

FROM

Legends of the North Cascades

BY JONATHAN EVISON

Once Bella had broken her silence and returned to school, Dave escaped into the backwoods almost daily, hiking fifteen and twenty miles at a go, in spite of his lousy hip, up the canyon, and over the rock-studded ridge, into the sprawling high country of the North Cascades, their precipitous peaks and cornices buttressed by glacial ice, white and windswept against the late winter sky.

As long as Dave was moving, putting distance between himself and the world, he could endure living in the moment.

One afternoon, while taking refuge on a small plateau high above the canyon, he paused in the clear, cool, afternoon to eat a heel of bread and a tin of sardines, taking in the remarkable panorama through the cloud of his breath; the great, yawning jaw of the canyon, and the ruffled blanket of spruce and fir sprawling clear to the bottom of the basin and beyond. Behind him, the peaks of the Picket Range reared up like spires: Ghost, and Phantom, and Fury. To the west, beyond the frozen silence, lay the inland Pacific, with its labyrinthine waterways.

Here, in this spot above it all, he lingered as long as the day would allow, basking in isolation. When he finally hefted his daypack, and turned to resume his progress, his eyes lighted on a narrow cleft in the side of the mountain.

In a world that seemed all out of mysteries, the gash in the hillside demanded his attention. Tentatively, he poked his head in, sniffing the chalky air, wary of bear, or cougar. Sensing no danger, Dave entered what amounted to a stone chamber, the size of which was difficult to ascertain at first. By the paltry light of his phone, he eased his way along the near wall for four or five steps, until the rock began to close in on him from above. After a few more steps, he arrived at the rear of the cavern. Stooping, he doubled back

along the opposite wall, feeling his way along the cold rock, before stationing himself in the very center of the space, which he estimated to be roughly four hundred square feet. The stillness of the place was overwhelming.

Dimming his phone, Dave sat down upon the cold, hard earth in the darkness, only a narrow blade of sunlight slicing the foreground diagonally in front of him. For the first time in weeks he drew a deep breath, and clutched it in his chest, and stared at the back of his eyelids for a good fifteen seconds. Rather than exhale the breath deeply, he absorbed what he could of it, letting it pass slowly through every pore of his body, his shoulders slackening, as he released it gradually.

He spent the next twenty minutes repeating this exercise until finally, he let go a deep sigh. While the experience did nothing to buffer him from the future, he found comfort in the stillness, and in the tomb-like depths of the cavern, which immediately took on an almost holy significance. Here was sanctuary, and shelter in the realest sense; a divine cathedral of rock to soothe the aches and pains of the temporal world.

Dave would visit the place again and again in the weeks that followed, hiking eighteen-mile days for a few precious moments of shelter from the outside world.

It was upon Dave's third visit to the cave that he began to consider and calculate the possibility of leaving his life behind and taking shelter in the inexhaustible wilderness of the North Cascades. Yes, to turn his back on the world was a rash course of action, but what was left for him and Bella down below? Their lives were a smoldering heap of rubble. The only woman Dave ever loved, the only mother Bella would ever know, was two weeks in the grave. And in spite of Bella's naïve insistence, she wasn't coming back. The days of his employment at Terminix were numbered. The prospects for future employment were fraught with unknowns. He was down to nineteen hundred dollars, roughly a third of which would be eaten up by the mortgage payment due in two weeks. Each possibility he contemplated for the future seemed bleaker than the last.

To leave the civilized world behind seemed like a natural extension to the escape Dave had been gradually charting for a decade, a course that had accelerated in recent years. He started tuning out the news cycle before

the last election. He shut down his Facebook account shortly thereafter and taped over the camera on his laptop. He stopped engaging in political discourse of any kind. Eventually, he stopped returning calls, or paying social visits, or attending the occasional Sunday service at Saint Barnabas to appease his mom.

Now, with Nadene in the grave, life in V-Falls had become altogether untenable. Dave no longer wished to be around anybody, except for his daughter. And what was left for a child down there but a world that would likely forsake her, a world that would wring the wonder and humanity right out of her, as it sought to reduce her life force to an algorithm? The modern world held no more promise for Bella than it did for Dave. Reverend Hardy had it wrong: It wasn't third and long. It was fourth and forever. Time to punt.

It only took a matter of days for Dave's unlikely speculations to harden into a conviction; to live in isolation suddenly seemed like an imperative, and the only future he could bear to contemplate. The decision itself proved to be a morale booster. If not hope, it gave Dave's life new purpose and direction. Thus began the six supply runs in two weeks; through the steep canyon and over the wooded saddle, thirty-five hundred vertical feet up the mountain, eighteen miles round trip, a third of it in snow shoes, to town and back, packing sixty and seventy pounds per load: vintage hand tools—two saws, a planer, a drill, a mallet, a hammer, a coffee can full of hardware. Fishing tackle, rods, a pair of Winchesters, .22 and .458 Magnum, a hundred and thirty-six rounds. Skinning knife, nylon rope, parachute cord, binoculars, butane lighters, wooden matches, three flashlights, three headlamps, and five pounds of batteries. Topo maps, bear spray, fire starter, ibuprofen, a first aid kit. A pair of old Coleman lanterns to be used sparingly, three gallons of kerosene, a hatchet, a wedge, a shovel, three pairs of work gloves (two large, one small), two sleeping bags, two inflatable Therm-a-Rests, four wool blankets, four tarps, clothing for all seasons, a transistor radio, and every trip, two or three empty water jugs. Oats, flour, rice, sugar, and books, cumbersome, heavier than tools, awkward, backbreaking books. The least he could do was improve himself with all the time he'd have on his hands. He devoted one whole trip explicitly to the printed word: used books, new books, library

books, children's books, textbooks, medical books, survival books. In two weeks' time, Dave hauled anything and everything a body could think of to survive in the backcountry of the North Cascades.

Almost everything.

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