

# Taken by Storm

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Looking back. I know now we should have believed the weather forecast.

*Storm force eight and rising. Due late afternoon, early evening.*

It was October 1968, before mobile phones and other electronic gizmos. Being the leader put a lot of responsibility on my brother Tom but he had done this climb the previous year and knew the way. Ben Lomond was an easy Munro, he said, nothing serious. Our plan was to reach the top, take a group photograph with our troop pennant and get back before the worst of it came through from the south-west.

We kitted up in the car park. Tom, always meticulous, went through our checklists to be sure we had every item we needed. Satisfied, he set off, leading us briskly along the well-defined track.

Tom had rented a twelve-seater minibus. We had locked it up, leaving a note in plain sight, sellotaped inside the windscreen, listing our names, destination and expected return time.

Venture Scouts, fit and eager to get our next badge and to raise money for our funds. Four of the six were newly enrolled at various universities, Billy and I were in our Highers year at Hutchie Grammar, all of us from Glasgow's well-heeled Giffnock.

The first part of the walk-in was easier than I had expected. The wind was at our backs and not too cold. When we started to climb I was sweating up. My throat was sore. Tom checked me out, gave me a half of a packet of Tunes, cherry menthol. My girlfriend Angela had been through a bad cold and I began to wonder if I had caught it.

Two hours later the first spots of rain engulfed us, small drops at first, like mist then becoming heavier. Tom called a break to check us out. It was noon. Huddled under his groundsheet with our torches, he said we had about an hour-and-a-half to go to reach the summit and that sunset was over five hours away.

After a powwow, we decided to carry on. It was unanimous.

Half-an-hour later, the skies darkened, the rain became heavier and visibility reduced to less than five yards.

Tom huddled us for a second powwow.

This time we decided to abandon our attempt.

Because of the reduced visibility, Tom insisted we rope up, twelve feet apart. He asked me to be last man. He took the lead. The storm was now full in our faces. Dennis, number

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five, tripped and fell. We came to halt while Tom checked him out. Dennis's left wrist was broken, a bone protruding. Tom patched him up and fixed his arm firmly to his side. We re-roped with Dennis now second man behind Tom. I was given the extra burden of carrying Dennis's rucksack. It seemed to be enormously heavy. Much later we discovered he had loaded up with six bottles of Coca-Cola to share with us as a celebration when we reached the summit.

The storm seemed to be increasing as we inched our way down. It became clear we were off the designated path. I had a feeling the ground was becoming rougher, steeper and skiddy.

Up ahead there was a scream. We were pulled forward violently. I sat down and grabbed at a bush and held tightly. The pressure on my arms was enormous. Billy, now number five, shouted back at me and his torch flashed in my face. He screamed:

***'They've fallen over the edge. Don't let go of me Mike. Save me. Save me, Mike.'***

The pain in my hands and arms was too much. I let go but Lady Luck was on our side. The rope between us snagged on the base of a huge rock spike, acting as a brake. The main pressure was now on Billy, the youngest and smallest of our group. The rope from his waist to the other four was biting into him. Sobbing he said:

***'Mike, I can't take this. I'll have to cut them free.'***

He had his knife open, ready to start slashing. I grabbed it from him and threw it away.

***'No, Billy, let's pull together.*** If we can get the rope up and tie it off around this rock the pressure will be off us.'

I was trying to sound confident but I knew deep down this would be an impossible task. We tugged and tugged time without number. Suddenly the rope became slack in our hands. I reeled it in - the end was frayed.

Billy started to weep and curled into a ball, sobbing.

I felt certain the others had plunged to their doom but I had to check.

I untied his broken line then my own line and joined the pieces together, made a running loop and fixed it to the base of our rock spike, retied the free end around my waist. Billy's torch was bigger than mine and had a press stud for sending Morse. I swapped his for mine and slid forward on my stomach to peer down into the ravine. They were crowded together on a very narrow ledge. Tom was crouched over Dennis, astride him.

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I shouted. Tom looked up. He shouted but the roar of the waterfall drowned out his words. I flashed a Morse message explaining we were safe. His return message said something like:

*I am okay. Just bruised.*

*Dennis is bad. Unconscious. His collarbone is broken. He is delirious.*

*The other two seem to be okay but I can't reach them now.*

*They fell into the water. I hauled them out with their ropes.*

*They have moved along the ledge where its wider.*

*They are unable to speak. Shock. Frozen by fear.*

*We are all soaked through. Spray from the waterfall.*

I flashed back, explained about Billy.

Tom flashed back, more slowly now.

*Mike, you must tie Billy to that rock then go for help.*

After a gap, he added:

*Keep near to the edge of the ravine but not too close.*

*Use the sound of the water to guide you downhill to the loch side.*

I flashed back.

*Understood.*

He added:

*At the loch turn left. Head for Rowardennan.*

I asked:

*Why not turn right?*

He replied:

*Mike, do as you are told.*

I flashed:

*Understood. Wilco. Hang on. Out.*

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I checked my watch. It was quarter past four in the afternoon but felt like midnight.

I roused Billy, wrapped him in his groundsheet, tied his ankle to the rock spike and set off, taking both torches. I was heading into the teeth of the storm, being pummelled by recurring waves of hailstones and sleet.

My focus was the next six feet, then the next six feet.

I was sweating up again. My head was full of phlegm. My nose was streaming. My vision was blurred. I wanted to curl up and fall asleep. I crouched behind a rock and fished in my rucksack for my last Mars bar.

A dog barked and rushed towards me. I kneeled. The Border Collie licked my face, ate the last piece of my Mars bar then started barking over and over, darting towards me, licking my face then backing off and barking again.

A bright light shone in my face.

'What's your name son?'

'Michael Cruickshank.'

'Where are the others?'

I told him about the waterfall and the ledge and the others. And Billy.'

I tried to explain what had happened but I was sobbing, confused.

Two others from the Mountain Rescue Team wrapped me into a metal foil sheet then zipped me into a waterproof sleeping bag. A different man leaned over me and spoke to me.

I repeated what I had told the first man. He said:

'Well done Michael, we'll do the rest.'

I was strapped into a stretcher. Two men and a woman carried me downhill. At the Land Rover, I slipped over into a deep sleep.

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I woke with Mum and Dad at my side. I was in a single ward.

I asked:

'Is everyone safe and well?'

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Mum burst into tears.

Dad said:

'Mike. What they think is that Billy crawled too near the edge and slid over, he landed on Tom who was protecting Dennis. All three fell into the water. Tom had bashed his head and was dead before he reached the water. Billy and Dennis both drowned. David and Andrew saw it happen. When they were found, they were hypothermic. You were suffering from pneumonia. They had you in Intensive Care on oxygen, pumped full of antibiotics. They only moved you in here earlier this morning.'

'Are David and Andrew okay?'

'Yes, they were allowed home yesterday.'

He glanced at Mum and added:

'Mike, there is a lady Police officer waiting outside. She needs to take a formal statement.'

Mum said:

'No, Archie, it can wait, surely.'

'No, Mary. The Police are only doing their job. Best to get it over and done with now.'

Then to me:

'Okay, Mike?'

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*"Over and done with."*

If only it had been so simple. I have thought about what happened that day over and over, trying to see what I might have done differently to save us all.

Those of us who survived were 'avoided'.

There was 'survivors guilt' to add to our trauma.

As the person who had been given responsibility for Billy, I felt I had failed him. Should I have tied him up more securely?

David and his family moved away to live in Devon shortly after the tragedy.

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Andrew and his family moved to New Zealand as soon as he completed his university course.

I failed my Highers and did not go to university.

Angela and I split up.

I was in hospital several times before I settled.

When I was twenty, I moved to Forfar to work with Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Thirty years on I have been diagnosed with pernicious anaemia, three months to live.

I thought it best to put these memories and thoughts down on paper, for Mum and Dad and for my younger brother Paul.

*Goodbye, everyone.*

Look after Shep, please.

When you find this note, you will know where to look for me.