

THE CHILD AND THE MAN: A MOUNTAIN STORY

August. Wind curls the branches of the tall white pines. A boy, six, is lying in his bed, staring into the darkness of a New Hampshire night. His parents and his little brother and sister are asleep elsewhere in the cavernous house, perhaps far away in dreams. Looking northward, the boy can see ghostly Mt. Chocorua penumbra through the rusted screen of his window, where sometimes a Luna moth will rest itself, the pale green fire of its wings haunting.

Suddenly there is a light: a small flash. It seems to come from the mountain's inkiest depths and, as it flashes again, and once more, and then more steadily, almost insistently, it makes the boy's own heart beat wildly. The light, like a voice, is calling him.

In a breath he is out of bed and quietly slipping out of his pajamas and into his clothes. He tiptoes downstairs, pulls his small backpack off the hook in the pantry off the back end of the kitchen, and gathers what he senses he will need: flashlight, compass, hat, sweater, a canteen of water and -- he does not know why, he simply reaches for it -- the First Aid kit that sits beneath the sink and which no one has used for years. For good measure he makes himself a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich and snares a box of Wheat Thins from the high swinging shelf his father installed two summers before to keep the mice from ransacking the perishables.

Leaving the house, he pauses at the door: the light, directly north of him, continues its incessant pulsing. Scared but not afraid, he steps stealthily down the big stone steps into the scrub juniper meadow that fronts the property and heads for the fringing woods. In a moment, he and the forest are one.

An hour later the boy is midway up Chocorua on the trail he has hiked many times before. Though he can no longer see the flashing light, he feels the urging of it, an almost magnetic pull tugging him forward. He is tired but determined; he presses onward, singing to himself in the darkness to keep himself unafraid.

A sound startles him. It is a cry, a single plaintive note. Frozen in his tracks, the boy flicks off his flashlight. Ahead of him on the trail, as his eyes adjust to the blanketing dark, he sees what he has come for. Again, the plaintive cry. Ahead of him on the trail, light and sound merging, he makes out the figure of a man -- felled, ostensibly, by a fall, but seemingly broken, and barely alive.

The man, as the boy approaches, can scarcely give credence to what he sees. For the boy before him is so young, almost too young, for believing. "How...", the man stammers. "I saw your light," the boy says, shyly. "Thank you," the man returns, almost sobbing. "I seem to have broken my leg; I didn't think anyone would come for me." "I am here to help," says the boy. "I have a First Aid kit. We can make a splint and get you down." "Thank you, child, thank you," the man says. Wind is high in the trees, but softer somehow, an easing balm. A calmness has soothed the surrounding dark. "Here," the boy says, holding out his canteen to the man, "you must be thirsty."

This is a tale my father told me at least a thousand times when I was a child. In fact, with old Mt. Chocorua practically looking into my bedroom window, I would beg and beseech my father time and again: tell me the story of the boy and the man; please, tell me the story of the boy and the man.

My father, from whom I have been estranged, sadly, for upwards of thirty years, was both the literal and inspirational driving force that pushed and prodded and propelled me into a White Mountains life when I was all of three years old. He was there when I summited Mt. Washington at six; he was there when atmospheric overcame us

in Edmund's Col and a devilish wind tried to snatch, like a thief, our flimsy tent from our hands. He was there, and there, and there -- and that's what mattered to me, and what, more important, seemed to matter to the mountains themselves as we climbed them, and camped out in them, and came to understand and appreciate them for their magnificence, their transcendence, their out-and-out beauty that no postcard can ever capture and no non-hiker can ever know.

I have thought about the tale of the boy and the man on every one of my White Mountain climbs. And, particularly since I myself became a father, I have thought about my father -- about missing him; about the possibility, the barely Las Vegas chance, of bumping into him at a sharp turn of trail, or on the rocky top of Monroe, surely one of the finest of high-up, see-all-around-you spots in the whole magical, mystical universe.

But I have also through the years come to understand the tale on different levels. Was my father trying to tell me, long ago, that it was he -- a man half-broken by life, by obligation, by a lousy marriage and a less-than-palatable job -- who needed rescuing? And that I, a mere boy, was to somehow throw him a lifeline? Or is it that I -- climbing frantically, season after season -- have somehow in my tramping become both boy and man at once? Finally, do I hike like the dickens every chance I get because I myself need rescue -- rescue, that is, from a sometimes troubled self?

My father loved the Whites for their unsurpassable splendor. For their munificence and magnanimity. Every hike we'd take together, he'd say: *Whatever the world has in store for us, the mountains themselves will never let us down.* True to us, truest to themselves, they never did, and never have. They nurtured me through childhood; they distracted me enough to pull me past gnarly adolescence; they've helped me both navigate and negotiate adulthood -- heck, let's be frank here, they've basically helped me survive. Guides, touchstones, presences -- call them what you will -- those peaks that are sometimes called The High 48 have kept me from straying too far off the beaten path -- or, truly, from falling off it altogether. And I am grateful.

I will keep hiking, of course. Because that light is always flashing.

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