

Chapter Thirteen

DEATH COMES IN SMALL PARTS

*A*S MY GENERATION OF OVERLOOK COUSINS GREW UP, our summer hikes grew also. The greatest trips were on the Presidential Range and we'd watch as the trees got smaller and smaller as we climbed until the last of them were squashed into moss and there was only rock and sky in front of us. There was a metal sign about here on every trail, bright yellow with black lettering: *STOP: Weather changes above timberline are sudden and severe. Do not attempt this trail unless you are in good physical condition, well rested and fed, and have extra food and clothing. Turn back at the first sign of bad weather.*

This meant that we were getting into serious territory. We'd always known that people died up on the heights, and now we were up on the heights ourselves. My brother had worked for Joe Dodge for many years; he was on the crew at Madison Spring Hut and I could think of no higher aspiration than to follow in his footsteps. Finally I was old enough to work for Joe myself and there was no doubt in my mind where—I'd work at Madison.

The Gulfside Trail began at the hut and not long after it topped the first crest there was a brass plaque beside the trail. It marked the place where Joe Caggiano died in 1938 and this brought an immediacy to the times of peril

and heroics that I'd never felt before. Up until now, those stories had been stories that someone told and the names were places on the list of fatalities on the wall down in Porky Gulch. Ever since our earliest visits, we'd go over to that list and read all the names again and feel a distant surge of danger, but standing by Joe Caggiano's marker was standing on the very rocks that were in those stories, this death was the closest in both time and distance to our bunks at Madison and we thought about it without really knowing what we were thinking. It would not be long before we became one of the stories ourselves.

RAYMOND DAVIS

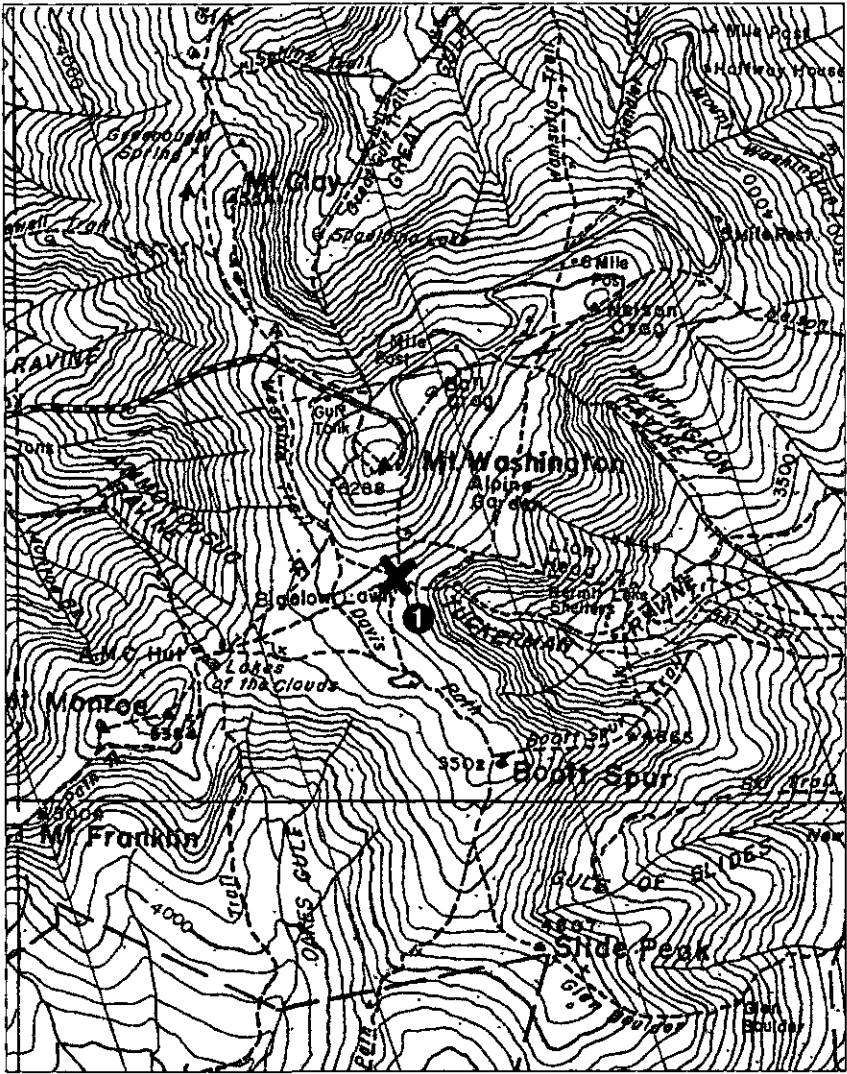
AUGUST 1952

August 23 was a major event in the hutman's calendar. This was a celebration established three years earlier at Lakes of the Clouds Hut when the crew laid on a particularly memorable dinner. It evolved, as social functions tend to do, and by this time it was a sort of moveable feast and provided a convenient occasion for a party to mark the end of the summer season.

That August week in 1952 brought very severe weather. On the twenty-first, clouds thickened steadily on the heights, the wind backed into the southwest and, curiously for that heading, the temperature on the summit of Mount Washington did not rise out of the 40s all day. The upper reaches of the range remained in the clouds all the next day and the wind veered into the northwest and rose from the 20-mph range in the morning to a peak of 71. The temperature settled from a morning high of 46° down to 32°.

Early the next day the trails on Mount Washington and the Northern Peaks were closed to hikers, so extreme a measure than no one could remember such a step being taken before. The wind was out of the west and blew steadily in the 40-60 mph range all day at the observatory and rose to 76 after supper. The summit temperature was nailed at 30° all day, with snow and sleet collecting on the ground.

Bad weather or not, about twenty-five hutmen got to the party in Pinkham Notch. It was always a spaghetti and beer bust, and momentum gathered quickly. Suddenly a young woman appeared. She was wet, muddy, and out of



1. Raymond Davis's route of hike unknown; he died at Tuckerman Junction

breath; she said she was a nurse and a man had collapsed up above Tuckerman Ravine. Her companion, another nurse, had stayed with him.

Joe Dodge's example taught us that there was never a moment of hesitation at times like this, so we put down the spaghetti and the beer and took off up Mount Washington at a trot. The clouds closed in on us, the rain turned to sleet partway up Tuckerman Ravine, then ice was gathering on the rocks. It was the weather those signs warned about and it was tough going, but at nineteen you are not only invincible, you are immortal, and we were all nineteen. When we got to the man, he was dead.

Most of us had never seen death so close and many had never seen death at all, we hadn't learned that when lifeless flesh is pressed, it does not rebound, it does not press back. This man seemed extraordinarily large, too heavy to lift, and we learned the meaning of "dead weight," a weight that doesn't help you at all. We could barely keep our feet as we headed down over the headwall of Tuckerman Ravine; we half-dropped our burden several times and we did drop it several times. Some laughed, saying we should just let him slide down the dizzying slope, he wouldn't mind, and we'd catch up later; others wondered if the spaghetti was getting cold. That, apparently, is what you do when you're at the height of your powers and carrying a dead man you can hardly lift.

Being tall, I was at the downhill end of the load. One of the man's booted feet was flopping right beside my shoulder, just flopping there with an absolute limpness I'd never seen. The nurse who stayed behind said she'd found a prescription for heart medicine in the man's pocket and I kept wondering what he was thinking when he passed the sign telling how the weather changes above timberline are sudden and severe, and how the upper trails are now closed. I wondered if he meant what was going to happen, and I kept looking at the boot laces on the foot flopping on my shoulder. They were tied with a double bow knot and I kept thinking the same thing over and over, that when he tied that bow this morning he was looking forward to the day.

They were beautiful boots, carefully greased for waterproofing and flexibility. All our boots were leather and they were part of us, our link to the ground. Now here was this man's beautiful boot, flopping at my shoulder. Like us, he'd taken out the cloth laces and replaced them with leather, also greased for strength and longevity. I kept looking at the bow knot, thinking

how carefully he'd tied it that morning, so it wouldn't come undone. As it turned out, that was not the weak link.

My friend Chan Murdoch was level with the man's arm and he told me later that all the way down he could only think of how the man's limp elbow kept nudging him as he struggled with the carry, just that persistent mindless nudge. When Chan said that, I realized that we'd both seen our first death in very small parts.

For Joe Dodge, there was other business to attend to. He lived with emergency like his own shadow and he'd led the charge uncounted times. So when we got to the AMC headquarters at the bottom of the trail, Joe made the call. It appeared, however, that the person at the other end of the line insisted on hope. Finally Joe said, "Hell no, lady, it's worse than that. The poor son of a bitch is dead."