





Before Nightfall

Michael Wejchert

In 1978 Johnny Waterman spent 145 days alone on the Southeast Spur of Mt. Hunter. That spring, bush pilot Cliff Hudson had dropped the twenty-six-year-old alpinist off on the Tokositna Glacier with 3,600 feet of rope and 800 pounds of food. Soon Waterman was a small figure in a lifeless aerie of snow, wind, sun and ice. Only five foot three, he ferried enormous loads over ridges that consisted of little more than a latticework of sugary snow, around cornices that hung over thousand-foot voids, and ice cliffs that seemed poised to collapse. As he pushed his camps up the mountain, he made about a dozen round-trips on each segment, passing the same hazards again and again. When the winds picked up, he screamed.

EVEN WHEN THE SKIES were clear, he found little relief. The endless summer light burned him. At night, as the sun made its maddening roundabout, he'd crawl into his sleeping bag, hungry and exhausted. He counted calories incessantly, aware of Hudson's regimented airdrop schedule. At one point, he wailed over the radio: Could Hudson drop some ointment off? Waterman explained that he'd contracted crabs from a prostitute before flying in, and the itching was driving him crazy. On another occasion, he performed a perfect handspring on a tiny snow ledge as the horrified Hudson buzzed by. Waterman named some of the gendarmes and features of the Southeast Spur as signs, perhaps, of his growing paranoia: First Judge, Second Judge, Third Judge.

With its matter-of-fact tone, Waterman's 1979 *American Alpine Journal* article downplays the dangers: "I was attempting to cross a place near the knife-edge when a twelve-foot section of cornice broke underneath me, giving me a 40-foot leader fall. I was surprised to be held by my belay system." Six days later, he tumbled and recovered again. On the summit plateau, after surviving on reduced rations for weeks, Waterman received the last of Hudson's airdrops. Above the gothic peaks and fluted ridgelines of the Alaska Range, the apex of Hunter rose, suddenly attainable. Waterman hesitated. He hadn't considered success.

"I thought that I would never make it to the other side of the climb, that I would die, probably, in some really meaningless place," he later

told Glenn Randall. From the summit, Waterman stared out at what seemed like a diminished landscape. He turned and began his laborious descent over the other side of the mountain, down the West Ridge, in frigid silence.

"Living through it would mean that nature wasn't as raw as everyone wanted to believe it was...."

—Johnny Waterman

WATERMAN'S FIRST ASCENT OF THE SOUTHEAST SPUR—the first traverse of Mt. Hunter—was the most macabre, theatrical bit of climbing anyone would ever conjure, the longest anyone had endured isolation on such a cold, difficult mountain. To linger on this route might seem an absurdity, a perversion. But Johnny Waterman had steeled himself since adolescence, and this was his third trip to Hunter. His father, Guy Waterman, had become, through similar self-subjugation, a renowned outdoorsman. Guy had even attempted the north face of Hunter with his wife, Laura, in 1971. As Chip Brown, Guy's biographer explains, both father and son shared a consuming passion for the wild, though their visions of it diverged. Guy often seemed to view nature as an Eden, as if his hiking and climbing were an extension of his gardening, conservation work and homesteading—part of his striving for a well-balanced life. He spent much of his time in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, where the alpine tundra and granite cliffs resemble the moors and crags of Scotland and the Lake District. Echoing the British Romantics, he wrote of hills as sanctuaries to exalt the human spirit, of winter storms as a means to purify one's mind. Johnny interpreted

his remote expeditions as mortal salvos against an implacable, destructive force. Over time, his alpine philosophy became increasingly intense, reaching a level of fanaticism that still confounds many other climbers. Looking back at Hunter, Johnny told Randall that he was disappointed by survival: "Living through it would mean that nature wasn't as raw as everybody wanted to believe it was, that man was far superior to the Arctic. Living through it would mean that Mt. Hunter wasn't the mountain I thought it was. It was a lot less."

Two years after Waterman's epic, Randall, Peter Metcalf and Pete Athans launched onto the Southeast Spur carrying just six days of food. There, they found a horrifying reality of wild storms, fragile cornices and overhanging rock. Their second ascent turned into a thirteen-day battle, leaving them frostbitten, emaciated and exhausted. "Mt. Hunter," Metcalf wrote in an essay for an anthology, *Contact*, "was one of those experiences that I would trade nothing in my life not to have had, and I would trade nothing in my life to repeat." They struggled to comprehend how their predecessor had ascended each aspect multiple times. "There is no question that John was going crazy, that he had intended to die on Hunter, and wanted to," Metcalf emailed me last year. "[The Southeast Spur] will never be repeated [as a solo], and for good reason.... [Waterman's climb] required nearly a half year of being out there, in the unknown, totally committed, in a manner that most people will never understand or appreciate."

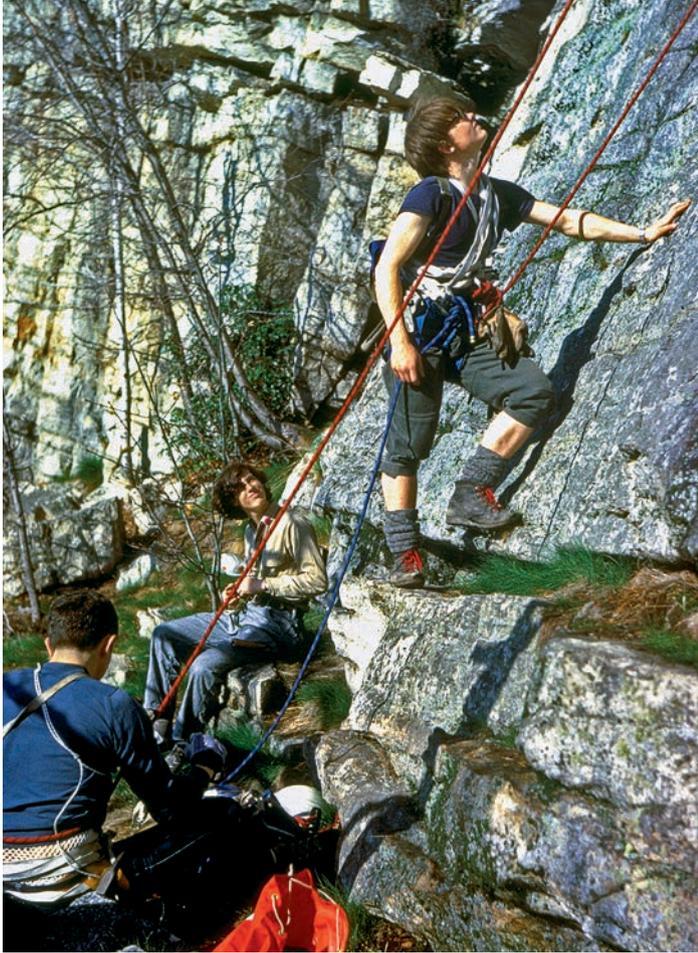
In the spring of 1981, Waterman announced his intent to make a first ascent of a line on the east side of Denali. Wearing little more than a snowmobile suit, he skied alone into the vast, crevassed icefields of the central Alaska Range. He was never heard from again. His tale often has two effects on people. One response is shock—and a swift denouncement of him as crazy. Another is a romanticization of his death as if it were the end to a Shakespearian tragedy: a mad hero traipsing out of the world with the same mystery that had surrounded his climbs. Either way, we've held on to the story: numerous books and articles immortalize the Waterman family. Today, as climbing news edges ever closer toward the sanitized and the mainstream, accounts of Johnny's short life might seem to recall a vanishing era when mountain literature hummed with mythical, countercultural misfits. Yet we still face the questions that he sought to answer in alpinism. Many of us still try to walk that narrow line between fear and grace, darkness and light, as stoutly as we're able. And we can't help wondering what happens when someone lets himself plummet headlong over the side.

THIRTY-THREE YEARS LATER, on the mountain Waterman chose as his tomb, Dana Drummond, Freddie Wilkinson and I are escaping the thick grey snow of Alaskan foul weather. Freddie had originally proposed a sixty-mile traverse along the skyline ridges of Foraker and Denali, a plan that seems Waterman-like in its scope and oddity. Instead, we've resorted to a bailout ski tour toward the Wonder Lake Campground. Two days earlier, we left Kahiltna Base Camp as flurries crossed Denali and clouds rolled against the sun. Now we're losing altitude, skiing and hiking, traversing snowy ridges and wide tundra, padding onto desolate plateaus. The sky must be the same one Waterman saw: soft, slow, endless. The world is hideously quiet. I can't remember what the time is, and

[Previous Spread] **Johnny Waterman on his first ascent of the Southeast Spur of Mt. Hunter (Begguya, 14,573'), Alaska. For 145 days, alone, he ferried himself and his supplies across a phantasmagoria of ice, storm and snow. In *Strange and Dangerous Dreams*, Geoff**

Powter described Waterman's deliberately slow climb: "It was the only way, he believed, to measure himself and to get the true measure of the mountain." | [Facing Page] Waterman with *Mad Magazine*, likely in the early 1970s. John Waterman collection (both)





it hardly matters. Sometimes, pink clouds reveal a bit of sun, but for the most part, the flat light rots the glaciers and the grey rock of the moraine.

I zigzag through nightmarish, isothermic snow. Each time I hear the *whump* beneath my skis, I'm afraid of releasing a slide on my companions. At the top of Gunsight Pass, we peer through a scrim of cloud at the tilted plane of talus far below. A slip would send us into a glacial lake and flush us under the Muldrow Glacier. Dana and I stop to put on layers. Freddie shrugs. He flips off his skis, straps on his crampons and, without a word, digs his frontpoints into the glacial till. Some people just hesitate less than others. I wish I could ignore my pangs of fear, but the scale of these mountains usually defeats me before I can begin. Our little jaunt is tame compared to Waterman's solitary climbs. But the more days I spend up here, often failing, the more I hold his boldness in awe.

I'VE BEEN DRAWN TO SPARE PLACES. The year after college, I moved to a house with no heat in North Conway, New Hampshire, and I prepared for my first Alaskan expedition. At night, my hair froze when I stepped from the shower. During the short winter days, I wended up steep, serpentine waterfalls without a rope, keeping mostly to myself. I began to see how a climber might come to relish his own company, even after 145 days alone on an Alaskan mountain.

I'd first learned the tale of Waterman's unraveling in Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild*. But I was too young then—just a teenager—to grasp more than a fragment of Waterman's brooding ego and puzzling disappearance. After my own time in the Alaska Range, I realized that all the lore around his craziness and his death overshadowed what a *good* climber he was: Waterman had a confidence in the mountains most alpinists only dream of possessing. He was just fifteen when he climbed Retribution in the Gunks—at a time when its grade, 5.10, approached the limit of technical difficulty. As the story goes, he hesitated at the

crux roof until another teenage prodigy, Howie Davis, whispered among hushed onlookers: "Go, John."

With his big glasses and miniature stature, Waterman might seem an odd fit in today's pantheon of savvy, airbrushed athletes, but he had an intense, unrelenting will. At age sixteen, he climbed the West Buttress of Denali. At seventeen, he made his first attempt on Hunter. By twenty, he'd climbed new ridgelines on both Huntington and Hunter. Before he turned twenty-one, he'd also made difficult ascents in the Selkirks and Canadian Rockies. Dean Rau, one of his partners, wrote in the 1974 *AAJ*, "Johnny Waterman is an outstanding climber on all media but on the mixed ground of Alaska's difficult mountains, his climbing becomes superb. He has enormous drive and ambition as well."

The struggle for perfection was a Waterman trait. Their brilliance contrasted starkly with the pattern of similar deaths that haunted the family. It began in 1973 when Johnny's older brother, Bill, disappeared in the wilds of Alaska. And it ended in 2000, when his father walked alone up Mt. Lafayette in New Hampshire and let the winter's cold claim him. Of Guy's three sons, only the youngest, Jim, is still alive. The fates of the others seem entirely removed from their early days of tramping together through the thick brush of the Presidential Range with their beloved dog, Ralph, or rising to catch the first light on the pale quartzite cliffs of Near Trapps.

IN NOVEMBER 2014, LAURA WATERMAN, John's stepmother, greets me with a hug and a smile. She is small but radiant. Wearing an old wool sweater, she serves me homemade soup and carrots from her garden. She lives in East Corinth, Vermont, one of those white-steeped villages cast about the woods of Northern New England. It's a two-hour drive from my home in North Conway across meandering roadways. On this late-autumn day, the wind whisked dead leaves around my car.

In 1973, a year after Laura married Guy, the couple started building a homestead they called Barra—a secluded cabin a mile's hike from town. They wrote books together that are now part of the canon of Northeast climbing and environmental literature: *Forest and Crag*, *Yankee Rock and Ice*, *Wilderness Ethics*. For nearly thirty years, they lived without electricity, a phone or running water. They cooked on their wood stove, worked by candlelight and subsisted mostly on food from their garden.

Today, Laura dwells in a log home with more amenities, though she still communicates mostly by letter. Mementos of Alaska, Katahdin and her beloved White Mountains line her walls and shelf space. As we sit at her kitchen table, a snow squall pushes against the barren trees. Laura recounts how she fell in love with Guy Waterman in 1969, when she was still an associate editor at *Backpacker* and a novice climber in the Gunks. Short, powerful and intellectual, Guy had been, among other things, a jazz pianist, a conservative speechwriter and a teenage runaway.

IN 1932 GUY WATERMAN was born into a privileged East Coast family, based in the softly rolling Connecticut countryside. His father, Alan T. "Hawee" Waterman, taught physics at Yale University. With the outbreak of World War II, Hawee began to work for the military, relocating the family to a series of cities. As Guy grew up, he felt out of place, yearning for a lost childhood paradise of orchards and streams, for a closeness with his father he never seemed to find. In high school, Guy and his girlfriend, Emily, ran off to North Carolina, only to be caught by the police and sent back home. Their parents took drastic measures to



try to end the relationship. During the winter of 1950, as Guy continued to rebel—dating Emily, playing jazz piano and smoking pot—his father and mother arranged for him to see a psychoanalyst. One evening, Guy went for what he thought was just a routine visit. In his unpublished autobiography, he recalled, “I found I was not to return home that night, but was taken instead to the psycho ward in George Washington Hospital, and incarcerated there on a floor where the stairways and elevators were locked. I was kept there for several days of tests and questions.... It felt very much like jail to me.”

That spring, Guy and Emily eloped at age eighteen. They had Bill in 1951, while Guy was a freshman at George Washington University in DC. Johnny followed a year later, and then Jim. Guy performed feverishly in nightclubs to earn money. Barely adults, the couple struggled to care for their young family. After graduating, Guy seemed to settle, for a time, into a conventional existence. During the day, he wrote speeches for bigwig Republicans on Capitol Hill. At night, he drank, usually too much. In 1960, when Nixon lost to JFK, Guy woke up dejected in the drunk tank. He accepted a job with General Electric, and the family moved to Stamford, Connecticut. The commute, the alcohol and an increasingly unhappy marriage brought Guy to rock bottom. One day in 1963, he read an article about the North Face of the Eiger. “Climbing was like the rope that appears before a man at the bottom of a crevasse. It was rescue and salvation,” writes Chip Brown in *Good Morning Midnight*.

To Waterman, climbing became a cause to live for, a means to measure himself and to keep the chaos in his mind at bay. Maybe he also hoped to atone for a decade of neglect by bringing his young sons with

him, shaking their shoulders gently for alpine starts, and bounding up and down the mountains of the Northeast. He took them to the Gunks, where Johnny became a *wunderkind* on the striated, overhanging swath of the Trapps. Guy described him in a letter: “He was not grace, he was power. He was not beauty, he was energy. He was not control, he was uncontrolled joy. I have never met anyone to whom climbing (as opposed to gymnastic exercises or competitive triumphs) meant more.” On the bucket holds of Bonnie’s Roof, Johnny let his feet cut out and swing around for the hell of it. He and his friend Howie Davis waltzed up and down the carriage road, launching into handsprings.

Guy met Laura in the Gunks during his divorce, on one of those radiant autumn weekends. She recalls spending time with all three Waterman boys (and Ralph, the dog), furiously climbing route after route. “Johnny was a very happy kid, when he was on the rock,” Laura says. “He could inspire, and he could make it so much fun.” During a trip to Cannon Cliff, Johnny hooted with joy, encouraging her through the crux of the classic Whitney-Gilman Ridge. He walked home quickly from high school, touched the door of the house, and raced back again for aerobic training. He cranked out 400 push-ups a day. Henry Barber, the brilliant soloist and free climber, retains fond memories: “[Johnny] would be hanging at the Uberfall in the dirt with a gaggle of climbers.... We would head off with a mishmash of a rack, seemingly unprepared, and I would enjoy long runouts passing by obvious spots for gear for which we had none.”

But in Johnny’s letters, the hiking and climbing partner he remembered most was his father. During a winter attempt on a Presidential

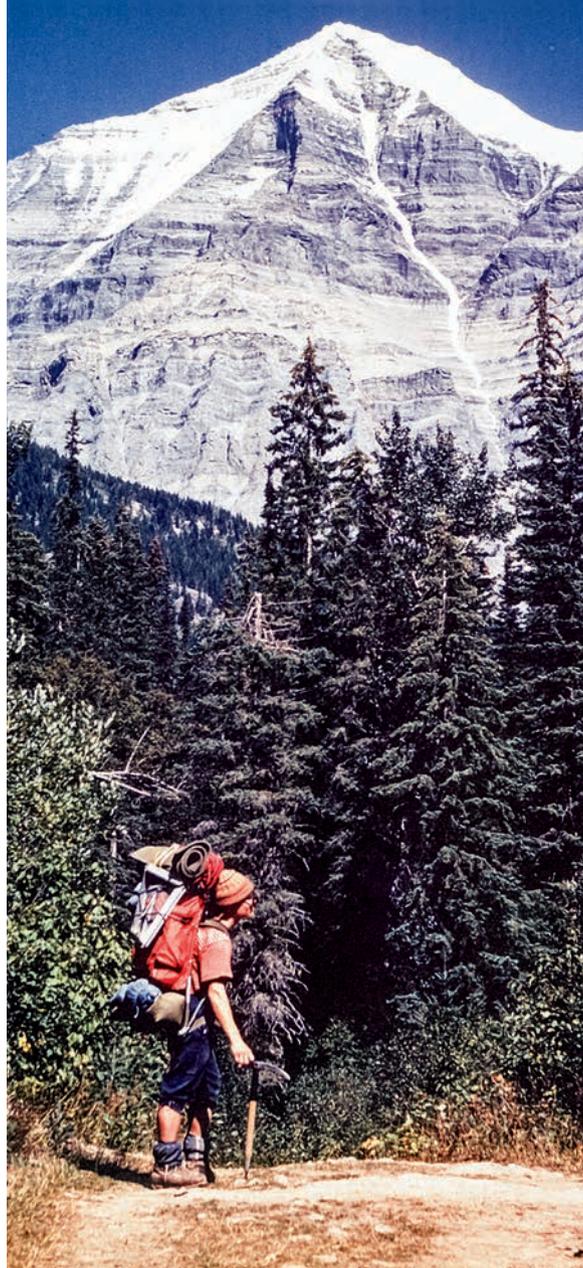
[Facing Page] **A young Waterman in the Shawangunks, New York.** | [This Page] **Waterman on Twilight Zone, Trapps, the Gunks, in 1969 before the climb was freed. In a letter to Brad Snyder, Waterman wrote: “I’m not disillusioned with climbing, just climbing**

only. Lately, I’ve been thinking of myself as a climbing machine with a very small and suppressed human element in my brain. It craves expression, but the rest of me shuts it out as if I should know better than to try to be human.” John Waterman collection (both)

Range Traverse, they gleefully suffered rain, snow and hurricane-force winds. Twelve years after Johnny's death, Guy wrote about the adventure in *Wilderness Ethics*: "To guard against losing their way...the son would go out from the last identified cairn as far as he could and still see it. Then the father would go out from there as far as he could without losing sight of the son, and stand there waiting for some brief lapse in the wind to try to squint forward into the fury of the storm in a forlorn effort to find another cairn." When the clouds thinned, briefly, he and Johnny dropped their packs to tag the summit of Mt. Jefferson only to get lost again in a "howling, screaming, swirling thicket of fog and driven ice crystals." After a gale ripped their tent fly, they staggered to the road. A day later, they set forth into another storm, bound for Mt. Washington. The winds rose to 100 miles per hour, and they spent four days hunkered in an emergency shelter, playing poker for their remaining food with cards they created out of notebook pages. Although Guy presented the story as a cautionary tale of bad judgment, his prose is imbued with deep nostalgia and pride for the mountaineer his son became.

As a teen, Peter Metcalf took an introductory rock-climbing course from Guy, and he recalls the elder Waterman's ethos: "It was all about adventure, commitment and ethics, that climbing was the way to live your life and nothing was more important." What Guy did in his White Mountains, Johnny began to mimic in larger ranges, dragging Guy's ideas through terrain nearly unfathomable to his father. In 1972 Metcalf and Johnny traveled to the Canadian Rockies, where they climbed the Kain Face of Mt. Robson and Mt. Resplendent, as well as a new route on Mt. Whitehorn with Lief Patterson and Warren Blesser. To Metcalf, Johnny seemed "Tougher than nails, someone who was amazing to watch on snow, ice, bivouacs, anything...so alive in the mountains."

In spite of his youth (or because of it), Waterman displayed a knack for the dangerous corniced ridges of the Alaska Range. On Mt. Huntington in 1972, he led a significant portion of the East Ridge and North Face—an unclimbed line of gigantic hanging seracs that the great mountaineering author David Roberts once imagined might "put a party in a perpetual state of nervousness." Niels-Henrick Andersen, one of Waterman's four partners, described the crux in the *AAJ*: "John...finally jammed one arm into a hole under the cornice so that he could balance and punch a hole in the cornice. He then wormed his way through the hole and out onto the main ridge." In 1973, as part of a three-man team, Waterman climbed the South Ridge of Hunter. As a storm closed



in on them, they accidentally stopped at a gendarme 200 feet short of the south summit. Waterman considered it a failed attempt. Nonetheless, in the *AAJ* account, Dean Rau recalled Waterman's virtuoso leads along "a nightmare of steep rotten ice and absent belays."

Johnny's early mastery of climbing allowed little time for purely social activities. In his late teens, Laura recalled, "a darkness moved in that he couldn't work his way out of." He wrote to a family friend, Brad Snyder, "Mostly I think my suicidal thoughts are really attention-getting devices... I just want a girlfriend." Both father and son had quietly struggled with mood swings and loneliness, an undefined gloom that only cliffs and mountains seemed, at least temporarily, to lift. In *Losing the Garden*, Laura recalled Jim telling her that "the only way he could have a relationship with his father was to go hiking and climbing with him." In *Strange and Dangerous Dreams*, the psychologist Geoff Powter, who once climbed with Johnny, remembered a Waterman cousin mentioning a "self-destructive streak" that ran in the family. Laura told me, "I think [Guy] felt some guilt over—and this is really ridiculous—passing on that gene, which manifested itself in a much harsher, more disagreeable way in Johnny."

But Johnny may have also suffered from survivor's guilt as his climbing partners began to die, one by one, in a bitter, almost-annual routine. In 1969 Johnny's friend Howie Davis threw himself off the top of Trapps after ending an affair with a married woman. That winter, Boyd Everett, one of Johnny's first mentors, was killed in an avalanche on Dhaulagiri. Niels-Henrik Andersen and Warren Blesser died on the Matterhorn in 1973, the same year that Rocky Keeler, a Huntington teammate, fell in Scotland. In 1975 Ed Nester, who brought Johnny on his first Alaskan trip, died rappelling a route in the Selkirks, after a block shifted. A year later, Patterson was lost in an avalanche in the Canadian Rockies, and Chuck Loucks, another role model, was killed in a leader fall in the Tetons.

In 1981, just weeks before his own death, Waterman spoke with Glenn Randall from a Talkeetna phone, "I've only known about fifteen climbers since I started climbing, which is about fifteen years ago, that I've had close to very close, intimate relationships with, and they went on to get killed: usually in very senseless kinds of accidents.... Here I was...being allowed to live."

LIKE JOHNNY WATERMAN, I grew up surrounded by my father's climbing stories. As I pored through classic books, losing myself in tales of fierce storms and north faces, an ancient notion of struggle formed in my

adolescent mind—some shadowed journey that might lead to a kind of redemption. My dad started taking me on ice routes when I was fourteen. Six years later, we made our first joint attempt on the Black Dike. Cannon Cliff is the darkest of our New England crags. Its black slabs are loose even in winter, protection is difficult, and the turf is sometimes barely frozen together. My mind conjures all this now, after years of experience, but then, I had no idea.

The famous middle pitch usually forms as a ribbon of ice cascading around a corner. That day, it was too thin, so I shot right to a variation called Hassig's Direct—likewise devoid of ice. Hours later, I'd dropped a piton I desperately needed, nearly sobbed to myself, and scrapped through a crumbly, blocky corner above what would have been a bone-shattering fall. I belayed my dad on a skinny sling looped around a rotten spike. We swore my mother would never find out. We topped out quietly as the snow lapped against the trees and the grey sun lurched lower in the sky. It was our best climb together.

Two years later, I returned to sprint up the Black Dike, alone, carrying only a water bottle. It was the beginning of my two-year obsession with free soloing, spurred on by unemployment, youthful impulsiveness, and a lack of other outlets. Tenuous veins of ice snaked through my dreams. I admired Johnny Waterman as an exemplar of a life lived with pure absolutism.

BY THE MID-1970S, Johnny had given himself fully to the mountains at the expense of nearly everything else. Years afterward, Guy confided in the writer Jon Waterman (unrelated): "I found a lot of things along the 49 years that preceded the spring of 1981, and I can be aware of them even in the midst of the lowest lows. Johnny didn't find enough such things."

In 1975 Johnny dropped out of the University of Alaska Fairbanks and took a series of odd jobs. Carl Tobin, his classmate and partner on many Alaskan adventures, recalls the torrent of fury that Johnny unleashed at a hapless bush pilot after a bad landing in the Hayes Range later that year. Other times, Tobin says, the eccentricities were amusing: Waterman would compose odd, rambling ballads on his guitar and play them for hours on end. Tobin remembers finding Johnny sitting on a bar toilet, strumming his guitar, pants around his ankles, happily serenading a bewildered trucker. "We kinda hit it off," Tobin told me with a chuckle. "I'm either proud or embarrassed to say."

Meanwhile, Johnny mailed his father envelopes full of disturbing prose. "One of the things he didn't send me, but which surfaced in his effects," Guy later told Jon, "was a very controlled and *underwritten* (in contrast with the grotesquely overwritten fantasies he did send) short story describing tersely my receiving a telegram notifying me of his suicide." Of one of Johnny's last visits to Barra, in 1976, Laura says, "Johnny was not doing great. You could see it. He was not what I described earlier, this wonderful, brilliant guy."

Three years earlier, Guy had received a letter from Johnny's older brother: "Going on a trip. Not in Alaska. Will be in touch when I get back." It was the last time anyone heard from Bill. Many who knew him are certain the twenty-two-year-old wandered off in the woods to kill himself, though his body was never found. Laura remembers Bill as a captivating youngster, adroit at securing the attention of women in the

Gunks. Early photos all show a mischievous glint in his eyes. But in 1968, a train-hopping accident left Bill with a severe leg injury, which eventually required amputation. He began drinking and using drugs more heavily, and he left college after a semester, ultimately settling near Fairbanks. In 1971 when Guy and Laura went to Alaska for their own Hunter attempt, Guy decided there wasn't enough time to check up on Bill. A year later, Bill showed up in Barra to help them lay the garden. But after he returned to Alaska, his letters became more sporadic, until they ended with that final, cryptic note.

One of Johnny's climbing friends, Kate Bull, later asked Guy why he never went to Fairbanks when Johnny, likewise, descended into the Alaskan dusk. Certainly, traveling had become complicated for Guy ever since he and Laura quit their jobs to homestead. "Our life [in Barra] is very ordered," Guy explained, "and geared to not spending money.... So there is no chunk of time I could easily take off and go to Alaska." And perhaps by *not* finding Bill, Guy explained, he could maintain the hope that his oldest son was still alive. "I think he couldn't face it," Laura told me when I asked what she thought. "I think that going to Johnny or Bill would have cost him in some way to face the thing in himself that he didn't want to face."

Dusks turn an eerie blue in Northern New England, the glow lingering far past the time you expect it to be gone; for a moment, it's almost enough to recall the midnight sun, much farther north. In a 1982 letter to Bull, Guy wrote: "There were evenings last summer here at our cabin, the day's work done, when I would...strain my eyes up the wood road that leads to our place, hoping to see a slightly limping form come down through the twilight and the years—before all went completely dark."

SO MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about John and Guy climbing together. Their story, father and son tying in for those few precocious years, has a beauty to it, like the flare of late autumn before the long nights fall. "Never did a father or son mean more to each other, I'm convinced," Guy once wrote. But Johnny wasn't a teenager trembling below a Gunks roof anymore, and their old harebrained adventures weren't enough to retrieve him. The Hunter solo, completed two years after Johnny last saw his father, was a direct shot at Guy's wilderness thesis: nature wasn't a cathedral; it was a battleground.

At age twenty-one, it's easy to romanticize dangerous climbing, to assume it's somehow the portal to a fully realized life. But even Johnny had doubts: on Hunter, he'd cried for hours on end. When most of us get off the glacier, the aftermath doesn't match the triumphant hero's return in those classic books. There's no tangible reward, just unpaid bills, scattered memories, and if we're lucky, some fragments of new knowledge. After Hunter, Johnny found he'd gained little except the loss

"Only gradually does [the dark] rise.... Long after the earth is under its spell, the sky still holds out in brightness."

—Guy Waterman

[Facing Page] **Waterman in the Canadian Rockies, likely in 1972. Despite his own suffering, Waterman helped many of his partners excel. Climbing author Jon Waterman (no relation) wrote that one of them recalled: "The sheer power of his enthusiasm for my climbing**

could inspire me to climb like I'd never climbed before. It was a great gift. Climbing with Johnny was like being inside a grand piece of orchestral music in which all is harmony and there are no wrong notes" (In the Shadow of Denali, 1994). John Waterman collection

of his illusions. “Being successful or not,” he told Randall, “wouldn’t make my life any easier in Talkeetna.” Johnny scraped together dishwashing and factory work, and he lived in a simple cabin in town. Although he planned to quit climbing, in some ways, he never left the mountain. He began suffering from what he dubbed his “Mount Hunter Psychosis,” terrifying flashbacks of cold, hunger and exposure.

A year later, Johnny was destitute, having earned nothing from his spectacular climb except a few magazine articles and an unforgettable Fairbanks slideshow (amid raucous laughter, he kept referring to his right hand as his only companion). In 1979 he ran for the Fairbanks school board on a platform of “free sex and drugs” (he got 1,000 votes), and for President of the United States, for what he called the “Feed the Starving Party.” To gain publicity for his campaign, he flew in to Kahiltna Base Camp on December 19, 1979, set on soloing a new route on the South Face of Denali with just a few staple items: flour, margarine, protein powder and sugar. It was fifteen below zero. After ten days of hesitating and thinking, he told the pilot Cliff Hudson, “Take me home. I don’t want to die.” He flew out again during a second attempt on January 1, 1980. “Mostly it was a psychological problem,” he said to Randall. “I didn’t want to stay there.”

At first, Guy looked at Johnny’s return to the Alaska Range with relief, as if the mountains might offer his son the same solace and purpose that he’d experienced himself. Other acquaintances assumed Johnny’s sorties were aborted suicide attempts. Then, on February 22, 1980, Johnny’s cabin burned to the ground, and with it most of his possessions, including volumes of his meticulous notes, poems and songs—attempts to catalog and bring order to an increasingly uncertain existence. He panicked. A friend mentioned the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) in Anchorage as a place where a dirtbag could cop a warm bed. Waterman stayed there for two weeks.

Guy didn’t make the trip to visit him, though he did ask Mike Young, who was studying medicine in Sitka, Alaska, to talk with the API doctors. They told him that Johnny seemed to be suffering from a schizoaffective disorder, exacerbated by recreational drugs and harsh environments. In *Losing the Garden*, Laura wondered whether Johnny’s struggles reminded Guy too much of his own confinement in the “psycho ward.” There was always that sense of shadows stirring at the edge of his utopian visions—the way he once wrote of night rising from beneath thick trees, only slowly enfolding the last light of the sky. The way that he, too, seemed to need his “bad weather days” in the wild. He never saw his son again.

Upon his release, John continued untangling himself from the coils of everyday life. In February 1981, headed for Denali, he left the Anchorage seacoast and trekked for some ninety-five miles up the icy Susitna River to Talkeetna and along frozen waterways to the Ruth Glacier. Still far away, the summit rose in colossal thunderheads of snow. He turned around, claiming a broken stove. In mid-March, he left mile 141 on



the highway to Fairbanks and hiked sixty miles back to the Ruth Gorge. His goal, this time, was to solo a headwall between the East Buttress and the Southeast Spur of Denali, another morbid line of hanging seracs and crumbling snow.

Climbers recalled seeing him linger for a while at the Mountain House, the small cabin dwarfed by the Sheldon Amphitheater. *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* later reported that Waterman carried “fourteen days of food (consisting of powdered milk, honey, sugar, and flour), a bivi sack, snowmobile suit, no tent or sleeping bag, VB boots, a red plastic sled, snowshoes, blue pants, and a blue jacket.” He declined a radio from Cliff Hudson, as if that lifeline, so crucial on his Hunter expedition, had become superfluous.

Kate Bull and her partners last sighted Waterman on March 30, 1981: a lone, dark figure against an ocean of white, piloting himself into a tempest of rock and ice. Search and rescue efforts turned up only some mysterious tracks, a few fecal remains and an old tent spot. So many of Waterman’s capers had bordered on performance art. Some Fairbanks climbers maintained that a wholly rational, sane Waterman had pulled off the Shakespearian feat of feigning madness, faking his demise and tramping off the map. Yet perhaps the final proof of Waterman’s intent is a sardonic bit of graffiti he left on a cardboard box in the Mountain House: “March 31st, 1981, 1:42 p.m. My Last Kiss.”

THE RANGER STATION IN TALKEETNA and tiny post office in East Corinth, Vermont, aren’t such different places on a wet, spring day. On April 21, the postmaster arrived at the house in Barra, with a message for Guy to call the National Park Service. The mud must have been difficult for Guy to tramp through for that long mile into town. Patches of snow must have clung to clumps of dead grass, the winter’s grip receding. The woods and fields of Vermont were beginning to erupt in greenery, while the endless sky of Alaska swiftly revolved away from darkness. When Guy picked up a telephone at a friend’s house and heard the climbing ranger Dave Buchanan speak, the news of Johnny’s death resounded against the peace of Barra.

For the following eighteen years, that sound echoed through the thick humidity of New England’s summers and through its muffled winters. Guy scattered memorial cairns in Franconia Notch. Some point northwest to his son’s last ski tracks in Alaska. One contains John’s hiking boots from their early days of tromping around the White Mountains. In 2000 Guy Waterman hiked to the summit of Mt. Lafayette, looking out toward Alaska. He sat down on a rock. It was February, and blisteringly cold. He’d told Laura of his intentions: he would freeze himself on his favorite mountain. For two years, the pair worked on a new house not far from Barra, getting it ready for Laura to live there alone. For two years, she’d known that one day he’d strap on his snowshoes and tramp down the old, weathered path toward the mountains. His love for Laura,

[This Page] Waterman with his father, in the mid- to late 1960s, heading out to Sages Ravine, Connecticut, for perhaps the younger Waterman’s first ice climb. | [Facing Page] Waterman on the Kahiltna Glacier, with Mt. Hunter in the background. Powder wrote

in *Strange and Dangerous Dreams*, “Understanding these more difficult but utterly human stories helps us both comprehend the deepest purpose and allure of adventure, and ultimately, I think, more honestly measure ourselves.” John Waterman collection (both)



he maintained, kept him alive until he could continue no longer. Unable to change his mind, she silently helped him carry out his plan.

In his memoir, Guy blamed himself for his son's death: "Johnny embodied those impulses in me, which have been so destructive." He'd once hoped that the views from small summits like Lafayette might be enough for Johnny, that the flowing clouds and bluish ridgelines of the White Mountains could summon his son back from his world of "darkness and storm." Instead, he followed his son into the night. As dusk fell, cars negotiated the winter road far below, and the lights of the surrounding towns reflected against the clean, frigid air. It was not Denali or Hunter, but this 5,249-foot peak was wild and icy enough.

DOES JOHNNY WATERMAN'S DEATH change how we regard his past accomplishments? It is easy to paste the excuse of suicidal insanity onto the climbs that he *did* survive because of the one he did not. Yet through some combination of luck and talent, he'd succeeded on a series of difficult ascents—while so many of his friends, great climbers themselves, perished in accidents. And when he did finally die, it was as though he'd contrived the circumstances of his demise, raising the odds so high in the mountain's favor that no human could win.

Johnny's terms were so concrete, his highs and lows so stark: we tend to balk before we allow ourselves to recognize any of those hidden qualities in ourselves. Though I was fortunate to meet good friends and climbers who rescued me from my angst, Johnny and I shared at least some of the same life circumstances—as did many of my peers. My friends and I washed dishes, badly needed girlfriends (or boyfriends), struggled to find our way, and dreamed obsessively of Alaska. Sooner or later, we came to our own terms with risk and mortality in climbing.

One reason that the Waterman story remains so timeless is that it seems to embody—almost too perfectly—the struggle for balance we

seek in the mountains. But there are other questions that might arise, today, well suited to our digital age. Was Johnny right? Are there few challenges left in the wild, save for those we conjure out of our own brains? Is Guy's peaceful Barra or Johnny's chaotic Hunter more indicative of how we now see our world?

It's hard not to wonder about the life Johnny might have lived, the regrets he might have had. Days before he disappeared, Johnny sat down with Kate Bull and her partners, envious of the camaraderie of their base camp. Then he tore himself away, and retreated into his labyrinth of rock, ice and snow for that last, perplexing act.

In 2014 Freddie, Dana and I stare sleepily across the expanse, looking south toward the Alaska Range as the bus pulls away, ferrying us away from Denali. We'll have a few beers with Carl Tobin and chat about untrammled corridors of the Alaska Range. We'll talk about Johnny too, but not his death. There was so much good there, so much talent and humor. Most of the stories have us laughing and shaking our heads.

What I see in the mountains these days is the light. It is the potential for moments of human grace beyond our wildest expectations. I know the Watermans saw this too, more than most. There's evidence enough in the way that Laura's face lights up when she remembers their carefree days in the Gunks or watches the afternoon snow squall. In those instances of wild joy that Guy and Johnny shared, relying wholly on each other in the midst of a winter storm. Guy had always wanted to complete a great climb with his son in Alaska, but they never did. Slowly, inexorably, life intervened, and alpinism, such a galvanizing force in both men's lives, helped wrest them apart.

We three, Dana, Freddie and I, gaze out, dreaming of hamburgers and beer as the bus fills with tourists and campers and abandons the wild. I try to get a look at Denali through the clouds, but I can't. It is swathed in shadow. ■