvard cabin a mess, chock full of boulders, ice, and brush to thrash through. The five of us have trouble carrying the litter, but no one speaks. The ravine is still, with no wind, just the echoes of our boots scuffing the rocks.

Back at the Harvard cabin, more marvelous people come out to help. Noticing my JustRite headlamp wedged next to Ed's body, with its cracked lens, I carefully stash it in my jacket pocket. The experts will take care of Ed. It's time to be with my friends.

The cabin is somber. Coffee percolates on the wood stove, and we sit quietly, listening, waiting. I get up and check the fire, stuffing in another log, something to do. Bob and Marla cuddle nearby, the white dogs emulating rugs underneath their feet. Grabbing the coffee pot, I fill my mug, relishing the simple ritual.

Bob is quiet; his face drawn, barely moving, not his usual cheerful self, the full brunt of the epic literally in his lap. The rest of us are statues, barely moving, dealing with the tragedy. After lunch, most of the crowd choose to bail. The cabin crouches over us, the open wood beams dark and protecting. The window dims as the sun moves west, gray in the late-afternoon light.

"Are you guys planning on leaving?" I don't need a ride; my Maverick is parked below, waiting for me.

Bob sighs and mutters, "I can't go yet. It doesn't seem right."

"The weather is glorious," Marla says. "Leaving today seems too quick. Ed's soul is still here. I need to stay and say goodbye."

Arching my back, stiff from sitting too long on the bench, I move

over to a chair. “Death is something I’ve never faced before. I’m with you, Marla. Ed must still be here.” Nothing has prepared me for this; I need time to process my feelings before returning to those who don’t understand. What a horrible way to start the new year.

The cabin is dark, a lantern flickering, its smoke wafting toward the wood stove’s heat. Quiet as a tomb, time to go to bed and let this awful day drift by. The hut manager’s door is shut. Before heading up the ladder, I check the stove and give Bob and Marla a hug. The only window frames the midnight-blue sky with a few glittering stars. Trees swaying in the breeze, limbs creaking.



SUNDAY DAWNS CLEAR AND BRIGHT, temporarily washing away the melancholy clouds of yesterday. Cooking breakfast in the dark cabin, we sip coffee, trying to focus on everyday, mindless stuff.

I stand and stretch. “It’s hard to believe I was sitting here thirty-six hours ago, laughing and playing checkers with Ed. Getting to know him, grooving on his enthusiasm at being with us.”

Marla unfolds her legs and places her feet on the floor, reaching out to poke Rhea with her toe. “Yeah, he is, well, was so sweet. We had a great time tramping around the ravine and exploring. It’s so sad.” She wipes a tear from her eye and pulls Rhea onto her lap, the fifty-pound dog happy to oblige, craving the attention. Bob slowly and methodically combs Bow’s white fur.

I pace around the small cabin, stepping over packs and ropes. Sadness is hard enough without sitting around all day. Being out and moving helps me understand my feelings. Wallowing is tough on me. I’m a climber and want to act.

Stooping to scratch Rhea’s ear, “Guys, I can’t stay here doing nothing. Ed is gone, but I feel he’d rather have us get out and have fun. Wanna wander over to Tuck’s?”

Bob looks up, rustling Bow’s fur back into place with both hands. “Yeah, sounds like a plan. It would help take my mind off things. This cabin feels like a mausoleum. Marla?”

“The dogs need a walk,” she says. “Let’s go.”

We dress for the cold and stroll over to Tuckerman Ravine, bringing our ice axes. The mzungu in me whispers that we could play around on the headwall or practice our glissades in the snow. Do something.

Ice crunches under my San Marco mountaineering boots. Skiers flock here to ski the Headwall, but not today. As we approach the Hermit Lake Shelters, the ravine opens wide, the sun glistening, the sky deep royal blue. Despite the gloom of losing Ed, the stellar weather helps soothe my soul.

Terrible conditions didn't cause his accident. It was a beautiful New Year's Eve filled with a glorious full moon, mellow wind, and clear skies. If the weather had been bitter and nasty, with a full-on nor'easter blowing snow, no one would have gone climbing, preventing the horrible chain of events.

"Wow, the day is intoxicating. The ice is glowing, perfect for ice axes." Rhea comes near; I squat down to pet her.

Bob approaches the beginning of the ice flow as Bow barges through his legs, almost knocking him over. "Bow, you brat! Holy cow, the ice is amazing. Bright blue, better than most ice I've climbed."

Marla joins him. "It does look lovely. Wait, you're not thinking of climbing, are you?" She reaches over and hugs him.

"Hey, what a great idea." Bob smiles. "If you don't want to go, Flinny, are you in? Come on; this might be our last chance to climb the Headwall. It's usually filled with gobs of snow. We can do it."

I push up from my knees, letting Rhea chase Bow. Being out of the cabin has freed my fears. The warm sun melts my sadness, the perfect weather an irresistible siren call. Dropping my pack and pulling out the rope, I nod. It's time to climb in perfect conditions.

There's something about the raw essence and potential energy of ice that's primal. Deeper than a "call to the wild," thwacking ice axes into frozen water fascinates me. I love to work my arms and legs in rhythm to dash up a waterfall.

What motivates an ice climber can be mysterious to others. Many approve of Sir Edmund Hillary's famous quote, "Because it's there," as an answer, glorious in all its ambiguity.

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The *Tuckerman Headwall* from the Hermit Lake Shelters. Bob and I climbed 600' straight up the center. January 1, 1983.

“Be careful, you crazy boys.” Marla punches Bob in the arm. “I know you need action to process your feelings, but please come back to me.”

“I’ll be fine. Flinny will keep me safe. The ice is absolutely primo.”

I give Marla a big hug. She has no desire to climb, content to hike around with the dogs. Rhea is having fun, running around in circles, barking as she goes. Her behavior is renowned in Syracuse; everyone knows Rhea. Definitely a great distraction, seeing her whip around in a frenzy, belting out an “Ah-roooooo” as she spins.

“Bob, you’re on belay. Climb when ready!”

“Climbing!” Bob steps up, swinging his axe into the blue ice, hearing a satisfying *thump* echoing throughout the bowl.

At the base of the *Tuckerman Headwall*,¹⁰ tying into the rope is comforting, the connection a conduit from which I draw strength.

Watching Bob from the corner of my eye, the dogs play like wolves, Rhea running in circles, yapping at Bow.

The headwall is a skier's playground, but today the scrawny bushes and rocks highlight a strip of blue ice thirty feet wide, our own Yellow Brick Road.

"Ice!" Bob yells as a chunk breaks off and careens down. Instinctively, I lower my head, where the orange Joe Brown helmet intercepts the projectile. Would Ed have survived if he had worn a helmet? It's possible. Is climbing going to bring him back? No. But I can't rewind time lying around and pining, either. I'm ready for this and hope my spirit is also.

We're halfway up, below the remaining vertical part of the headwall. It's our third rope pitch, and Bob leads. The sun has passed over our heads, warming the summit and leaving us in the shade. The horrible night is far from my mind as my Forrest Lifetime axe thunks into the blue ice.

My legs relax, using the front points of my crampons to stand on knobs of ice, calm as I unwind Bob's remaining ice piton on the pitch. Called a *Snarg*, they create a dubious anchor, but they are fun to whack with an ice hammer.

Out to the northeast, the sun lights the ridge, and the downhill ski trails glisten at Wildcat Mountain. Yanking on the rope gives Bob the signal that I'm about to start climbing. A double-check of my harness and a tug adjusts my axe leash.

My right foot stomps on an apple-sized lump of ice. Putting weight on the apple, my foot slips off. Another kick follows without the usual satisfying *thunk*. Instead, a tinkling metal sound causes me to turn and watch the crampon slide off my boot and bounce down the ice five hundred feet to the rocks below.

Time to freak out: high up on the headwall, gripped, stupefied, and scared. I messed up buckling my crampon, or perhaps the strap broke. Yell to Bob, but the wind whips my voice out and away. Frozen in place, I'm about to join Ed. My mind starts to chirp about being a bonehead. Things are not looking good.

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From the left, adjustable crampon, rock pitons, Mountain Technology ice axe, Charlet Moser ice hammer, two carabiners, Lowe Hummingbird tubular hammer, Lowe Snarg ice pitons.

It's all mental games in the end. A jerk on the rope snaps me out of my funk. Bob's wondering why I'm not moving—untethering my left hand from the ice hammer, I gently reach up to tug on the rope. My life-line returns me to the present, away from mental noise. Refocusing, I determine my best option is up. Time to get thwacking.

My three years of training return. Use my feet. Dozens of beginners hear this mantra at Little Falls, the SUOC rock climbing crag. *Focus! Stop grabbing wildly for holds and use your feet.* The vision of a beginner flailing around on an easy rock slab, finally getting their balance, makes me smile.

Before the invention of crampons, men and women climbed glaciers by cutting steps. Ice axes have an edge designed just for this purpose. I bash at the ice, creating a step for my right foot.

I can't blame my situation on others; losing the crampon is my fault. I must own it and save myself. Bob didn't drag me up this climb. I'm responsible for getting out of this mess.

Finally, the headwall angle slopes off, and I mosey up to Bob and his belay.

"Flinny, what the hell took you so long? Man, it's cold when the wind kicks in."

Smug and safe on the comfortable ledge, I proudly stick out my right foot and declare, "Have a gander at my missing crampon."

Bob has a double-take and exclaims, "What the hell?" again.

"Musta kicked it off. I finished taking out the Snarg and started climbing when my right foot slipped. Heard a jingle, and, poof, my crampon flew away. Crazy! I cut steps to get here; totally cool. Thank God I didn't lead that pitch."

"You're an idiot. Get over here and take the belay. Sheesh!"

Luckily, the ordeal is done, and Bob and I crest over onto the Alpine Garden. An hour before dark, the sun is sinking toward the horizon behind us. We sit down for a welcome rest.

"Look at Carter Dome glowing in the sun. Lovely," Bob says as we munch on candy bars.

"It's wonderful. It sucks Ed's not here with us."

"Oh, he is." Bob sips from his water bottle.

"I barely knew him, but I will never forget the few times we spoke. Still glad I didn't fall and join him in heaven. That would have been bad."

Bob stands up, groaning, and slips on his pack. "Yeah, you owe me for losing your crampon. Didn't need that stress. At least it ended up okay. Ready to head out?"

"Sure, let's go. I've had enough drama for the year."

We head north along the ravine rim and navigate down Lion Head to the base of Tuckerman Ravine. It's been a fine day. Well, up until the crampon-tossing incident.

I slowly fill in more of my feelings as time goes on. Of all my worst fears, this one had come true. I had read about being grateful for life but never understood.

Ed is gone physically, but my memory, especially his laughter and smile that night, endures. And his desire to help others at the cost of his own life. Ed, these *mzungu* qualities of yours will always remain with me.

ED'S MEMORIAL

Recorded in the camp log at the Syracuse University Outing Club's Sheep Shed, Long Lake, New York on February 18, 1983, by John.

This Sheep Shed is dedicated to the young, wild, and free spirit of Edward Aalbue, who died during a winter camping trip. He lost his life while traveling down his path in search of happiness.

We're all looking for something that will lead to joy in our own lives. For some, it's making a lot of money, finding an enjoyable job, or raising a family. For others, it's skiing across a frozen lake, kayaking down a wild river, or crawling through a dark cave. For Ed, it was climbing a mountain. The only way his death has any meaning is if we let it influence us when we encounter a fork in our own road. Ed's the lucky one, for he's finished his journey and has accomplished his goal. We, however, are still searching, still hoping to find that something.

You must be prepared to face future responsibilities that lie around the next bend, but don't let them stop you from enjoying new experiences that you will encounter today along your journey, because you might not be here tomorrow. Do what you like to do and have a good time doing it. Blessed are those who dream dreams and are ready to pay the price to make them come true.

We'll catch ya up there, Ed.

Love,

The SUOC Family

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AS A YOUNG MAN, I GRAVITATE TO THE RISK AND REWARDS OF ROCK CLIMBING, OVERCOMING FEAR AND FACING DEATH. ALONG MY JOURNEY, I DISCOVER THAT FRIENDS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN REACHING THE TOP.

The mist swirls as the climbing rope goes taut. A thousand feet up Mount Kenya, cold and alone, I wonder if lightning will strike in the incoming storm. Reeling in my climbing partner who is tied to the distant end of the rope, the snow swallows me, dusk falls, and not for the last time, I wonder what the hell I'm doing here.

"Mzungu!" [ma-zun-goo] bellow the children when they see me climb out of the safari truck. It's Swahili for wanderer, I smile since I'm not just another foreigner.

Climb Like a Mzungu is a memoir covering a ten-year span from 1980 to 1990. The challenges are self-doubt and the perils of climbing mountains.

Mount Kenya is the second largest peak in Africa, a mere sixty miles away from my birthplace. My parents moved to Uganda as missionaries, and thirty years later, I'm back.



DAVID FLINN is a writer born in Kampala Uganda in 1960. After college, he published the Adirondack Alpine Journal in 1983, based in Keene Valley, New York. After years of bounding around, he lives on the ocean, braving nor'easters and planning his next climb.