

Icy Hands

By Hannah Swaim

Trees. All I could see were trees. It could not have been a more perfect day. At such a height, it should have been cloudy and cold. But the weather was gorgeous. I stood out on the ledge as far as my tingling feet would allow and gazed down at the picturesque valleys below me from the summit of Mount Washington.

We climb the mountain as a youth group every year. About fifteen teenagers, including my older and younger brother, and few adult chaperones get together and drive up to New Hampshire and stay the weekend at a friend's house. On Saturday morning, we all get up early and attempt the trek to the top, usually splitting into groups of our own choosing. The weather at the summit of Mount Washington is notoriously erratic. Winds exceeding hurricane force occur on an average of 110 days a year. Until recently, it held the record for surface wind speed of 231 miles per hour. The record low temperature is negative 51 degrees Fahrenheit, with a wind chill of negative 103 degrees. The unpredictability of the weather can make for either a thrilling climb or a very dangerous one.

Just three hours before, I stood 6,288 feet below the summit, looking up at the top of the mountain. Now the positions were reversed and the hard trek had been worth it. I drank up my surroundings, filling my lungs with the pure, crisp air and taking in every new angle. I felt accomplished and alive. Three hours later, things were not quite so perfect. In fact, things were far from it. My body was no longer shaking from a fear of heights but from an even greater fear: the fear of loss.

My friends and I returned to the bottom of the mountain. We felt relieved as we laughed and relaxed on pine benches and waited for the rest of our straggling group to finish. Almost all had come down from the summit. The only ones who had not were my 15-year-old brother Nathan, my dad, and their two friends, Tim and his 17-year-old son Nate. However, we did not worry. We knew they were probably taking their time. A park ranger came by, muttering something about a severe storm at the top, but we dismissed this information. We had no reason to worry. It was 70 degrees and sunny at the bottom and we were on an adrenaline high.

After an hour or two, we began to worry a little bit. Someone suggested we call one of them just to be sure they were okay. I dialed my dad, laughing with my friends as we remembered some of the funny moments of our hike. The phone rang for a minute and then went to voicemail. I did not think that was strange because my dad never picks up his phone. I dialed my brother but also ended up at his voicemail. Now, I began to worry. "Guys, I can't reach them. Can you try Tim or Nate? I don't have their numbers," I said, with an edge of worry in my voice.

Soon, everyone was dialing their numbers, but with no luck. We began to worry more. They must have either all lost their phones, lost service, or something worse. Seeing as the first option was highly unlikely, we all went into a panic. I must have dialed my dad's number 100 times. No one was sitting calmly anymore. We were all pacing and asking the rangers at the bottom and everyone who came off the mountain if they had seen them. No one had any answers, and we were told there was only one thing we could do: wait.

And pray.

We waited, prayed and held each other for six hours. Half of our group was sitting and the rest of us pacing, but all were fixing our eyes on the entrance to the trails. A bright red van pulled around the corner of the road leading up the mountain. It stopped in front of us and two

rangers leapt out of the front doors. They threw open the back doors and shouted something indecipherable in our general direction. All of us stood up at the same moment. After a few seconds of confusion, I realized my dad and brother were in the back of that van. I saw a stretcher come halfway out of the van, with a body wrapped in multiple blankets. I saw a white and blue Nike sneaker peaking out of the end, a shoe that belonged to my dad. I froze.

My older brother whispered the suggestion my mind refused to form. "Dad's dead."

My mind did not want to interpret the scene in front of me. I did the only thing I could. I shut my eyes and shut down my mind. Someone threw his arms around me tightly. I tried to shrug them off, but before I could choke out any words, my dad whispered in my ear, "I thought I would never see you again." My eyes flew open in confusion as he was pulled from my arms much too soon for my fragile emotional self. In disbelief I frantically intertwined my fingers with his until they were torn from mine. His hands were like ice.

As much as we all wanted to go to the hospital, we were told to go home and wait. This seemed as hard as waiting for them at the bottom of the mountain. We all sat up together in the living room at the cabin, holding each other and staring at the floor. We decided not to call home until we knew a final word. We did not want them to worry about something they could not help. The phone rang around midnight. Wordlessly, my older brother held the receiver up to his ear. After a minute of nodding into the phone, he broke into a grin. They were going to be ok.

They were released the next morning, all four with severe cases of hypothermia and trauma. When we brought them home from the hospital, we all gathered in the living room where we had spent the past sleepless night and listened intently as my dad told their story.

"We started off taking Tuckerman's Ravine, but halfway up we decided to be adventurous and take a new trail. All trails are well marked, and we figured we could make it to

the top without a problem. But as we got further up the mountain, the weather took a turn for the worst.” The seemingly-unimportant storm the ranger had whispered about set in faster than any of us could have ever imagined.

“Soon, we couldn’t see more than five feet in front of us. The winds picked up to over 70 miles an hour, the temperature dropped to less than 10 degrees, and it began to snow. We were completely unprepared for such a winter storm, and all we had were our shorts and thin rain jackets.” I involuntarily shivered.

Nathan piped up, “I lost my shoe at one point, but my fingers were too cold to even put it back on. I had to go without it.” My dad nodded, “We decided to settle into the next cave we could find to spend the night. I figured we could get close together and put the boys in the middle, giving them the best chance of survival. But I knew that if we did that, it was almost certain that we wouldn’t have survived.” I got up and sat next to my dad, leaning my head into his shoulder. I needed more comfort than he did. As I glanced around the room, everyone was moved by the story. My emotions could not take much more. I had gone from a climbing high, to thinking I had lost two family members, discovering they were alive, seeing them whisked away in an ambulance, and listening to them retell their wrenching story.

“Nathan refused to give up so easily,” my dad said. “He decided to go on a little bit ahead as one last chance to find the trail. Before I could tell him not to, he had ventured ahead and within seconds disappeared from sight.” I could tell at this point my unshakable dad was losing it. From the look on his face, panic must have seared through my dad’s body when Nathan walked out into the storm. It was just like Nathan to want to be the hero.

My dad said, “I screamed after him. I tried to follow him, but Tim held me back. He told me there was nothing I could do at this point; Nathan was lost. I did not want to hear this. I

refused to hear this. There had to be a way to find him in this storm. I wouldn't give up. I searched around where I had last seen him, only venturing a few feet further before realizing it was hopeless." My dad stopped and began to cry softly. He gripped Nathan's arm. At this point in the story, he had already lost all hope of his own survival. And now he could not even be with his son. I did not know how to handle the emotion displayed openly on my dad's face.

I thought about Nathan and how much he annoyed me. He was stubborn, difficult, and had a superiority complex. But thinking about all my arguments with him, I could not imagine life without them.

Nathan continued where my dad could not. "I know I shouldn't have left the group, but as you can see, it all turns out ok!" We all shook our heads but felt relief at the same time. He said, "I pushed through the snow and the wind. I don't remember feeling anything except cold. I have never been so cold in my whole life. But I knew that I couldn't give up. I was going to fix this."

I figured Nathan was the one who wanted to go to the top no matter what. He told us he ignored the park rangers warning them of danger. He wanted to prove that he could do it. Once again, the entire room shook their heads.

"It's a good thing I kept walking, because I stumbled upon the road only 100 feet away. And exactly at that moment, a ranger van was pulling around the corner. I jumped and waved my arms like crazy and luckily they saw me," Nathan said. "I was able to lead them to the rest of our group, and they brought us back down the mountain."

Tim finished the story by telling how the van worked its way down the mountain and someone called 911 as soon as they had cell service. Once they reached the bottom, the ambulance was waiting to take them to intensive care. At the hospital, the doctor announced they would all be ok, but any longer and they would have had permanent damage. Tim and Nate had

lost feeling in their extremities that would take weeks to return. But none of that mattered because they had survived. Tears of joy and wordless hugs were shared at the end of the story, a story that I would hear countless times afterwards.

Trees. All I could see were trees. I could see straight down through the crystal clear air of the mountain. The weather was perfect. I looked to my left and saw my dad and brother climbing up the last few feet. One year later and everyone had made it to the top, safe and accounted for. At the top, we all huddled together and cried. This time, the tears were of relief and reminiscence. Now I shared the spectacular view with my father's arms around me, his warm fingers intertwined with mine.