

LOST SOULS

What does it mean to become a “real climber”—and do you need to risk your life in the process? Seeking an answer, the author revisits the folly of his youthful climbs in the White Mountains, New Hampshire.

BY MICHAEL WEJCHERT

IN AUTUMN 2008, I arrived in New Hampshire’s White Mountains at midnight, driving fast. I’d grown up in New England—hiking here had been my first exposure to mountains. The wind whipped against the dark trees; the fog and dampness and the memories of being a child here rushed in, my nostrils filling with that humidity. I’d come back east after graduating from Colorado College, in Colorado Springs. A few of the older climbers out west, legends like Jimmie Dunn and Bryan Becker, had all hung out at the crags around the Springs. At places like Turkey Rocks, I’d overhear their stories of guiding out of North Conway’s International Mountain Equipment in the 1970s, of runout 5.11, of sandbagged routes, of scary ice, of evenings hanging in swami belts on Whitehorse or Cathedral Ledge.

Without any other job offers, inventorying supplies for eight bucks an hour for the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) seemed like a fine option. Their storehouse was located at Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, the bundle of low-slung buildings that mark the trailhead for Mount Washington. The AMC chiseled room and board in Pinkham’s communal bunkhouse out of my already meager paycheck, but Cathedral Ledge was right down the road.

That first night, I roused a grumpy security guard at Pinkham and asked where to sleep. He didn’t say much, nodding his flashlight toward a row of dirty brown dorm rooms. I collapsed on a plastic, striped camp mattress and tried to pass out.

That autumn, the leaves flew down out of the trees, and the sky shone a crisp October blue. On my days off, I’d mill around with my climbing gear at Cathedral, but no one paid any attention. Out of desperation, I started free soloing. I found I enjoyed it. Choking down the inevitable fear felt like taking a shot of hard alcohol. After the risk churned in your stomach for a few hundred feet, only pure movement and simplicity remained. Soloing was like any other kind of climbing: You could practice and train for it. You could get better. The distance you could cover and the speed at which you could move by yourself were intoxicating. I kept it under 5.10 for the most part. Only once, alone on the glassy upper slabs of Whitehorse, did I freeze, moving up

and down on greasy footholds as a guided family, picnicking on a belay ledge below, watched in horror. In moments like this one, I wished I had climbing partners.

At Pinkham, a separate building housed the AMC’s trail crew, a group of hard-partying kids who were part Woody Guthrie, part Hunter S. Thompson. They all had an impromptu uniform: beat-up, custom-made Limmer hiking boots, blue dickies, red suspenders. They seldom wore shirts, and showered even less frequently. They hand-stitched leather knife holsters and wielded double-bit axes. Some were intense, real-deal maniacs who hopped trains and stole people’s things. Some were just college kids playing lumberjack. One was a climber.

I asked a few fellow employees about the climber kid. After a few weeks, I mustered the gumption to creep into the building and find him. The smell of chainsaw oil, linseed oil, waterproofing grease, and pine paneling rubbed to a patina by filthy hands hit my nostrils. Walking up the stairs, I could have sworn the needle fell off the record.

“I’m, ahh, here to find Everett? To see if he wants to climb?” I sputtered. Everyone shot an accusing glance toward a somber kid in a baggy red flannel, as if it were somehow his fault that I’d trespassed into their world. Though Everett was in his mid-twenties, he was balding; his hair buzzed close. He wasn’t quick to smile.

In the gloom, Everett gave me a solid once-over: *Skimpy, glasses, shaggy hair; looks about 16*, I imagined him thinking. But there was a copy of Mark Twight’s *Extreme Alpinism* on the weathered table, and I picked it up, flipping through the pages. I pointed to a picture of *Crazy Train*, an ice smear in the Longs Peak Cirque, Colorado. Twight was halfway up the route, looking pretty poised.

“I’ve climbed on that,” I said.

It was partially true: I’d climbed *Smear of Fear*, an easier and safer route next door. Everett gave me another once-over. His eyes softened.

“Really?”

“Really.”

A DAY LATER, we were streaking toward Whitehorse Ledge in my Toyota Corolla, the fall foliage a blur of reds and yellows whipping by. Within a minute of being in the car, Everett told me he had come to New Hampshire for the same reason I had: to become a real climber. No shortcuts.

We climbed a route on Whitehorse Ledge called *Lost Souls*. It had long runouts and had me quaking with fear, but we climbed well because neither of us dared fall in front of the



ABOVE: The author on *Smear of Fear* (WI 5 M6 R) on Longs Peak, Colorado, in 2007, a year before he moved to New Hampshire full-time.

ICE CLIMBING WAS EVERYTHING THEN. EVERETT AND I BREATHED IT, SPENDING LONG NIGHTS SHARPENING TOOLS OR READING YVON CHOUNARD'S CLASSIC CLIMBING ICE.

other. The October air sharpened the night as we rappelled back into the valley. I decided to spend the winter in New Hampshire.

Everett worked as a ski patroller at Attitash, one of the small, stunted local mountains. By December, I’d moved into a flophouse with him and a few of the other trail-crew kids who’d also hibernated for the season. The house was in the teeny burrow of Intervale—

and it was a shithole. None of the rooms were heated except for the kitchen, and my hair would freeze solid if I spent too long drying it after a shower. Most of us tenants had been dumped or evicted or rejected somehow. One of our roommates had started hiking the Appalachian Trail after a warrant for his arrest went out in North Carolina, but he’d stopped after nearly 900 miles in Intervale. It was as good a place as any. After a few months of unemployment, I got a gig washing dishes and cutting potatoes in the Pinkham kitchen. My shift began at 5 a.m. and ended at 2 p.m.—leaving just enough time to race up a gully on Mount Washington before nightfall. In cloistered North Conway, no one gave us a second glance. We felt like pariahs and acted accordingly, though it was probably more self-fulfilling prophecy than anything else.

I think we knew someday we’d right ourselves and become functioning members of society. This was voluntary isolation, after all. We didn’t have any responsibilities or money, and so every night someone would buy the cheapest liquor they could get their hands on and we’d get drunk, cuddling next to the ancient propane heater in the kitchen. We read Hagakure or Hunter S. Thompson, both of whom were more dangerous to young minds than any of the substances that got passed around. In the fall, we’d pirated thousands of dollars of food from the AMC storehouse, and

now we lived on expired Luna Bars, boxes of ancient Halloween Oreos, and surplus gluten-free macaroni and cheese. If someone dared procure a luxury like freezer pizza, it was devoured in seconds.

Ice climbing was everything then. Everett and I breathed it, spending long nights sharpening tools or reading Yvon Chouinard's classic *Climbing Ice*. I climbed every day, soloing for hours. I soloed the *Black Dike* first, learning on the fly to swing gently, still unsure of what to trust, what to retreat from. At Frankenstein, the local ice crag, I soloed a dozen routes, blasting PJ Harvey and Sisters of Mercy on my iPod because I wanted to be like Mark Twight. As evening came and the guides and climbers filtered out, only the immediate moves shone in the glimmer of my headlamp, vapor on my breath, one swing at a time until I reached the top. Then I'd drive the 20 minutes back to Intervale, giddy with the realization that I'd survived another day.

New England ice felt tricky, like it would take a lifetime to master those deft little pecks at rock-hard ice. The brittle conditions required a cold grace I'd not yet learned. The dangerous arc of my learning curve could have easily swung around and knocked me senseless. I'm thankful it didn't, but this was surely just luck.

ONE AFTERNOON, Everett got off work early. We headed to Frankenstein to what we thought was a route called *Fang*, but turned out to be a sliver of ice just to the right that was first climbed by John Bragg and Jeff Pheasant in 1974. The rasp of darkness was only an hour away; the sky turned grey and silver, and the trees of Crawford Notch blackened with the sky. Everett had been late, and now we barely had time to climb.

Impatient and pissed, I soloed the first pitch, and then tossed the rope down and belayed. We reorganized the rack on the big ledge below the difficulties. I was better than Everett at ice climbing, or at least we both thought I was, so I took the lead, clipping ancient pitons through a short rock crux. We didn't know enough to bring any rock gear of our own. The climbing was thin and scary.

The ice quickly revealed itself to be too rotten to protect, and the last fixed pin was soon worlds away. Downclimbing would have been too dicey even if I'd wanted to. Inching my way up, I tried to breathe, tried to inhale some calm, but every five feet felt like a lifetime of work. I'd droop my head against the ice, listening to the sound it made, the drips pooling down my helmet and my nose, trying



to get up this vibrating, rotting, wet thing. Finally, when I got to a stance, I fired two ice screws into a rotten shelf. I dared not lean back and weight them. It was near dark now. We had only one headlamp, which was down with Everett. The trees rose from the cliff top 50 feet above me. I prayed nothing would go wrong between now and then.

"Everett! Off belay!" I hollered. A pause. A headlamp turning on, then just that blanketing quiet of the woods, of nervous relief. I could still see him getting ready, a red heap in his ratty, oversized Wild Things jacket. Everett must have been freezing. He hadn't had enough money to buy a real belay jacket. Suffering was free. I pulled up what slack was left in the rope—it wasn't much—and threaded it through my belay plate.

"Everett! On belay! Don't fall!" The cold began to seep into my softshell coat, in through my neck, but we were close now. When Everett arrived, he cast a doubtful look at the two ice screws stuck in my anchor, took the few slings I had left, and kept climbing. He wove up in the dark toward the trees. I feared he'd fall, that something would happen: the red jacket pinging toward me, a bouncing headlamp, my belay ripping, us boomeranging 200 feet down to the needles of young oak and birch trees at the base. But Everett tiptoed up, steady, alert, solid, and

I WANTED TO GO BACK AND CLIMB IT, WANTED TO FEEL THE OLD PRICKLING FEAR—OR AT LEAST CONFIRM MY MEMORY OF IT.

strong. The cord ran out and it came tight and I knew I was safe then, the rope like a mooring tossed to a drowning man.

"On beelayyy!" Everett yelled down. I stabbed my way up, straining in the gloom to see where I was going. Soon I saw Everett's grin reflected in the light of his headlamp, his dark eyes glistening.

We stumbled along, plowing a trough through wet snow and hobblebush and scraping our crampons on the kitty-litter granite we uncovered underneath. It was getting colder. Back at the parking lot, we ripped off our boots amidst a cloud of frigid exhaust, lit red by my car's taillights. The



UPPER LEFT: The author returns to the scene—a recent attempt at the *Bragg/Pheasant*. Finding conditions unsettling, he downclimbed. **ABOVE:** *Smear of Fear*, 2007. **LOWER LEFT:** Skinny conditions on an unnamed route at Trollville, New Hampshire, in 2016.

about at the gear store downtown. But we hadn't fallen, and the next morning Everett patrolled at Attitash and I washed dishes at Pinkham and that was the end of it.

THERE ARE MORE CROWDS NOW, and when the *Bragg/Pheasant* gets done you can find it on the internet; you can find which gear you need or who last climbed it and when. Information helps, though it removes the mystery we once hunted. But perhaps what Everett and I loved back then wasn't the danger, or even the climbing, but the quiet afterward—some part of which seems lost when these stories just become photographs competing for likes as people scroll past. We took no pictures, so all I have left now is my memory, which could be wrong, of course. Memory is tricky that way.

But I swear: I remember the dripping ice and the gathering darkness, feeding that rope through hands warmed red-hot from effort on a winter night. I remember the fear injected into me as if by a needle. And the few minutes Everett and I sat together up top, hooting into that violet sky, when the north woods suddenly seemed welcoming and warm. We had added our own story to that place and felt like we belonged to it now.

Everett moved out west a few years later,

working for YOSAR and as an Estes Park climbing ranger and then guide. By then, we had spent enough time living together that we'd argue about stupid, little things, and we didn't climb together as often. We were like two neurons firing against each other. It was probably my fault: I didn't allow for partners to factor into my ambition back then. That framework of ego and intensity left little space for bailing or admissions of weakness.

Over time, I settled in town, transforming into a true local, climbing more, eventually buying a house in North Conway. Recently, I went into the North Conway grocery store and saw a scrawny climber kid shelving dairy products. I recognized him: His van had been parked at Cathedral Ledge all summer. I made a point to say hi, ask if he needed a better job, if he needed climbing partners.

"I'm good," he said, or something like it. Maybe he was, or too proud to say otherwise, or a little of both. I imagined his eyes boring into me as I turned away and it made me smile, remembering that intensity.

A few winters ago, my wife, Alexa, and I drove through Crawford Notch for the umpteenth time. We pulled into the parking lot and I squinted through binoculars, trying to place myself on the *Bragg/Pheasant* again in the dark. Earlier that season, I'd backed off the first pitch as it baked in the December sun.

The binoculars revealed that the ice was just barely there, although a few friends had recently climbed it. I wanted to go get back on it, wanted to feel the old prickling fear—or at least confirm my memory of it.

We drove on. It was getting late. That afternoon, as winter light filtered down over Crawford Notch, the trees were black and bare above the freshly white ground and the sun burned into the sky. We picked another route and marched in. I watched Alexa, her green eyes dancing from behind her jacket, the cold wind burning her cheeks bright red, leading up a column, and thought about how lucky I was to have someone who loved winter here as badly as me. Alexa climbs like she exists: a mixture of reserve and beauty and powerful, silent grace that is part of why I love her. I was happy not to lead anything.

At the end of the day, as my old Toyota twisted out of Crawford Notch, carrying us home, I looked up again. The *Bragg/Pheasant* was still hanging on, but maybe I'll never go back up there. Sometimes it's better that way.

Michael Wejchert is a writer, climber, and guide based in New Hampshire. He is working on his first book.