

## Descending into the Maelstrom.

*Written by Cave Dog*

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The night was hot. It was humid. Everything was wet, the leaves, the blades of grass, the blackberries, the ground, our bodies, our feet, everything. The night was black and our headlamps lit up the suspended water vapor in the air, rendering them useless. We had to take our lights off and hold them at our knees so that we could see the ground. Even when it was not raining, the condensation was so intense that water rained down from every surface overhead.

Trails that I had traversed just a week ago were now utterly unrecognizable. Usually the trail looks like a two foot wide thin brown line through the woods. Hikers had been trying to walk around the mud, only to cause more mud on the edges with those following skirting ever wider. Now there was a thirty foot swath of deep mud charging relentlessly ahead. Every step was an unknown venture into the depths of the muddy abyss. Sometimes a hidden rock would stop our falling feet. Other times, our legs would plunge in past our ankles or midcalf or even over our knees. Mud would ooze into my shoes and squish between my blistered toes, sore from the deep crevasses formed from four days of soaking conditions. I looked up only to see a cratered landscape of water filled postholes formed by unfortunate souls like myself.

I was hiking with Night Dog through this dismal darkness. Night Dog has an incredible spirit. He is one of those people that gives more of himself than even he knows that he has within him. He is kind, cheerful, and a friend of the highest order. He is a wonderful person to hike with under any circumstance. I was so very glad to have him with me through that night as I began my descent.

Night Dog was charging ahead into this quagmire, pushing with everything he had. His heart is big and has a lot to give. My only mission was to follow his feet. I was beginning to have difficulty with character recognition. I had been here before in the Adirondacks challenge in a lightning storm atop the Dixs at the beginning of the last night. That time, I was alone and feeling it. It took me extra time to look and recognize objects. I was unable to keep up a stiff enough pace under those conditions to keep warm in the storm's downpours and the night's cooling. The crewmember atop South Dix forgot extra clothing and a headlamp and the night wore on me slowly.

Now I was on The Long Trail pushing for another adventure. But this time, I had Night Dog. We were on a twenty two mile hike over Bromely Mountain, up Spruce Peak, past Stratton Pond, and finishing with an ascent and decent of the tallest peak in the region, Stratton Mountain, 3936 feet. I hiked The Long Trail in training and had enjoyed this section very much. It was peaceful, refreshing, and had a nice mix of greens and browns. There are tall peaks with nice views, serene ponds, and lush forests full of life: squirrels, birds, snakes, deer, butterflies, dragonflies.

But my hike this night competed with reason and challenged the higher goals of my object. For some unapparent reason our team was working as extremely dedicated individuals instead of the well oiled team, as I was accustomed. As a consequence, communication seemed crosswise and crewmembers were reinventing the wheel at every turn. The inefficiencies resulted in missed reprovisions in the backcountry.

Missed rendezvous had happened to us before: the Collegiate Peaks in Colorado, Big Indian in the Catskills, and Balsam Gap in the South Beyond 6,000. Each time this happened it was devastating and nearly cut our record attempt short on the spot with just one miss in an entire challenge. But somehow through guts and determination, we persevered and forgot. But one situation, beyond all others, came dangerously close to jeopardizing our efforts. I was missed three times in the same day in the Pemigewasset Wilderness of the White Mountains, all by the same person. I was dangerously dehydrated and low in calories and still hiking in the heat of the day without water and food. I was ready to abandon the effort, if it were not for the heroic multiple twenty plus mile hikes by Yankee Dog to rescue the entire White Mountain attempt. Unfortunately, the day we had expected to be our biggest mileage day, ended up being our shortest.

A missed reprovision has many consequences. Naturally enough, it dehydrates and depletes the system of calories. In such a state, the uphill are painfully draining; you feel light headed; your blood becomes thick and sluggish, and it is extremely difficult to stay awake when sleep deprived. It is also extremely devastating to morale. This sport is much more about the mental game than the physical game. When you feel completely depleted and that nothing is working correctly, it is ten times harder to push through the hard terrain and conditions.

When one is hiking sixty mile back to back days, it is extremely difficult to keep up with fluid and caloric needs. It is nearly impossible to keep up and catch up at the same time. One missed rendezvous can take the rest of the challenge to recover from completely. It would be much better not to have the scheduled reprovision and just take a bit more weight to cover the distance without assistance. However, when one is trying to break records, you trim everything possible to push the limits. It is the nature of the game. It is not everyone's game. In fact, it is very few people's game; but it is my game.

In the end, during The Long Trail Record challenge, I did not have support crew in the backcountry where I was expecting them in nine separate locations. Many times I had to hike five or more miles without any food and water in very hot and humid conditions. In normal situations, this would be terrible, but in this situation it is disastrous. Hiking up Clark, Mayo, and Bolton completely depleted of glycogen, my blood was so thick that my heart was pounding double time and double strength, and the muscles of my entire body were screaming with pain from their tissues eating each other for calories. This was enough for me to call it all off right there. But there was AlpineSummit Dog running up the trail with his injured big toe near Harrington's View to bail me out. Plunging ahead, on Duxbury Road, I pounded down as much pasta as my knotted digested tract could take and sucked down AlpineSummit Dog's ice cream bars with delight. Not yet feeling

recovered, I charged up the hardest section in the entire course, up and over Camel's Hump and Burnt Rock, the best I could while feeling completely depleted.

By this point, I was voicing much more strongly that backcountry support needed to get it together or forget it. Not accustomed to being in this position, this confounded me. My message seemed to be getting through too well. From famine to feast, backcountry support were reaching their rendezvous locations hours before reason. The team member that missed me on Nebraska Notch was so distraught he turned around and spent fourteen hours atop Ellen, just to make sure there was no way I could out run him. This was a touching display of remorse and commitment to the cause. But it also took that crewmember away from being able to help out in other areas for a long time.

Unfortunately, more difficulties arose and now I was in my final night hike with Night Dog, pushing the tempo to catch up to record pace. Going into this night, I was low on calories, hydration, and sleep. I tried to sleep for ninety minutes the first night to no avail, succeeded with ninety minutes on the second night, sixty on the third, and now in the final night there was no more time left for sleeping, only pushing. Night Dog pushed and I followed. But by the time we reached the top of Spruce Peak, my character recognition started to become delayed. In such terrible conditions of darkness and foul weather, recognizing rocks, mud, and blowdowns can be very difficult. However, with delayed character recognition it becomes scarily comical. Unless you are looking directly at an object, your mind lets your imagination fill in the gaps of its slow recognition. In your peripheral vision, you see pickups, signs, tables, houses, or whatever comes to mind. You look at them directly and you see them for what they are: trees, rocks, mud, roots. I have only been in this state a couple of times and I hate it. But I am willing to continue on because I am completely aware of place and time and able to make reasoned decisions. The delay in recognizing peripheral or fleeting objects is annoying but does not affect my ability to see where I am going or stepping.

This night was different. Delayed peripheral character recognition was happening more often and to a greater degree. I also had temporary lapses in remembering why I was out there. I would start to think I was doing something else and slow down.

Night Dog was there to keep me oriented. However, this was a hard night. We walked up streams that used to be trails. We traversed the depths of bogs that used to be forest floors. We waded through the thick foggy air that rendered little visibility. Night Dog pushed and all I could see were his feet. Ever churning out the footsteps, he plunged forward with a conviction I have seldom seen before. Splash, splash, splash, plop, plop, plop, swish, swish, swish, splash, splash, splash, Night Dog kept going relentlessly. Every step was a splattering adventure. We never could be sure to what depth our feet would plunge and what surface would be hard enough to stop its descent.

In addition, I was barely able to stop the descent of my own condition. As we pushed on, our next reprovision was at Stratton Pond, just before ascending Stratton Mountain. We drank up and ate everything before reaching the pond and were now in desperate need of more supplies. Lo and behold, Stratton Pond proved to be yet one more miss. The

torture was deep, it was so very deep. My blood sugar was so low I could barely stand. I was having more and more trouble remembering that I was in competition. So, we did what we had to do: we plunged forward to scale Stratton without supplies. Little did I know that this would be the beginning of a very long and tedious downward spiral, churning my mind over and over into the oblivion of other worlds and consciousnesses like a slow but deep maelstrom.

I assured Night Dog that Stratton was no big deal. I had hiked Stratton just a week ago. In training, I flew up and enjoyed a limited view because of fog atop the fire tower. It seemed like nothing at the time, nothing like some of the big peaks up north. "No problem, we will charge up and then it is all downhill to the next road crossing support."

My god, the mountain grew before our very eyes. We fought for every step; yet, our steps did not seem to be getting us any closer. We dug; we scrapped, we clawed our way forward with what was left of our wasted forms. Ages were created and ages died as we relentlessly and indefatigably pursued the stars above on this stairway into the sky. I recounted every hundred vertical feet of our progress. One hundred feet never came so slowly. Each passing hundred feet felt like an incredible achievement. Our bellies ached for nutrients. Our mouths were parched for fluids. The night's darkness crawled through our being.

Indeed, we did make the top just as the sun began to show signs of rising. Atop we found a caretaker, a real gentleman. He instantly recognized us as the fellows that were going for The Long Trail Record. He offered us water. Trying to not look greedy, we drank it ravenously and got more. I sat down on a rock and began to realize that my world was taking a new form. Everything seemed surreal, somehow glossed over.

Night Dog was ecstatic. We did it. We scaled Stratton despite the layers of obstacles laid out before us. There was still time to beat the record. He told me to leave him and run like the wind. Go for it. Do not stop until you have that record. We got through the much tougher night, all you have now is daylight. How little did either of us realize my deteriorating condition. The lack of supplies could not be compensated for now with so little time left. But Night Dog's enthusiasm was as infectious as always.

I ran. I bounded. I flew down that trail. I jumped off rocks. I felt the wind at my face. I was going to make it. I felt great.

It seemed to take much more time than was reasonable. As the minutes wore on, I began to realize that this was a foolhardy endeavor. With forty miles to go, less than 14 hours left on the clock, and my deteriorated condition, it seemed unreasonable to hope for a record breaking effort. When I reached Groove Dog at the Stratton-Arlington Road, I told him it was useless at this point. He rose up to the situation. He enthusiastically responded that yes I had to keep up a stiff pace but that it was well within my abilities. He laid out his Groove Dog passion. There were only two miles to the next road crossing. So, I decided that there was no need to decide now. I could do the next short

section and make up my mind before going into the next twenty mile section over Glastenbury Mountain.

I slipped far in my descent on this short trail. I quickly began to hallucinate. I have never hallucinated before and I never want to again. Period. It was awful. I will never know what really happened on that trail. There were so many people and I think at least two were actually real. Two nice ladies helped point me in the right direction of travel. Everything seemed real but it just could not have been real. I made it about half a mile when I realized that I was in a serious situation. The game was over. I was entering a different world and one for which I wanted no part. I sat down dejected, whipped, hungry, thirsty, exceedingly sleepy, but strangely not tired. I had lots of energy but my mind was failing. I sat down, laid down, and slept.

I woke up disoriented. I knew where I was but only had a hunch as to which way to go. I floundered around a bit and the two nice ladies came by. I asked which way to go. They affirmed that I was correct in my assumptions and left. My immediate goal was to get out of the forest. The closest way was back where I had come. Unfortunately no one was there. Groove Dog was on the other side of the trail. It was a mile and a half, three times as far, but I knew that I would be taken care of there. Since I was still going in the direction of Massachusetts, I decided to run like I was still going for the record and soon felt I was. I made it another mile before my world began to descend once more. I laid down and slept again.

This time I woke up completely out of touch of which way I came from and which way I should be going. I made my best guess and began to saunter down the trail. It took a long time but eventually I made it to the end at USFS Road 71.

Night Dog and Burns Dog were there waiting and worried. I had taken an hour and forty minutes to hike only two miles. Groove Dog had taken one of the cars to try to figure out why I was taking so long. He would soon return.

I explained that it was no longer possible for me to break the record. Burns Dog jumped into action and explained in his plain logic that I only needed to keep up a 3.149 mile pace. This may be a tough pace over the whole course but pushing for the finish, this was well within my limits. He was right and I could not deny it. I had lots of energy left. I could run the rest of the way, if I had wanted. I was at a place that I had never been before and did not fully understand. Everything seemed real and I could not say for certain that it was or not. I felt good especially now that I had a chance to get some more food and drink. Their logic seemed undeniable. I told them okay, I will continue but only if someone goes with me because I am now having difficulty determining what is real and unreal. You would not believe how many times I would later be praying that I had left The Long Trail right there on USFS Road 71.

Night Dog was beat from his valiant hike through the night. Groove Dog had to get home to work. Burns Dog had been one of two support crewmembers to twist his ankle during the challenge. However, he volunteered to keep me going, anyway. The

sacrifices that everyone on the team makes run deep. Burns Dog should have been on his back with his swollen foot up. Yet, now he was taking one for the team. We set out at a good pace and maintained it for many miles. But it became clear that I could go faster and there seemed no reason for me to be holding back when there was a record to catch. So, eventually I ran out ahead.

This section up Glastenbury would start one of the strangest and most intense out of body experiences one can imagine. Everything began to seem like I was watching television. Everything was flat and unreal. My ability to feel my surroundings was quickly becoming limited. There were no smells. Sounds seemed distant. Eventually I could only feel with my hands and my mouth. Then pain disappeared.

Hucksters were all about and at one point I was the best rock jumper in the world, astounding the masses with my inhuman ability to jump from one rock to the next on the trail at great distances. I could run up hills with amazing speed and agility. Soon I had gained the power to change the trail. For some reason, I only wanted to go uphill. If I concentrated just right anytime the trail dipped down, I could will it back uphill again.

But my new powers soon made me bored. I would sit down along the trail. Eventually Burns Dog would catch back up with me. He would immediately tell me to drink. But I no longer needed water, food, or even air. Not wanting to hurt his feelings, I would take the tiniest of sips. Amazingly, the fluids felt real. Nothing else seemed real but the cold energy drink felt distinct to my lips. We would soon move down the trail again. But I was faster and would lose him again, only to enter new worlds and situations beyond explanation.

Burns Dog and I were yo yoing. I would take off at lightning speed. Then he would find me sitting in the trail in deep thought, only for me to take off again and for him to catch me again. He said that Sugar Dog was up ahead at the Caughnawaga Shelter. Getting to Sugar Dog became my new fascination. I tried to will her around each corner but she never came. I began to ache for her. Where was she? I needed Sugar Dog. It was taking forever and I could not understand why I could not conjure her up.

Eventually, we got her on the radio and soon in person at the appointed shelter. I could feel her with my hands. She was real. She asked what I wanted like all the support crewmembers do when I arrived. She was astounded when I said that I did not need anything. She said I had to drink, so I drank. She said I had to eat, so I ate. Burns Dog fixed up my next fanny pack of food and fluids. Yet, he could not figure out which pack was the new full one and which was the old spent one because they looked the same. I laid down and was content. Sugar Dog said that I needed to get going. This struck me. In all of my challenges no one has ever had to tell me that I needed to get going. So, Burns Dog and I got up and headed out again. My descent was now falling faster.

Soon I no longer felt that this was reality but a bizarre dream and I did not like it. I was no longer living the dream. I was living in a dream. I spent a lot of time contemplating reality and dream. Could some of what I saw be real and others not. I decided that

nothing was real and little mattered in this world. I could now hike with my eyes closed, but not for very far. But I got bored with that game. I scrapped a swath of flesh from my calf on a passing rock. It did not hurt. In fact, I kept expecting to look down and find the dripping blood gone.

Sitting atop Glastenbury pondering the farther reaches of the soul and mind, Burns Dog caught up with me again. I mulled over why it was that he kept catching up with me. Somehow everything seemed strangely real when he was around. Was he in fact real? I bet he was real. I decided that I would no longer hike out in front. I would make sure that he was always ahead and present.

As we found our way down Glastenbury, I became less and less interested in the task at hand. I let Burns Dog figure out everything. But I would help him. When he was distraught that he could not find any blazes on the south side of Glastenbury, I conjured up an old blaze straight out of my mind. Time was slipping ever so slowly by.

Eventually we caught up with my brother, Rad Dog, at an overlook with about seven miles to go before hitting the next road crossing, Route 9. Rad Dog was pumped. We are going to make it. There is just enough time. When you start sprinting for the finish, the record will fall. Off running he went and I followed. But the trail was becoming exceedingly tedious. I was beginning to wonder why it was that he wanted me to follow him. How could a dream be so deathly boring? On and on, we went and I just could not understand why. Geologic time moved faster than this. I am through. I searched for ways to wake myself up to no avail. My descent took a precipitous fall now that I was nearing the center of the maelstrom.

And then it began to rain and pour and the skies pounded with thunder. The sky was like a vertical torrent, as if Zeus dropped the hatch and let it all out at once. Drenched to the bone, I was shivering even though it was quite hot out.

With the terrible weather conditions, I was now entering new worlds beyond my comprehension. For some reason the masses wanted me to descend this mountain then ritualistically scale this colossal spiral mountain sized temple and place a piton atop the apex. But I was done. I knew neither how far I had come nor how far I had to go. I had no idea of how much time was left on the race clock. All I knew was that I was utterly finished with this ridiculousness. I would descend this mountain but that was it. In fact, I would rather end this dream right here, right now. I kept looking at my brother and kept thinking, "Why? Just stop!" With a mile to go my pace slowed dramatically. My brother was beginning to tell jokes to try to inspire me to continue to push ahead. But I was done and it was obvious. He used Split Rock as a landmark to push towards. We would go a little ways and stop. It was tediously slow and I did not care. For the first time in my life, I just did not care. This existence was nothing but torture, mind numbing tedious torture at that. We painfully pushed forward.

I was shivering so he radioed down to Sugar Dog to hike up with a fleece and raincoat. Sugar Dog was somewhere down there. She was all that I wanted. All would be well

when Sugar Dog arrived. My brother started to sing, anything to cut the terrible situation. Rain continued to pound us and lightning continued to fall. Where was Sugar Dog? She said that she would be right up. Time had a different dimension now. It fluttered ever so slowly forward. I do not like to sing but I could not resist myself with joining my brother. It almost sounded beautiful in some sort of warped way. We sang and we sang. With every large object, I asked my brother if it was Split Rock. No. No. No. Where was Sugar Dog? How could it take her so long. Is that Split Rock? No. Is that Split Rock? No. My brother was amazingly patient with me. How far is it to Split Rock? It should not be too far. I sat down. The situation was rapidly deteriorating as I entered the center of the maelstrom, where the mind spins the fastest. I would not again stand up with my own power.

These challenges are about living the dream. They are about being free. They are about attempting something unique and exceptional. They are about pushing the limits of the human experience. They are about challenging the soul and rising to the height of mountains. They are about inspiring others to live their dreams as you live yours. These challenges have been immensely rewarding. I have gotten the rare opportunity to intensely study one mountain range and forest after another. I have met amazing people that are active and taking on interesting projects. I have been introduced to numerous American subcultures across the lands. I have spent enormous amounts of time in fabulously beautiful areas. I have experienced some of my highest and lowest moments during these challenges, memories that are mine to the end of my days. I love these challenges.

But now I was way beyond all of this. I was way over the edge and falling and hating every last bit of it. Life was now tenuous and I could not care. I did not care about winning or losing. I did not care about beauty or harmony. I did not even care about life or death. All I cared for was seeing Sugar Dog. She was my only beacon in the dark forest. She was all that I had left.

I wished deep into the recesses of my being that I had called it off at USFS Road 71. It baffles me now how I could have been talked into proceeding again. It just seems utterly unfathomable. I was in states that I had never been before. I did not understand them. I was blind to the regression that I was in the middle of descending. This is not what I am about. This is not why I do these challenges. This is absolutely insane because I was going insane. It was not worth it. It was absolutely not worth it.

I have turned around shy of my goal so many times in the past. During my climbs of Colorado Fourteeners, I turned around thirty five times because of lightning alone. During my month long solo in Glacier National Park under winter conditions, I turned around a half dozen times. Why I missed the boat home this time, I will never know. It is like what we used to say in Colorado, "Them there mountains ain't goin' no wheres." What I can say is that now that I have been there and back, I know the signs and I do not plan to ever go into the depths of the deep spiraling abyss ever again. I do not have a death wish. I am a lover of life in all its beautiful forms.

Sugar Dog found me just below Split Rock sitting in the trail with Rad Dog trying to convince me to continue. She gave me a kiss. I could feel it. It felt so incredible, smooth and delightful. It had been such a long time since I could perceive any external stimuli with any certainty. I felt so relieved. With a helping hand, I immediately got up and announced that we need to get off this mountain. I was now having difficulty using my limbs. With an arm around Rad Dog and another around Sugar Dog, we crept down the trail. As we made our way down I leaned more and more upon their shoulders. Sometimes they would have to move my legs for me because I could not seem to move them around all of the big rocks. The trail was not always three wide; so, Sugar Dog fell back but as long as we held hands I would continue. I could feel her hand, so warm and unblemished. It was my only portal into this world. The other worlds that I passed through were far far away. It would take an eternity and a bit longer but slowly and surely we made it down. As we neared the bottom, Sugar Dog left to move the car closer to the trail. I went completely limp and closed my eyes. I was done. Thor's hammer was pounding the cumulonimbus anvils with a vengeance now. Everything was saturated from the persistent downpours. I asked for big strong Sea Dog to come up and carry me off of this mountain. Rad Dog explained that Sea Dog did not come for this challenge. I asked for Good Dog and he appeared in a flash. As we approached the car, Sugar Dog was back. I opened up my eyes and was strangely happy.

I would spend the next couple hours babbling incoherently in soft tones while downing Ensures and pizza slices. The meat lover's pizza was exquisitely scrumptious, better than the sweetest candy. I would go to bed at 11:30 PM. I slept hard and woke up at 4:30 AM completely normal and full of energy, ready to climb a mountain. I rolled over and Sugar Dog was awake. I looked deep into her eyes and announced with conviction, "I am back."

-Cave Dog