



Kids gone wild

There's a new movement out there to get children into nature

BY BRUCE GRIERSON

A huge—and I mean huge—black bear walked right past the car as I was loading my infant daughter into the back seat. It was in no particular hurry. It had emerged from the forest and was cutting through our driveway en route to the dumpster near the elementary school, where it would poke around and then hang a left back into the wild. We both watched it recede. At 300 feet it still looked pretty big. Lila was curious but not frightened: it occurred to me that living among bears—not to mention coyotes and the odd cougar—is normal for her now. And that's a good thing, I think.

"You know why I like it here?" my wife

explained to someone not long after we'd moved to this little townhouse complex, high on the flank of Vancouver's North Shore mountains. "Because the only predators you have to worry about have four legs. And I'll take those over the two-legged kind any day."

In a sense the decision was made for us. We'd been priced out of the city itself. Driven into the 'burbs. But Upper Lynn Valley doesn't really feel like the 'burbs. It feels like a subalpine redoubt, the kind of place where you hide from the law or cook up a new religion. Walk a few hundred feet from our front door and you are out of civilization. You're in wilderness that continues

for 2,000 kilometres, until the boreal forest peters out into tundra. We have a couple of preschool-aged daughters. We figured up here they could run around and climb trees and burn off steam and breathe good air. And we wouldn't have to worry about them being greased by a taxicab or solicited by a deve in a raincoat on the way to school. It was really as simple as that.

We didn't realize that we had become part of a global crusade, led by people with lofty philosophical aims and reams of scientific data behind them, to "reconnect children with the outdoors." It's not a trivial issue. If we do this right, the argument goes, kids will be happier, healthier and smarter. And if we don't? Well, not just those kids, but the whole planet is screwed.

Willie Sutton once famously said he robbed banks "because that's where the money is." Kids stay indoors these days for a similar reason: because that's where the electrical outlets are. Until recently, when moms pulled the plug after the third or fourth hour of TV and frogmarched the kids out into the sunshine, they rarely had persuasive reasons for doing so, short of vaguely moralistic ones. ("You're wasting your life, buster!") Now they do. It turns out that hanging out among snails and lichen, building stick-forts and floating stuff down streams, awakens the brain in a way that no artificial environment can match.

Watching too much TV is disjunctive to the way our wetware evolved. Our brains were built to process sensory input from all sides, to focus our attention in tight and then pull back for a global sense of where we are. If we deprive ourselves of that global input, we theoretically become vulnerable to an affliction the writer Richard Louv calls "Nature Deficit Disorder." I know. It has a cheesy ring to it, like "halitosis" or "social-anxiety disorder"—terms concocted to sell mouthwash or Prozac. But Louv is a careful researcher and has no ulterior motive except maybe to sell his own book, *Last Child in the Woods*, which was published four years ago and won last year's Audubon medal. So persuasive has Louv's book been that it has launched a movement with a catchy, Bush-beating moniker: No Child Left Inside.

Last Child leans heavily on Harvard

anthropologist E.O. Wilson’s “biophilia” hypothesis: that there’s a powerful, important bond between human beings and other living systems, and we sever it at our peril. But Louv is making more noise than Wilson ever did on the subject because of his impeccable timing, right at the convergence of two crises—mental and physical health problems in kids, and the dire health of the planet. The two problems are said to be related, in the following sense: the more unhealthily detached kids become from the natural world, the less they’ll feel the urge to take on the job of saving us from ourselves.

Environmental psychologists are now piling onto the scrum, and all kinds of fascinating data is emerging. For instance:

When you build real nature—rocks and trees—into school playgrounds, kids seem to behave more civilly to each other. When

forest school drumbeat is at least audible, and ground zero for its development may be Vancouver.

Tricia Edgar has been intrigued by the forest school idea for years. Edgar works at the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre, a resource so fabulous it actually influenced our decision to move where we did. (The centre’s children’s programs are amazingly inventive. One afternoon I tagged along with a kids’ group and learned to identify all the edible berries in the region. Sneaky tip: you can recognize salal because if you turn the leaf upside-down you can make a fake beard and moustache out of it.) Edgar and her staff teach the ecology program to countless kids in the North Vancouver school system, and they give workshops to adults on how to teach outdoor education.

Edgar is among a small group in the Van-

In the U.S., there are already a handful of “Forest Kindergartens” where four- and five-year-old kids spend all day outside, rain or shine, year-round, making toys out of “nature’s loose parts”

kids have played outside for awhile, they concentrate better in school and perform better. When a kid with attention deficit disorder has gone camping or fishing, his symptoms diminish. It’s tempting to object that—*Aha*—it’s just the exercise they’re getting that’s responsible for the brain boost. But that’s not true. Because, as University of Michigan researchers recently proved, a 45-minute walk in the forest increases cognitive performance, whereas a 45-minute walk through the downtown does not.

The movement is gaining a real foothold in the U.S. The National Forest Service and the National Wildlife Federation there are now humming with well-funded initiatives to return kids to nature. There are even a handful of “Forest Kindergartens”—based on the European model of *Waldkindergartens* or “wild kindergartens”—where four- and five-year-old kids spend *all day* outside, rain or shine, year-round, working co-operatively to boil up pretend soups out of leeks or berries, making toys out of what Louv calls “nature’s loose parts,” and sometimes napping on couches made of sticks and mud.

Us? Well, we’re a little behind. But the

couver area that has been trying to rustle up interest in the forest school concept. Personally, the idea strikes me as pretty radical, but Edgar believes the basic premises are sound, and she’s working toward weaving them into the school programs.

There’s very little actual “teaching” in *Waldkindergarten*—kids figure stuff out on their own, with minimal structured oversight. That’s Edgar’s approach, too. For younger kids, the centre has an outing called the Five Senses. “You go out into the forest and you don’t try to put labels on things,” says Edgar. “You just pay attention.” Let’s say the kids are coming up to a creek. They can hear the distant burble. As they get closer their focus closes on the water they can now see, on the log across it, on the bug on the log. The toggling back and forth between short thoughts and long thoughts is exactly what scientists say the brain was evolved to do.

“We have kids who are very urban, so even walking on the forest floor is unusual for them,” Edgar says. “We go to the creek and they’re afraid of touching the water. So you give them the experience in graduated steps.” Edgar says those inner-city kids put the forest experience in the only context

they know: video games. “It was cool,” they will later report. “It was just like the *Jurassic Park* video.”

My pal Drew has long been a model to me of how you do this kids-in-nature thing right—and why you do it.

Drew’s own family vacations, growing up, were classic mainstream fare: one week each summer his family would do a little car camping, of the sort where upon arrival dad deployed the lawn chair and the newspaper and radio and “basically reproduced our living room” in the campground. “I wouldn’t say my own strategy now is a reaction against that,” he told me recently, “but I do remember thinking, even as a kid: *There’s gotta be another way.*” Drew’s other way looks like this: you take your kids into the wild places you yourself would like to explore. With one or

key to developing lifelong environmental consciousness: early and “vivid” exposure to the wild, and a mentor figure to help them understand it all. The outings don’t have to be extreme, just memorable. The mentor doesn’t have to be an expert, just enthusiastic.

It worked. Their girls, Zoe and Téa, are totally green kids. They’re the kind who push for the school to adopt a watershed or improve the recycling program. They’re horrified by SUVs. Drew recently sold the family car and joined a car-share. For some near-teens, the prospect of no wheels in the driveway would qualify as a hardship worthy of UN intervention. But far from objecting, Zoe and Téa “were all over it.”

I asked Drew what other benefits he’s seen.

“Well, I can think of at least two,” he said. “The trips are definitely part of our shared

People become environmentalists not by sitting inside watching Al Gore videos but by having a powerful experience while out *in* nature. For kids, the outings don’t have to be extreme, just memorable

both of his kids in diapers, he and his wife, Daphne, roared off-piste, on multi-day adventures in the Australian outback or the Gulf Islands. They canoed the Bowron Lakes circuit: adults in back, kids lily-dipping up front. They cycled the old Kettle Valley Railway trail one summer when forest fires were ravaging the B.C. Interior. (While they were on the trail the winds shifted and the fire closed in, and the air smelled like smoke, and they ended up with flames almost licking at their heels, burning down those historic trestles just days after Drew’s family crossed them.) This summer they’re planning another canoe trip on a chain of B.C. lakes in a remote provincial park that happens to be home to one of the densest concentrations of grizzlies in the world.

Without knowing it, Drew and Daphne crafted a perfect Petri-dish culture for growing bright, good stewards of the land. People become environmentalists, all the studies show, not by sitting inside watching Al Gore videos but by having a powerful experience while actually out there *in* nature. Drew and Daphne intuited precisely the two components that researchers at Cornell and the University of Colorado recently revealed are

experience as a family, and we’re determined to keep doing them as long as the kids will hang in there with us. Every trip had its low and high moments, and for sure it all brought us closer together.

“The other thing is that the girls are less fearful in nature than a lot of other kids are. Zoe is downright fearless in terms of not being squeamish about picking up a worm or a bug. I think that’s a good skill that can translate—whether it’s to public speaking or whatever else.”

There’s a further benefit. Drew didn’t mention it, but Tricia Edgar had.

“What are you going to do, where are you going to go, in your mind, when you’re stressed out in later life?” she asked, rhetorically. “If you make positive associations with nature early, then you can draw from that well, wherever you are. You can summon that scene and calm yourself down. And because you spent so much time there you can vividly evoke it, right down to the scent of the trees and the sound of the wind.”

It’s not a bad thing to have at your disposal. No matter how old you are. **e**

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Why do I get so lost?

Our directionally challenged correspondent searches for an answer

BY BRUCE GRIERSON

Let me tell you a few things about my relationship with the points of the compass, and then we'll jump right to the meat of this thing.

At shopping malls, my eldest daughter frequently has to tell me where we parked. She is five.

Once, while visiting Paris, I went out for a jog and got disoriented. Eventually I saw a police officer on patrol, and I pulled from my shoe the address where we were staying. "Ah," he said, nodding. "You want to go back to Paris."

On a quest many years ago to climb the highest mountain on Vancouver Island, a pal and I got so lost in the wilderness that there was no turning back, because it just wasn't clear which way back was. It wasn't clear where forward was, either,

except that we'd seen a plane fly in over the ridge ahead, presumably dropping off other climbers, so we went that way, even though we were out of food and water and gas for the stove. (And did I mention my pal was bleeding from a head wound?) It was a long shot but—don't you see?—it was the only shot, because that slot in the horizon the plane had dropped behind was our lone landmark.

I am like Captain Peter "Wrong Way" Peachfuzz on the old *Rocky and Bullwinkle* show, who was so navigationally inept that the crew kept him on a fake bridge, with dummy instruments, so that he'd think he was in charge while the ship was in fact being steered by real controls elsewhere. My instincts are almost *reliably* wrong—which is as good as them being reliably

right. Because you can then take a "gut" reading and—Hello Cleveland!—go do the opposite.

I tell you this not as a pathetic cry for help, or a claim to a perverse kind of pride, but to try to understand: Why does a sense of direction vary so wildly in people?

My own case by no means defines the low ground. There is a woman in my home town of Vancouver—I can't tell you who because she's only described, not named, in the medical journal *Neuropsychologia*—who suffers from an actual pathology called "Developmental Topographical Disorientation." That's the term coined by the cognitive psychologist Giuseppe Iaria. He studies how lesions and other brain damage can make our internal compasses go wonky. But this woman is different. She's 43, and in most ways fully functioning—she can watch TV and read the newspaper and even get to or from work so long as she doesn't deviate one iota from her regular route. But she can also get lost on the way home from the bus stop. She really can't be trusted on the streets alone. This woman seems to have developed a bug in the hippocampus. She can't make and store accurate mental images of her environment.

This kind of impairment is vanishingly rare, but it does make you wonder. Are those of us with more moderate symptoms different in kind or just degree? In other words, is there a genetic component to this?

My father, in the Second World War, was a navigator in the elite RAF Pathfinder squadron, and he steered a Lancaster bomber unerringly on missions over the Ruhr. His mother was so spatially adept she played Scrabble looking at the board upside down, and she hosed me at the game on her hundredth birthday when I was in my cognitive prime. If there is a heritable component to good mental map-making, then I somehow ran between the raindrops.

In fact, the genetic stuff is more provocative than it is convincing. We usually hear that men—trusted so often to pack and to drive because of their superior "spatial" sense—are better born navigators than women. But there isn't a whole lot of supporting evidence. (Though, as University of Alberta psychologist Ed Cornell found

in his studies, men tend to *think* they're better navigators. And emboldened, they charge off into the business of getting themselves unlost more quickly, if not necessarily more accurately.)

The British cognitive biologist Qazi Rahman has proposed that gay men and women are worse navigators than heterosexuals, on account of different brain architecture. But scientists have found no individual gene that codes for exceptional orienteering.

And what about the preindustrial people who, we're led to believe, were so much better at navigating than we GPS-equipped

relative to each other: a mental map.

Kenneth Hill believes that most people rely on route knowledge to get around, and are therefore a lot closer to being lost at any given time than they think they are. When route knowledge is all you have, you may become "vulnerable to being turned around." If the birds eat the breadcrumb trail, you're hooped.

But of course, just knowing all of this is a great boon. Because if navigating is really about learning better habits and systems out there in the wild—rather than choosing our moms and dads well—then it's some-

remote and bug-infested swamp." *Climb to a high point to get your bearings.* Climbing to high points didn't help the British teenager who got lost in the Australian outback for 12 days in July. He'd get his bearings, yes, but he'd then become hopelessly lost again the moment he was back down in the trees.

Here's one I particularly like. A survival-guide author actually named Gene Fear recommends, as a kind of last-ditch Hail Mary in the lengthening shadows, that you try to locate "home." Home as in your birthplace. How? Well, point yourself, systematically, in various directions, and have your hiking partner test your arm strength in each of these orientations. Your muscles will come alive when you're facing your point of origin.

Some simple tips *are* genuinely useful. Like: remember to turn around from time to time and look at the landscape from that angle. Or: choose a base point and make short forays in each of the cardinal directions, always returning to the base point. (Repeat systematically, extending the length of each spoke of the wheel until some useful new information arises.)

I once tried, after getting turned around while tracking a squirrel or something, to make a bush compass the way Anthony Hopkins did in the film *The Edge*. (Hopkins is an academic whose plane crashes, and he relies on book learnin' to survive. His mantra is "what one man can do, another man can do.") To make your own compass, you magnetize a sewing needle by rubbing it on soft fabric 20 times in one direction, from point to eye. Then you place the needle on a leaf and float the leaf on water. The needle should swing round to magnetic north.

For me, it just kept pointing to my pants.

To get genuinely stone-cold lost alone in the backcountry is a terrifying thing. David Grann, researching an article that would become *The Lost City of Z*, became fascinated by the case of British explorer Percy Fawcett, who set off into the Amazon in 1925 in search of El Dorado, fabulous city of gold. Fawcett was lost, never to

Climbing to high points didn't help the teenager who got lost in the Australian outback for 12 days. He'd get his bearings, but then he'd become hopelessly lost the moment he was back down in the trees

moderns are now? It's probably true. But not because some primal Sixth Sense dried up when we stopped relying on it. The Bushmen of the Kalahari are lauded for their almost magical navigational instincts. But it turns out that if fog sets in, they're screwed. The Sixth Sense vanishes when the signposts do.

In other words, to the degree that innate differences matter, they're trumped by something a lot simpler: some of us aren't paying attention.

As the psychologist Kenneth Hill of St. Mary's University in Halifax put it in an influential paper, directional "instincts" aren't inherited but acquired, by whole lifetimes of training and practice. Those Kalahari Bushmen just got good at reading "way-finding" clues—the stones, the stars, the route markers. They learned to walk with their eyes open.

What does it mean to "know where you are"? Here's how my dad the navigator would have answered that question: It means you can pinpoint your position on a map. But that's not how most people understand the concept. If I tell you I know where I am, what I probably mean is, I know the way home. And that's a flimsier kind of knowledge. That's "route knowledge," as distinct from "survey knowledge." Route knowledge tells me what roads I have to take to get there—whether or not I know where "there" is. Survey knowledge tells me the locations of trails and landmarks

thing we can all get better at. With conscious effort the inept can become average, and the average really pretty crackerjack. Now it's no longer a philosophy problem: time to browse the How-To shelf.

And here the quality of advice is... uneven.

Most books on the subject don't go beyond banal tips like "carry a notebook," "ask directions," "never leave late," "allow time to get lost." Etc. Anything that falls into the category of "stuff I might have thought of" leaves me unimpressed.

The writer Patrick McManus suggests that, among re-orientation techniques, "scooping water up in your hat and pouring it down a badger hole is good," because "someone is bound to show up to ask you why you are doing such a fool thing." Whereupon this person leads you out of trouble.

That counsel is no worse than most of the folk wisdom you come across. *If you are lost just keep walking, because you will eventually return to the place where you started.* This is a nugget there's not even bad data to support. *All streams lead to civilization.* Kenneth Hill notes that following this advice where he lives in Nova Scotia "will more than likely lead the lost person to a

TAKE THE TEST

Two Canadian scientists, cognitive psychologist Giuseppe Iaria and neuro-ophthamologist Jason Barton, have set up a website where you can test your own navigational chops: gettinglost.ca

return. Ditto for at least a hundred people who went looking for him. So obsessed did Grann become that he had to join the folly. And of course he himself got lost! Along the banks of the remote Xingu River, he became separated from his guide. His hand-drawn map was useless, his canteen was empty. The trees seemed to be closing in. He felt himself starting to panic. Grann was fighting off the early onset of “woods shock” that affects even veteran outdoorsmen, a condition where one becomes so terrified all rational thought evaporates—you can’t process once familiar landmarks, and don’t even recognize help when it comes. Rescuers encountering lost hikers in this state have sometimes had to chase after and tackle them.

But let me say this about getting lost. It’s going to seem to run against the grain of everything we’ve been talking about, which is sketchy navigational sense and how to fix it. But what if a dicky compass isn’t something you really *want* to fix?

Since I’ve become a family man, it’s really not cool for me to go off half-cocked with no map and no ETA when there are little kids at home kind of depending on my return. So I haven’t once had the feeling, *Jesus: I have no idea where I am*. And you know what? I miss it. There’s a payoff to being lost.

True, you don’t want to get Percy Fawcett-lost. But to be a *little bit* lost, momentarily flummoxed with a fair amount of confidence that you will soon be unflummoxed, is exhilarating. There’s a sweet spot between lost and found where we feel most alive. It’s the opposite of bourgeois complacency and overprogrammed routine.

Being lost—and I think at some level we all get this—is the kind of character-builder you can’t route around. “In the middle of my life I came to myself within a dark wood, where the straight way was lost.” That’s Dante’s idea of hell. But it’s also the place where, according to the epic poem, you find yourself. The dark wood, once you’ve punched through, gives onto a kind of paradise, the newly tempered self shining in the light, the struggle forgotten. It’s a great outcome.

So long as you can remember where you parked. **e**

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No ordinary dog

One way or another, Vince would always make it to the top

BY BRUCE GRIERSON

The first thing I noticed about Norm Winter, the mountain guide I'd hired to help a group of us reach the summit of Mount Baker in the U.S. Cascades, was his strange calm. Norm was a B.C. boy, lanky as a cowboy, with a little billy-goat tuft of hair—a soul-patch, a flavour-saver—beneath his lower lip that drew your eye there, away from his bemused smile. He walked as if he were making an instructional video on how to walk so you are never off balance. In his commitment to restrained and deliberate speech and move-

ment, he was almost Confucian.

The first thing I noticed about his dog Vince, a four-year-old mongrel with some husky, some spitz and lord knows what else in him, was his...strange calm. (No, the first thing was his crazy curled tail; the second thing was his strange calm.) Initially it seemed odd that Norm had brought Vince along. What was he going to do with the dog while we climbed? The question was soon answered. By the time we'd geared up and mustered at the Heliotrope Ridge trailhead, Vince was already ahead of us,

way up the path. No car camping for Vince. He was coming with us. And he aimed, it appeared, to beat us to the top.

This was not ordinary. But then, as I would soon learn, Vince was no ordinary dog.

Vince came into Norm's life one summer's day in 1995. Norm was walking along Commercial Drive in Vancouver, out with another dog that belonged to a vacationing friend, and he was literally thinking *Man, I have no room in my life for a dog right now*, when a woman walked past, with Vince. The dogs stopped to sniff each other. So their people chatted, too. It turned out that Vince's owner was living on the street and couldn't keep him. "She was actually at that moment on the way to the pound with him," Norm recalls. Norm looked at Vince. Vince looked at Norm. Norm thought that, as dogs go, this one was really pretty beautiful. "I told her, 'Look, I'll take your dog for a couple of weeks until you find a home for him,'" Norm remembers. "And I never gave him back."

Vince had a quirky personality—a bit standoffish, not all over you like so many pups. He could be aggressive with other dogs but he was timid with people. "He had big emotions, but he didn't dole them out to just anyone. He chose individuals and did things for them."

As a domestic dog, Vince was raw clay. Before Norm started taking him out into the mountains, there would have to be basic training.

Someone had obviously thrown Vince from a truck when he was a pup because he wouldn't go near Norm's pickup. This posed a problem. They weren't going to the mountains—or anywhere—until Vince could be trained to get into Norm's vehicle. "I worked on it for a long time—very, very systematically," he says. A walk together around the truck. Open the tailgate and walk around it again. One paw on the bumper. "There were at least 20 steps in the process." Eventually Vince learned to trust that this man with the soul-patch was a different species from the asshole who had tried to dispatch him. He committed to Norm, and the two became a buddy movie.

Vince was plainly an outside dog. In a Squamish downpour, he'd go sleep on the lawn for seven hours. He was also a natural climber. That much became clear once Norm started bringing Vince on his treks—in the Coast Mountains, in the Rockies, in the Cascades.

"We'd get to approaches where it'd be fifth-class climbing," says Norm. That's the point where you have to start using your hands. "So what he'd do was back way up and take a run at it, and hit the wall as fast as he could and then start pumping his feet. One time he just got his paws over the lip and was hanging there, with a long drop

problem. The only issue was that sled dogs are trained to keep going, and so these four grew confused when, at the peak, they ran out of real estate.) But it's rare. In those cases where a dog does become a regular companion of a mountaineer, the bond between dog and owner can be legendary.

The great, eccentric Victorian-era American climber and mountain-historian William Coolidge summited some 66 big peaks in the Alps—including the Jungfrau and Mont Blanc—with his tiny brown beagle-mix, Tschingal. (Tschingal, when she died, was awarded honorary membership in the British Alpine Club.) Coolidge wrote about

"Vince would back way up and take a run at it, and hit the wall as fast as he could and start pumping his feet. One time he just got his paws over the lip and was hanging there, with a long drop beneath him."

beneath him." Norm reached Vince just as the dog was gassing out, and pulled him the rest of the way up.

If the climbing got too technical, Vince would find another way, a less obvious way. While Norm was guiding on *Polar Circus*—a long ice climb in Banff National Park—Vince made it halfway up before he ran into ice walls. And then he was gone. Norm kept climbing. "All of a sudden Vince popped his head out and was looking down at us."

In the really hairy spots, Norm would rig a harness out of a prusik and a piece of webbing and heave Vince up. Vince didn't like that one bit—but he'd let Norm attach it if he figured it was the only way their day together was going to continue.

"I thought I'd lost him once in [Utah's] Zion National Park," Norm says. "We'd spent a day climbing and were camped at the end of the canyon, up in the dry ranchlands. Vince disappeared there chasing rabbits. It was a bad place. He was just gone." Norm finally gave up waiting and started back down the canyon. "And then I could hear him howling. He'd backed out onto an outcrop and was cornered there, 30 feet up." Norm brought out the harness. Vince did not object. "He actually took a wide stance to make it easier for me."

Now, it's not unknown for dogs to climb serious mountains. In 1979, famed Iditarod racers Joe Redington and Susan Butcher got together their best dogs and mushed them to the top of Denali. (The dogs made it no

how that dog would trot across precarious snow bridges, "and on at least one occasion helped to find the way home when the guide had lost it."

When we climbed Mount Baker, we gingerly picked our way up the Coleman Glacier, with crevasses on both sides. Though we were roped up, I still felt vulnerable. It seemed like no place for a dog. But maybe it was the perfect place for a dog. As it turns out, a dog can *sniff* its way through an icefield. "Its super-sensitive nose can scent the old air that comes up through the crevasses from the depths of the glacier," Coolidge wrote. In some ways dogs are more naturally suited to this pursuit than people are—so long as they have the courage to climb.

It would be revisionist history to say that Norm and Vince recognized each other from the beginning as kindred spirits. They didn't. But they were.

Norm was every bit as complicated as Vince—as I would grow to discover over the course of three climbs in the Cascades.

Norm could discourse on the history of mountain gear, from the hobnail boot to the 12-point crampon. In the next breath he'd be parroting whole scenes of dialogue from *The Eiger Sanction*. He described his hometown of Flin Flon, Manitoba, as "the only town in North America named after a literary character." (Flintabbatey Flonatin, the adventurous grocer from Muddock's

The Sunless City.) Then for long stretches he'd fall silent.

Once, as we were climbing Mount Rainier, the weather turned on us. Norm made the call to abort, and his face clouded with regret. "I'll be back here," he said. "I want this one, too. We *will* climb this mountain." He rolled up his sleeve to expose his forearm, and he began hitting that forearm with two fingers of the other hand, trying to raise a vein. He had the mountaineering jones bad.

It struck me that Norm was himself a little bit feral. His father was a hard man, a veteran of the German cavalry back in World

B.C., went to work in Europe—guiding in the Swiss Alps out of Zermatt. Some folks at a backcountry lodge in the Rockies said they'd take Vince while Norm was away. "They figured he'd keep the pine martens out." But Vince sensed that his master wasn't coming back any time soon. So he set out to find him. Two weeks later he showed up in Golden—having navigated 100 kilometres of some of the densest bush in the world. "He knew I'd eventually show up," says Norm. If Norm left home for a few days or weeks, Vince would often set off on his own peregrinations, then return to Norm's doorstep at almost the exact moment that Norm

If his owner Norm left home for a few days or weeks, Vince would often set off on his own peregrinations, then return to Norm's doorstep at almost the exact moment that Norm arrived back in town

War II, who had escaped from at least one POW camp and admitted, in later life, that he still slept, sometimes, with a gun. Norm learned to be self-reliant early. He could shoot a rifle and drive stick by age six.

The city made Norm tense. Only after we were out of the car and partway up the trail did he noticeably relax.

I once called him on what I thought was his land-line around dinnertime. I could hear the faint roar of a butane stove in the background and the image that came to mind—of a guy camping out in his own apartment, maybe sleeping in a tent in the living room, because wild is the only mode he knows—seemed perfectly apt. In fact, I had reached Norm on his cellphone, in the mountains of Alberta's Kananaskis Country, cooking dinner for another group of clients.

Together, Norm and Vince were like an old couple that can count the moments, over their long deep marriage, where things looked grim. "We were very attached," Norm says. "But it wasn't all roses."

They would get into arguments. Norm had his agenda; Vince had his. "And he'd be defiant. I'd be on a time schedule, with another climb to do. I'd say: 'Vince, we *have* to go. I *have* to go.'" Vince would hunker down, just out of reach. So Norm would leave.

Two or three days later, he'd return to that spot—to find Vince waiting for him.

One summer Norm, then based in Golden,

arrived back in town. It couldn't have been coincidence. Could it?

My initial climb with Norm happened more than a decade ago. In the last few years, I'd lost his signal. A couple of months back I called him up again. He's a mountain guide still, running a successful operation called Revelstoke Alpine Adventures. He's married with a little son named Leif: life reordered. All is good. But what had become of Vince?

The call was spookily timed. Turned out, Vince was heavy on Norm's mind.

Not long before, a tumour had shown up on Vince's flank. Norm had it removed, but the cancer had spread inside. Finally, Norm laid Vince in the back seat of the truck. They set out on the long ride to the vet's. On the way they had a conversation. This time it was one-sided. Norm talked, watching the road. "I let him know how much I had learned from him, and how much I respected him," Norm said. "Really, he taught me a lot about patience. I realized after I got angry at him that it was never about him. It was about me.

"I thanked him."

Norm drove in to the vet's parking lot. Then he turned around. Vince had once again found another way, the less obvious way. He had died back there, his master's voice playing him off the air. **e**

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