A silhouette of a person stands triumphantly on the peak of a large, dark rock formation. The person's arms are raised in a 'V' shape. The background is a bright blue sky filled with scattered white clouds. The overall mood is one of achievement and adventure.

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



**T**his book is a creative nonfiction piece based on my memories of things that happened in my twenties between 1980 and 1990, including places, things, people, and experiences. I've tried my best to tell a true story. I consulted my journals, pictures, friends, and relatives to be as accurate as possible. 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. I left out some companions to streamline the story.

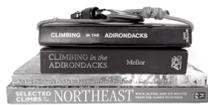
While I chose a life climbing mountains, I encourage you to live an adventurous life regardless of your path.



The North Face of Batian, 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, stirred up by all the commotion, as my colleagues scamper into the store. The children circled—wild animals playing 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 a purpose.

I take off my sunglasses, revealing my blue eyes and thick, brown hair. They stop and huddle closer in anticipation. Behind me to the east, Mount Kenya’s twin peaks of Batian and Nelion glimmer, and patches of snow 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 back, 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, looking around and snagging 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 grab the bag of provisions and head out to the truck, Tusker beer bottles clinking. Paying the bill, I thank the shopkeeper, "*Mzuri sana, bwana.*" Cross-culture 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, nemba 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

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near, they traveled to Kampala over the bumpy dirt roads to the only western hospital in the country.

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 worldwide, 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.



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

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My Dad and I attend a political rally for Milton Obote in Mbale, Uganda. Photo by Rosalie Flinn, April 1962.

One day in early 1965, my friend Michael and I played outside my house, near the church community center in Mbale. 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. 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 dirt and 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."

Wondering what they're blathering about, Michael is quiet, contin-

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uing to bulldoze the road to his majestic dirt castle. “What do they want?” I ask him.

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



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MY FAMILY LEAVES Mbale less than a year later, fortunately, right before a violent purge of foreigners. Since independence from Britain in 1962, Uganda's politicians have been haggling with the Buganda monarchy to form an acceptable government. Alas, it would take twenty years to sort things out.

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.

I'm almost six years old, Dad's away trying to find a job, and Mom's bogged down with my younger sister and brother. Being the first one through the gauntlet, I'm the parenting experiment. Will I listen? Do as asked? Eat yucky vegetables?

I do an excellent job since my parents often leave me alone.



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

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

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.



The author with the Cathedral staff of Saint Andrews, Mbale. Photo by Seymour Flinn, August 1965.

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My sister Lissa, my brother Andy, and I on the porch in Greenwich, Connecticut. Photo by Seymour Flinn, August 1967

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 fires 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 all the bling. They're more practi-

## CLIMB LIKE A MZUNGU

cal, 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 I realize it's small stuff, so don't sweat it.

The farmland transforms into a forest, and the houses thin as the 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 truck 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 the beast. Fifteen minutes later, we realize that it's hopeless. So much for four-wheel drive. We unload our gear 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 expected. Didn't think about altitude. No running up this trail."

"We started at nine thousand feet," Joe says, laughing. "Should have hired an elephant to haul our kit. No matter; we have four miles to go. We'll be fine."

Keeping up the conversation to distract from the grind and my heavy pack, "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 expired in late 1965, and it was time for us to leave. Years later, adjusting to America still felt weird, even though I spoke the language and had white skin. It was strange growing up in

Greenwich; my classmates drove BMWs costing more than Dad's annual salary.”

In high school, I was preoccupied with belonging and acceptance. A gangly four-eyed nerd who used sports to bond with his peers. Clueless. A football wide receiver who refused to wear his glasses because they could break if tackled. As if I ever got the ball.

“I hated high school,” Joe replies. “Everyone is 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, smores dripping with chocolate, clinched the deal.”

“Amen to chocolate. You got any handy?”

Pulling out a Kenyan version of the Cadbury bar stowed in my hip belt pocket, I pass it to him. We plod on, hoping to catch up to Andrew and Francois, who gallop ahead.

Hours later, we join them at the ridgetop, where the glorious peaks of Mount Kenya flit into view, mist swirling. 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 pops us a glimpse and disappears back into the clouds.

Dumping my moose of a pack to forage for a jar of peanut butter. Opening it with a flourish, I offer some to Joe. “Have a snack and enjoy the view. I’m stoked to be here. You guys are the best.”

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. Very happy to be here. I’m off to the hut. Anyone else?” He throws on his pack and starts.

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

Andrew takes a photo of the lobelia shrub next to us. “I just love these groundsels.”

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

I agree. “These trees are right out of Dr. Seuss. Never seen anything like them before.” They resemble giant artichokes, rainwater pooling in their leaves.

Andrew nods. “Totally stellar. Nothing like this in the UK. The others can run to the hut, but I’m happy to stroll and enjoy the shrubbery.”

Another tall lobelia is nearby, ten feet tall. Snap goes my camera.

Settling my pack, pondering the miracle of being here, blown away by my luck. I haven’t followed the ordinary guidebook of life. Finding solace in the wilds, energized by rock climbing, my thirst for adventure manages my rat race.

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



Ken heading into 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 our hair, flipping the canoe over would be disastrous.

The moon peaks out from the clouds, glistening on the snow, reflecting a pale-yellow stripe down our path. Imagining a roller coaster, I hang on and howl when we reach the bottom. Suddenly, a road jumps in our way, and the canoe throws sparks as we bounce across the pavement. Another street draws near, and we launch, screeching, to the other side, to rest 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 encourages students to explore the outdoors, a college version of the Boy Scouts, 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, trapping newbies and brainwashing us 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. Tall, skinny, and a total dork. 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 liberal arts college 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. It's excellent that SUOC seems pretty cool. Do you live on campus?"

"Yeah, up on Mount Olympus in Day Hall. Lucky to find good folks, 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 life. I punted and found a place off campus. Lucky to have good housemates. College is wonderful; everyone has an open mind. It's electric, none of the stupid high school games." Eric finishes his beer.

Nodding in agreement, I say, "And there's 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?"



Eric soaking rays at the Spiders Web in Chapel Pond Pass, near Keene Valley, New York, August 1988.

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

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

Standing to stretch my legs, “I’m stoked to have met you. This intro 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 awesome; it 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. I’m looking forward to more adventures.”

His elfin smile lights up his face. “Luckily, our fleet of five canoes all survived unscathed. I’m glad you showed up. Remember, Tuesday nights are the upcoming trip signups.”

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



MY FIRST CHANCE TO run a river comes a few weeks later, in February. Most SUOC boats are banged up, but that’s to be expected when used as toboggans. Kayaking magazines describe whitewater rivers full of frothy white 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 logic to me over beers at Hungry Charlie’s, the pub for post-SUOC-meeting revelry.

“You need to practice the real thing before Spring,” he lectures. “The time to kayak is when the rivers rage with 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?”

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

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

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 the river<sup>1</sup>, getting comfy. I'm 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 head downriver, you must show me you can escape from the boat if you tip over."

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 easy 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 tump 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 beginner pool training sessions last fall, you need to release safely, 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, a drowned dog freezing, wondering what I've gotten into.

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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 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 my mind tries 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.

The snow trickles down in the calm gloomy sky as we finally reach the pullout. I crawl out of 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 regular 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 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 so far; 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 warm 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? I can't see anything squished into that low cockpit."

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“Ah, good question. The short answer is that it’s the same for any sport; you gotta put in the time. Being a newb 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?”

“Trust me. Get your roll down and go with the flow. Crushing each wave and blasting through the rapids is a glorious rush.”

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, there was a letter from the Industrial Design department in my mailbox. Cradling it between my fingers, its thin, crisp type beckons opening. I head back to my empty dorm room, perch on the bottom bunk, and fondle the envelope, my tummy crawling with caterpillars. My 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. My 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: 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, and the church was barely functioning. It’s a depressed city with fierce race wars, and my siblings attend private schools. I thought we left the battles back in Africa.

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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 yelling at me. 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, and I pack up to 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. Leverage 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.



IN OCTOBER, the climbers invite me to the town of Little Falls, home to Moss Island,<sup>2</sup> 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 be natural or 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, a lifeline, to keep the climber from falling. Think of taking a leashed dog on a steep walk: the owner is the belayer, the climber, the dog. As the climber moves up, the belayer lets the rope out, keeping it tight. If the climber slips off, the belayer locks the rope as the owner tightens the leash.

"You got it," yells 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.

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.

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

The climbing harness fits me snugly as 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 logical, almost rungs of a ladder. My feet pivot sideways to fit the horizontal ledges. I move one limb at a time, making progress, searching for significant footholds to rest and shake my arms. This is fun.

The dangled rope gets in the way half the time, 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 nice 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 me, thin but ripped with wiry strength, and has blond hair trimmed short. He

pretends he's Gaston Rebuffat, one of mountaineering's legends. Sometimes, he uses 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 is no fun, 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. 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.

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

I breathe deep, clip in, turn around, and don't look down. My mind chills, and my body takes over, welcoming the exposure, the rush of it 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 winter break, thrilled to score Dad's old Ford Maverick. Tan with two doors, automatic transmission, and a perfect cruising machine. It's great to have wheels and the freedom to drive on SUOC trips to the Adirondacks.

In late January of 1981, I sign up for ice climbing in Ithaca, only to discover John's car broken down, and I couldn'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 concluded rigging a top rope was 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 water rats, while the Dolly Sods Wilderness provides great backpacking for regular folks.

I'm driving down 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 cabin driveway right before dark. During the ride south, John tries to convince me to go caving. Sitting around a campfire outside our cabin, the discussion continues over beer.

"I get that you prefer climbing," John says, "but you should try a cave. SUOC is about trying all the sports. Besides, we use ropes to 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 a dirt and 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 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. But the notch arrives, and, poof, I'm launched into space. Adrift, slowly spinning around, a timid spider hanging to a thread, my carbide lamp

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dark, 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.

We spend hours wandering around on a "route," assuming John knows where we are heading. My carbide lamp gives off enough light to keep claustrophobia at bay. The best part of having company is the ability to distract me by chatting.



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

“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. I’m sure John knows this and ensures us newbs don’t spend time alone. Trying to forget his earlier stories about swimming out of caves or spending days inside.

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 the hang of things.

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, weighting the knee, draw my foot up, move the knee next, finally the shoulder, and back to the foot in a cycle. Designed to slide up the rope, the ascenders hold me in place; as I crank up, my brain focuses on the need to pee, leaving no room for fear.

Popping out, yanking on the rope to indicate I’m off, then dash 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

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

With bated breath, I wait for Billy's answer, topping off his beer as a small, imploring gesture. It's his car, after all. He reaches for the mug, taking a big swig. And 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, 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 from this stunt. Eric and I shrug and trudge past Chainsaw Guy, heading for the keg.

Having grown up in a staid high school town, I know 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*.



THE BEAST IS READY. Billy’s white station wagon is overloaded with four six-foot-tall dudes heading north to Canada. When driving west, it’s either I-90 across the States or the Trans-Canada Highway. With the option for potent Canadian beer, our route choice is obvious.

When arriving at the border in late May, 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

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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 worries he'll hock it for cash. It's some customs thing. They'll confiscate it, or he pays the \$250 deposit.

Disgusted, Billy gives them a check, and we bolt to Toronto, visiting as many breweries as possible to assuage our trauma.

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 rock.

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, "Can't let the cops push us around."



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

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 score a new shock.

The repair starts 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 thing to do.

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 under the clear sky. “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.”

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. The easy travel is over, and Steve and I are on our own.



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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 beckons me. You know, charting my path creates 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 wind gust blows dust in my face.

Finally, we score a ride in a tricked-out Bronco, loud disco Bee Gees blaring. The guy riding shotgun nods off, ripping a snore as he slumbers. 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 wild California girl picks us up in a Toyota. She wears Red Baron sunglasses and drives us to the mountains.

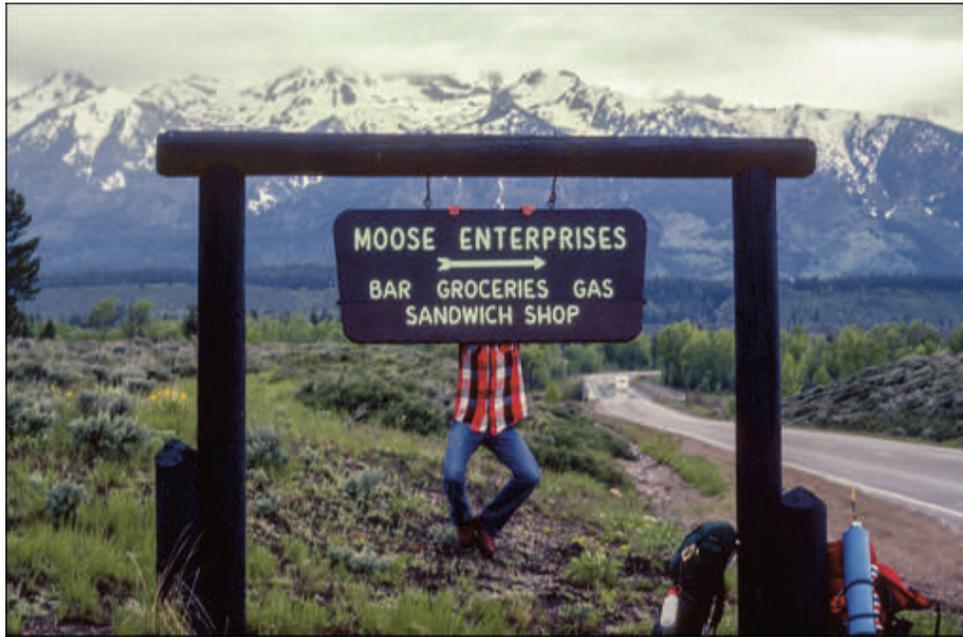
Camping under lodgepole pines with a smattering of Douglas fir, the sagebrush smell pleasant when smushed. A hearty spaghetti meal follows. We sleep by a raging river roaring as loud as a freight train.

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 snag 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.

DAVID FLINN



The author hanging out in the Tetons, 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.

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“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.



Steve drying out our kit after the rain in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming. June 1981.

We apologize and mumble sympathies, but he isn't too upset. Instead, he gives us hot dogs, cheese, and some 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. "I can't believe that hoser with the 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 the Tetons alone. 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 wild girl in a car smothered with Arizona WABC bumper stickers gives us a lift to Yellowstone gate, 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.



"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 Gawd 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 doing?"

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."

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My usual bouncy self goes somber. Lissa is three years younger, has glorious strawberry-blond 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!"



The author trying to score a ride with a "Beyond Eureka" sign, north of Eureka, California in June 1981.

DAVID FLINN

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.

At long last, Steve and I get a sweet ride outside Eureka in northern California. The van driver loves us, being from Philly, inviting us to stay with him as he heads south to Los Angeles. We drop Steve off 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."

"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 back 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 putting in 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 work 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!"

## CLIMB LIKE A MZUNGU



My fuel truck with the Hughes 500D fire patrol helicopter on the Aprehoe-Shonsone Indian Reservation, Wyoming. August 1981.

“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 value 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.

DAVID FLINN

One fine bluebird day—sunny with a clear blue sky—the pilot takes a couple of Shoshone Indians 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 friend takes me to a Crow Pow Wow. I'm the only *mzungu* in attendance; I didn't even think about taking my camera.

Overwhelmed is an understatement. So much to observe and absorb. Many folks 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 manifest the best drop, avoiding town centers—the literal no-hitch zone—and slogging to the edge of town. Freeway entrance ramps are optimal, where cars go slowly, easy to see me and pull over. There's much to learn about life wandering around using my thumb.

When the landing gear clunks, almost as if it's 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 gear as classes and SUOC fill my time. After many day trips to Little Falls, it's November, and on the road to the Gunks in New Paltz, a three-hour drive southeast of Syracuse. I'm

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still learning and comfortable with top-roping, but my first exposure to lead climbing will be a big step up.

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 Gunks 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 Uberfall<sup>3</sup>, the prime area in the Trapps region, a micro-hike 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, restricted by the length of the 150-foot rope. Anchors are provided by a tree, temporary anchors—called protection, or pitons hammered in a crack for permanent use.

Weaving a webbing harness around my tummy and legs, I anchor the belay to a massive tree at the base. Since the club doesn't have lead gear, our leader supplies his equipment.



The author belaying Woody at the *Uberfall* at the Gunks, New Paltz.  
Notice the basic harness made of webbing. November 1981.

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, using temporary anchors that look like colossal machine nuts. Small pieces of nylon rope allow a carabiner to connect it to the rope. I get why Gaston calls climbing a puzzle game; 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 ole 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 gear store in downtown New Paltz. John Bouchard, a rad climber from New Hampshire, presents slides of his bold ascent of the Eiger North Face in Switzerland. Their 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 COZY 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.

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 Falls<sup>4</sup> thirty minutes later. After a micro-hike into the ravine, the walls steepen slowly, ending at a cute 40' waterfall brimming with frozen wonder.

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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.



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

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 feet," 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 like a monkey, 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 must be robotic, moving arms first, then the feet in unison, not alternating arms and legs. 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 for me to get the hang of it, but I quickly learn to appreciate the wonderful 'thwack' of the ice axe finding its home in the ice.

Hanging like a monkey, sticking my butt out, then kicking the crampon into the ice takes some practice. Marla's right; it's easy to get distracted whaling away with the ice tools. Stepping on knobs of ice is more effortless than kicking; the sharp crampons bite quickly.

Nearly lost my balance after an aggressive leg extension. My right foot blew off, but I'm still hanging on, thanks to the tight rope. Phew.

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

On the way back to the cars, I ask Eric, “So what did you think of climbing ice?”

“It’s almost as good as a rock. Great that I can create my 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 ice, “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.

I reply. "Gotta work on your trick next time; I was focused on my feet. Like hitch-hiking, don't like standing around in the frigging cold, waiting to climb."

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.

"Heavy thoughts. I think I'll stay on the rope." 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."

So long as he stays on a rope. No need to go hog wild.

Two weeks later, we head over to Lick Brook Falls.<sup>5</sup> 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 beast.

Fortunately, we wander down to the *Lower Falls* and set up a top rope. The waterfall flows like a staircase, vertical in places with nice landings to rest. It's exposed, and I feel great out in the wild with no trees nearby. It seems silly, but without shrubbery and rocks, I feel more secure.

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 ice axe in a nice arc, resulting in a solid thunk.

After my third try, the sequence of my hands and feet are starting to jell, so I'm messing around, splayed out like a gymnast on the balance beam.



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

THE BEAUTY of Chapel Pond Pass is unveiled at the parking turnout. A ten-yard scamper brings me to the snowy edge of the pond. Gazing to the right, the water drains out into Chapel Pond Canyon.

Turning around behind me, the Washbowl Cliffs loom across the street; the steepest 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.

DAVID FLINN



Bob stoked after leading *Chouinard's Gully* in Chapel Pond Pass, Adirondacks February 1982.

*Chouinard's Gully*<sup>6</sup> is the prominent ice line where Bob, Marla, and I are going, my first multi-pitch climb.

The day is gloomy grey, a typical winter day. We tromp across the ice, and I wonder if it's safe. The thought of falling in causes the caterpillars to jostle around my stomach. Luckily, the bugs go back to sleep once we rope up.

Bob 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 nice 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 of the climb 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 am feeling good. The sucker is cranked in solid; a truck could hang off it, but a total bitch to get out.

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Guess that's the point. Making the mistake of looking down the gully, I can't believe I climbed the beast. My tummy lurches, 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 climbers left (looking up at the climb) to avoid messing around with three rappels.

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. All the sharp tools can cause nasty injuries."

Marla says, "I'm glad you didn't. And that 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. New versions today are much fancier. 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 nice 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, continue up to the summit and rig ropes on *Critter Crack, Le*

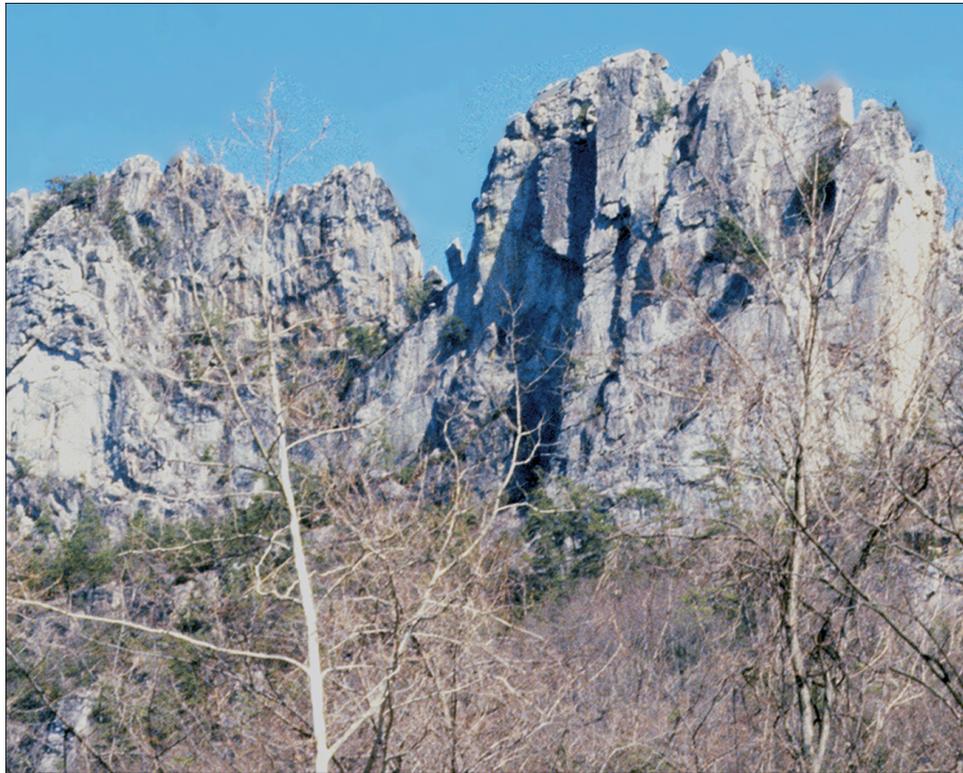
DAVID FLINN

*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 peak of the South Face forms a knife-edge ridge that narrows to five feet. Over 300 feet high, it's safe and airy; I've no desire to risk a tumble.

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

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



*The Gendarme* used to reside in the gunsight notch—it fell in 1987—of the South Peak, Seneca Rocks in West Virginia, March 1982.

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

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

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 300' off the deck. Ready to fly like an eagle.



SUMMER DRAGS by as I work a real job at home. The warden at Dad's church found me a supervisor position 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 is no place more fun 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 camp 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*<sup>8</sup>. Bob does the leading, Marla goes second, and I climb last. Slab climbing is a ballet where balance is the ticket.

Unlike all my climbs up till now, the slab requires 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 an indentation 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 climbers 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 the climb?”

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

Marla laughs, “That’s a bit vague; how did you feel?”

“Oh, right. I was comfortable, not scared. Perhaps too overwhelmed not to screw up. The art of balance intrigued me, the ability to trust my body to do the right thing. How about you?”

Marla pokes the fire. “Exactly, just like gymnastics. It’s all about the right kind of movement, a dance. I love the whole process. Planning, driving here, then doing the climb.”

Bob jumps in, “I love the doing part. All the gear and skill make me feel I’m accomplishing something nobody else can.”

Marla adds, “Climbing’s a philosophy where I treat my life as one big climb. You know, climbing 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.



NOVEMBER IS the big budget meeting, and I’m nervous. It’s up to me to score the loot. The president must lobby the university annually to justify the budget request. Club tradition uses personal transportation, freeing up university money for gear. 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

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full force. A brown-haired girl sits next to Marla, and I plunk myself between them. She's a SUOC newb, and her green eyes sparkle. The beer helps me chat normally and not all shy as usual.

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

Katy owns her newbishness with style. "I hope to try skiing. Done a lot of downhill, but I'd like to try cross-country."

"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, my pack stuffed with sixty-five pounds of climbing gear. Tired of being a porter. The minimal 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 to munch 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 besides climbing. Heck, in high

school, I caddied, dragging golf clubs around Round Hill Country Club for money. 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 trudge to the Harvard Cabin, my Last Homely House, a base camp 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 monster pack into a spot in the corner, I proceed with welcoming hugs to my friends. The cabin is cozy, 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.

Upstairs is the sleeping loft, where the heat settles, making for a glorious slumber, keeping winter at bay.

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

"Bob took them up *Central Gully*<sup>9</sup> 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 at Marla. "You're not worried about them, are you?"

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

"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.

## CLIMB LIKE A MZUNGU

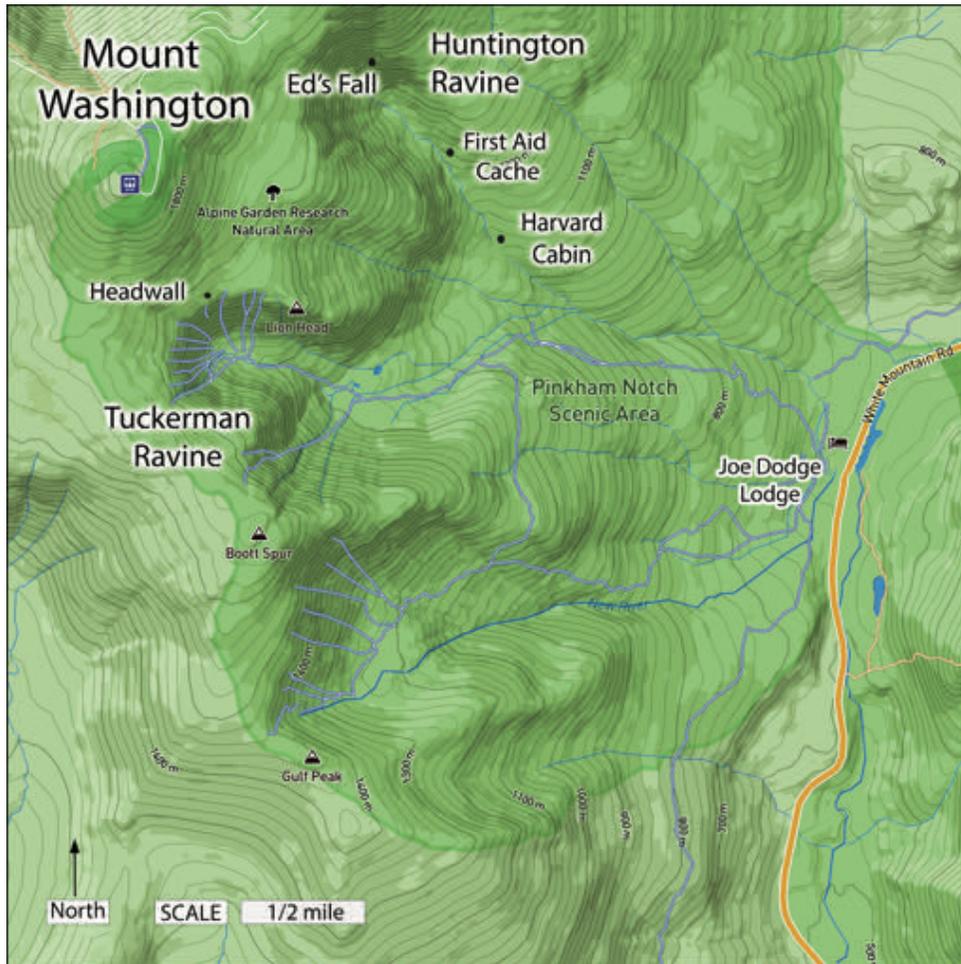
Since our climbers have not returned, the leftovers wait on the stove. Being New Year's Eve, out comes the booze, and the fun starts. I try my luck at checkers with Ed, a Freshman and one of the beginners.

"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."



Mount Washington is a wilderness-loving ice climber's playground.

“Marla took me up to Huntington’s 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 made 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, I 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 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 twenty degrees, and no wind. The creaking of 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; see if everything’s okay. Come straight back if anything is wrong.”

“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

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

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 gear 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 cozy 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 tromp 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 anxiety unravels as caterpillars stir in my tummy.



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.

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 lying, not moving, 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.”

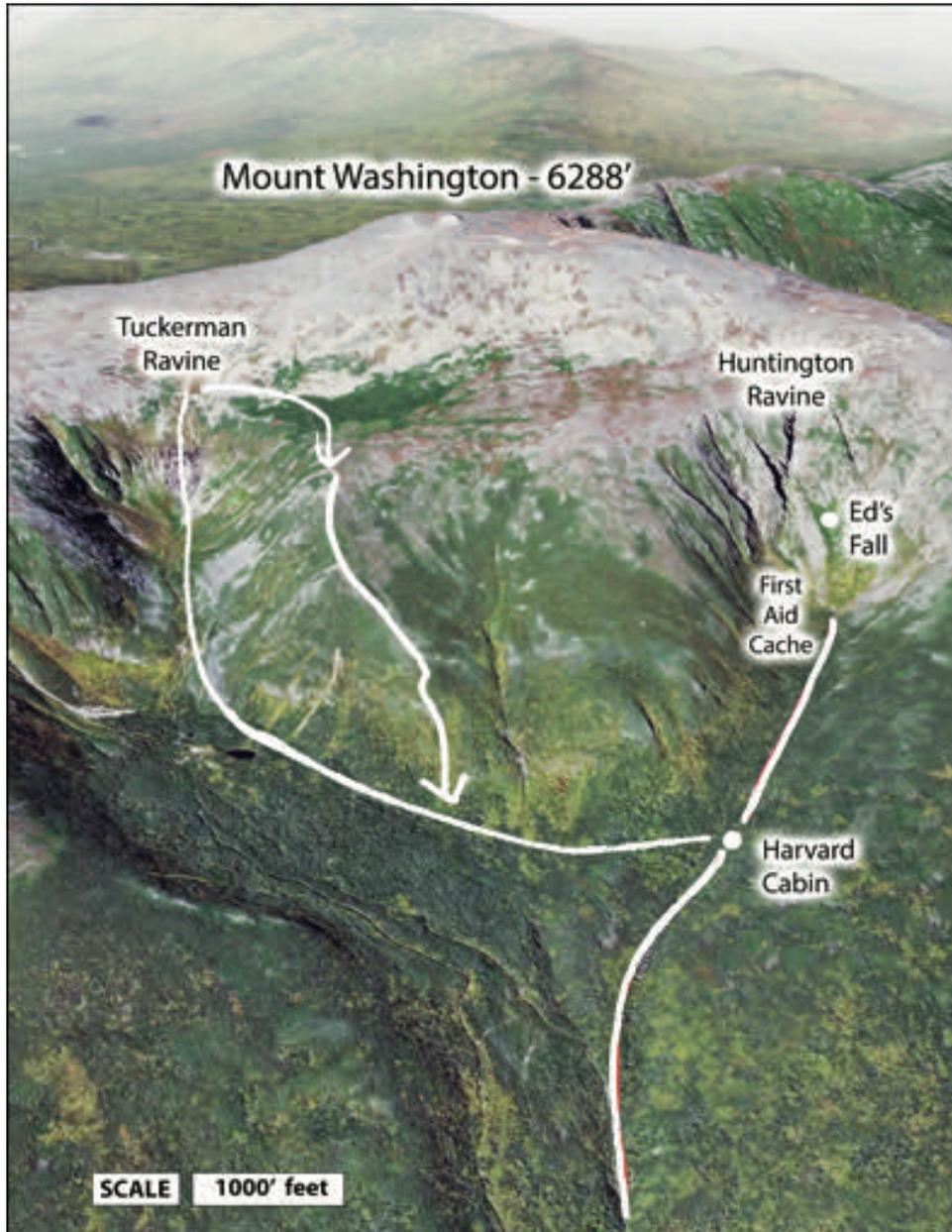
Even in her exhausted state, she opens her eyes, realizing I don’t know. “Dave, Ed didn’t make it. After you conked out, Ed died. His injuries were too severe. I’m sorry.”

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.

## CLIMB LIKE A MZUNGU

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.



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

Stumbling up the winding trail like a zombie, a rock jumps in front 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 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 chooses to bail. The cabin crouches over us, the open wood beams dark and protecting. The window dims as the sun moves west, grey 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.

## CLIMB LIKE A MZUNGU

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. My glory of climbing alpine ice is crushed. Ed is gone, missing out on all he could have been.

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 gear. 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, and an occasional patch of snow is found amongst the boulders. 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 scampers up to 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.

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

## CLIMB LIKE A MZUNGU



The Tuckerman Ravine headwall from the Hermit Lake Shelters. Bob and I climbed straight up the center. January 1, 1983.

“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.

“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<sup>10</sup>, 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 as we alternate each section. 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 lone ice piton on the pitch. Called a *Snarg*, they create a dubious anchor, but they are fun to whack with an ice hammer.

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. Out to the northeast, the sun lights the ridge, and the downhill ski trails at Wildcat Mountain glisten.

My right foot stomps on an apple-sized lump of ice. Putting weight on it, my foot slips off the apple. 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 up and draws my voice out and away. Caterpillars transform into butterflies, dozens trying to get out. Frozen in place, I'm about to end up with Ed. My mind starts to chirp about being a bonehead. It's not looking good.

It's all mental games in the end. Bob's jerk on the rope snaps me out of my funk. He's wondering why I'm not moving—untethering my left hand from the ice hammer, reaching up gently to yank on the rope. My lifeline returns me to the present, away from mental noise. I refocus, figuring my best option is up. It's 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.*

## CLIMB LIKE A MZUNGU

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."



Ice gear from the 1980's. Snarg ice pitons, adjustable crampons with ski boot, Joe Brown helmet, and an assortment of ice tools.

“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 trudge down Lion’s 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. Thankfully, that horrible night is over. Of all my worst fears, this one had come true. My dad is a minister, and our faith cherishes living, especially when tragically shortened. 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