

Broken Watches

A close call on the Sharkstooth in Rocky Mountain National Park causes the author to reflect on loss—in the mountains and out.

By Kristan Uhlenbrock | August 22nd, 2020

Perched about 300 feet above the scree, I grab a flake to maneuver over it, and it moves. “This is loose, be careful when you come up,” I yell. Glancing down to my partner, Aaron, his lanky frame leaning out like a tree growing at an obtuse angle from the rock, I catch his eyes fixed on me. His feet planted solid as roots.

I reach around, find a hold, and daddy-long-leg over. Needing a place for my trailing foot, I set my heel on the top edge to stabilize. The faint pressure under my heel dissolves, and the flake peels away without a sound.

Time slows. I see death open his shadowy, tattered cloak to reveal a liner dripping with pocket watches—watches that were once part of my working collection.

III

Sharkstooth—a jagged spire ripping 12,000 feet out of the earth, forming an angled, razor pyramid. A slight curve to the 1,000-foot face feels sinister, as though it would just as easily cut you to pieces as ignore your passage.

The afternoon before, we had hopped-skipped the glacial erosion of Loch Vale in Rocky Mountain National Park and picked our way through a debris field to The Gash—a half mile of scree slopes, monster boulders and running water, all part of the traverse to the base of Sharkstooth. Celebrating our one-year wedding anniversary, Aaron and I were eager to spend a night among the stars and be early on the rock.



Approaching the Sharktooth, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Photo: Courtesy of Kristan Uhlenbrock.

It's easy to see a storm roll in. The dark blanket that lies along every surface and the heavy clouds that draw a low ceiling across the sky paint a sense of urgency. Smell, on the other hand, signals the storm has arrived. The moist heaviness fills your nostrils with a metallic tinge.

We were still a quarter of a mile from our bivy spot when the wind tore through the valley, and cold, grape-sized rain drops smacked us, turning into a downpour compounded with hail and crackling lightning that ricocheted off the mountain faces. We strung a rainfly between two boulders, thankful to have ignored the ranger's rule against bringing any sort of "erected shelter or supported tarp." We huddled under it, stripped off our wet clothes, and climbed inside sleeping bags as the temperature dropped below freezing.

The storm chased the setting sun over the ridge. A clear sky tailgated the two. Quiet settled into every corner of the valley and along my tense spine. I slipped into calm, a post-adrenaline reconciliation. But a deep, growing rumble broke my reverie. I craned my head from under the canopy to witness a fleet of rocks the size of train cars accelerating down the face across the valley, white smoke trailing it the whole length of the wall. Wind pulling up tendrils to distort the night's stars.

VI

What seems like every other week, I read about the loss of climbing greats and hear warnings given by those who've lost someone. Their stories are stark reminders of the danger of the mountains. Without knowing the people, I can only imagine these deaths in the abstract.

I have experienced death, however, in other parts of my life. My stepfather. My father. My best friend. My uncle. Concrete, sudden, and unexpected. Cherished pocket watches that stopped working too early and often under circumstances where the mechanical insides seem to have been smashed rather than worn out.

People deal with death in their own particular ways. Some may cry, mourn and go through the various stages of grief: seek counseling, visit gravestones, carry pictures in their wallets. Then there are some who close the cover of a watch and put it in a pocket with plans never to check the time again. And while this works for months and years, the watch forgotten, it'll occasionally tick, causing you to slip a hand in the pocket and pull it out, shocked that you own a watch. You flip open the cover only to realize it's broken. Broken pocket watches still retain beauty, such as ornate Celtic shields, though they have rusted hinges and other flaws. Despite best intentions to ponder what these timepieces gave or took from you, you tuck them back away. Never quite sure what caused the tick.

IX

Aaron's crystal blue eyes lock on the table-sized, teardrop-shaped falling rock. Tethered to the anchor, he leans to the right as the grey fragment spins by in an arabesque, brushing his arm. Rock shards shoot in every direction, booming echoes resonate deep in our bones, and a sulfur smell permeates the air.

He is the first to break our harmonic yelling of, "Rock!" His eyes shift from down to up.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Are you okay?" I respond.

"Build an anchor and come down," he says. "Let's bail."

I turn my attention back to the rock, scouting for the nearest placement. Ten more feet and I'm able to slide a nut into a constriction. I mean to come down but need to keep going. Without looking back, I clip and move up.

XII

Two months later, rocking atop a small unsteady boulder on the ground, a tawny rope at my feet, I fluctuate between focused and foggy. Every fifth breath shudders my whole body, my lungs; my brain grasps for oxygen. My face and chest are sopping paper towels on the verge of ripping open.

Aaron's lips move but I hear nothing.

We are back at home on the East Coast climbing up a 50-foot corner made up of chockstones and slabby moves, a puny route at Buzzard's Rock where I first learned to plug gear years ago. Halfway up, I lost my mental game. Every hold I grabbed or piece I placed moved or sounded hollow.

[\[Read stories from John Long, the master himself, here!\]](#)

After the near miss on Sharkstooth, we kept climbing and ended up summiting. A few weeks after that, in the Wind Rivers, I dealt fine with a sketchy multi-pitch rappel situation. But somehow on this single pitch romp, I shatter.

"You have to talk to me," Aaron says, crouching in front of me.

Deep creases pile up from his eyebrows to his helmet. I fixate on his skin-tone mole below the right cheekbone, my familiar waypoint between soft and scruff. He puts his hand on my knee, and I hear a tick.

It took almost losing my loved one to wake up to having lost other loved ones. The breakdown on Buzzard's Rock revealed my inclination to ignore death, or close encounters. Sharkstooth was the force that initiated my awareness. It just manifested months later.

Now I keep my watches close at hand, remembering to look at them on occasion.

Comments and Armchair Critique: