



SEPARATION

A RARE DECEMBER FLOOD BROUGHT IN WEST VIRGINIA'S CLASS V+ MOORE RUN. AND STEVE GRAYBILL, BOBBY MILLER, AND MAGGIE SNOWEL PUT IN ON IT WITH FOUR HOURS UNTIL DUSK. IT GOT WORSE FOR EVERYONE. ESPECIALLY FOR STEVE GRAYBILL. **BY CHRISTIAN KNIGHT**

T HELENE SCALLIET

The text message said they were doing the Moore Run and that he wasn't sure what time he'd be back. The creek was raging, after all, and he was a few hours west, in Parsons, West Virginia. But this was December 9, Helene Scalliet, 30, thought. The sun was gone by 4:30 p.m. nowadays. So her boyfriend would have to be off the river by 5 at the latest. Worst-case scenario, he'd be home by 8.

And no matter how late, Steve Graybill, 37, had promised his Belgian girlfriend that he'd swing by her place. He'd be hungry, by then, and tired, Helene knew. He'd appreciate a good meal. So Helene cooked him one. Vegetable curry with a light peanut sauce and rice. She also bought him a six-pack of his favorite beer, *Arrogant Bastard*. And she waited. And waited. The curry eventually got cold. The beer got warm. And still, no sound of a 1996 Nissan Sentra's tired engine retiring for the night in the driveway. No tapping on the front door. Not even a phone call.

Helene had met Steve a few years earlier, shortly after she graduated from college and moved from San Diego to analyze policy for the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration in Washington, D.C. She was interested in whitewater. So she took a class. Her instructor was Steve's roommate, Alden. She'd run into Steve frequently. Their houses, it turns out, were only 10 miles apart. And they shared a lot of the same friends, being kayakers and all. But they never really experienced a one-on-one moment until they carpooled in May to Cheat Fest 2007.

The conversation they shared along that three-hour westward drive was one of the best, most intensely kindred that Helene had experienced in a long, long time. And the connection between the two became even more palpable when Helene won the women's short boat category downriver race and Steve won the men's.

After just seven months of dating, however, Helene found herself in a stereotypical role: In her pajamas, reading Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal. Vegetable. Miracle*, and waiting for her boyfriend to come home. Hours ticked off the clock and still, she'd heard nothing; not from her boyfriend or from his notorious friend, Bobby Miller. Helene decided to call, but instead collided with Steve's voicemail. Thirty minutes later, she called again. Same thing. She decided to call Bobby. No answer. At 8 or 9 p.m., she called Steve's housemate, Alden. "Do I have reason to be concerned or am I just being the girlfriend?" Helene asked him.

Alden, it turns out, had been concerned too, he said. And he had sent text messages to Steve earlier that morning, trying to find out what creek they had settled on. But he never got a reply.


"Oh," Helene told him, "they're doing the Moore Run."

Alden's reply was full of dread. "Oh no," he said.

"Why?" Helene asked. "What's the Moore Run?"

Eleven months earlier, Alden told her, Bobby had attempted the Moore Run. But they put on late, wasted two hours portaging a marsh and an area where the river bores underground. Darkness forced them to scrap their ways through the Rhododendron and seven miles down the Otter Creek trail to its trailhead. Search and rescue showed up, lights flashing. Bobby and his buddy didn't get out until midnight. Alarmed by the story, Helene suggested they start heading west. They met at the Highway 270 Park and Ride and began driving through the cold, rainy night. They didn't think they'd be driving all three hours. They figured the cell phone would be ringing any minute notifying them that Bobby and Steve had made it out. All was well. You can turn around and go back to your warm beds. Driving, Helene knew, was just snake oil for her afflicted brain.

PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN KNIGHT



Splitting up can occur on an impulse and it can lead to unforeseen consequences.

The call did finally come. Around 10. But the voice on the other end did not belong to Bobby or Steve. It belonged to a 28-year-old woman named Maggie Snowel. She had put-on the Moore Run with Bobby and Steve with plans to paddle the in-between stuff and shoot photos of the big stuff. But she had gotten pinned in the first quarter-mile and hiked out. She hadn't seen Bobby or Steve since they parted near the top of the two-mile run. She had, however, just received a phone call from Bobby. Bobby, she told them, had escaped the canyon. He was back in his gold Subaru Forester at the take-out. But Bobby hadn't heard or seen Steve since dusk. He had no idea where Steve was or what condition he was in.

When Helene and Alden finally arrived at the Otter Creek trailhead near midnight, a fire engine from the Parsons Volunteer Fire Department was occupying the Otter Creek trailhead's parking lot. Bobby Miller's Forester was there too and he was inside it, sleeping. Helene and Alden told Bobby to go on home so he could work the next morning. The volunteers told Helene and Alden what they had already told Bobby: We're not marching into the forest draped in this kind of fog; with this kind of rain pouring down. We'll come back in the morning.

TIFFANY CURRAN

Sometime after midnight, Theresa Helmick, an emergency dispatcher, called her 25-year-old daughter, Tiffany Curran, at Davis Memorial Hospital in Elkins, West Virginia, 25 miles away. A kayaker was lost somewhere in the Otter Creek area. Maybe up near the Moore Run. His buddy, Bobby Miller, had made it out, but he had no idea where the missing kayaker was. The last sound Bobby Miller heard from the missing kayaker was a loud, hollow thud, perhaps the kayak landing on a boulder. *They don't know if he's alive or dead*, Theresa told her daughter.

Two months earlier, Tiffany was one of the scores of emergency responders thrashing through the nearby Dolly Sods Wilderness in a quest to find Jacob Allen, the 18-year-old severely autistic boy who had wandered off during a family hiking trip. The victim, his parents had said, couldn't communicate and had the mental capacity of a 4-year-old. Rescuers would later describe the terrain as disorienting; as an impenetrable wall of Rhododendron, with game trails that lured them 30 yards into the thick and then abandoned them. After four days, they found him curled into a fetal position under a Laurel bush near where he had first wandered off. Jacob was tired, hungry and thirsty. But otherwise healthy. And throughout it all, Tiffany had remained optimistic about the outcome.

She couldn't say the same for Steve Graybill. Unfortunately for him,

he'd gotten himself lost in the Fernow Experimental Forest—a place where the unrelenting Rhododendron and Laurel conspired with red oaks, yellow poplars, sugar maples, and 19 other hardwood species to seduce hikers onto side trails that disappeared into green walls of Rhododendron; places so thick with vegetation, even the sun couldn't penetrate it; a place whose sinister beauty was influenced by Agent Orange, which the government tested on it back during the Vietnam War—or so the local rumor goes.

Steve Graybill was lost in those strange woods or somewhere on that raging creek, after midnight, when the temperature couldn't be any warmer than 40 degrees; on a foggy, rainy Sunday night when the moon had deserted West Virginia and when most of Tiffany's fellow volunteers were preparing for the workweek ahead. This, Tiffany thought, was going to be a body recovery.

But even if Steve Graybill was still alive, he'd have to wait out the night for help to arrive. Tiffany wasn't getting off work for another eight hours or so. And, she figured, there's no way the other volunteers would be hiking the three miles into Otter Creek in this kind of weather at this time of night.

Such is the disadvantage of getting lost near a mountainous town such as Parsons. The 1,500 people who reside there rely mainly on dying coal and timber industries to get along. The town simply has too few people and too little money to justify a professional emergency response service. Instead, it has to rely on three dozen of its own residents to devote what energy, skill, and time they can to car accidents, the occasional house fire, and the rare missing person.

Tiffany had wanted to join that Parsons Volunteer Fire Department ever since she started thinking about things she wanted to do in her life. But up to 2001, when she was 18, the department had never taken on a female firefighter. After a conversation with a volunteer at the local diner, however, Tiffany joined the department. Volunteering is what convinced her to study nursing. One of her first calls as a volunteer beckoned her up the Green Mountain Trail, buried within the same Fernow Experimental Forest that would swallow up Steve Graybill a few years later. The victim on Tiffany's first call was a troubled teenager who was going through drug withdrawals. She needed help coming down the mountain. For each of the six years since, Tiffany had ventured up to the Otter Creek Wilderness, and the Fernow Experimental Forest Area a couple times, looking for a hiker, hunter, or a collector of Rants (cross between an onion and garlic).

At 7:30 a.m., on the cloudy, gray morning of December 10, she left the hospital and headed up that way again. Too tired to hike, she took control of the communications for the operation. And then she waited for a couple of willing volunteers to march into the wilderness area.

"RESCUERS WOULD LATER DESCRIBE THE TERRAIN ... AS AN IMPENETRABLE WALL OF RHODODENDRON, WITH GAME TRAILS THAT LURED THEM 30 YARDS INTO THE THICK AND THEN ABANDONED THEM."

MAGGIE SNOWEL

Maggie Snowel, 28, was two hours into her drive to the Top Yough when Bobby Miller called. As usual, the elementary school teacher and NBA zealot was full of energy and persuasion and rhetorical questions.

Why're you going there when all these other creeks that never run are running, he asked her. You can run the Yough on any Sunday, he said. You should come with us.

She told him she had made plans to paddle the Class IV classic with some friends. And yes, despite the once-in-a-season bounty of creeks brought in by the recent rain, the Yough was exactly what she had wanted for a Sunday morning in December—fun, short and predictable.

But after listening to Bobby on her cell phone, the Department of Defense electrical engineer changed course. Instead of driving on to Friendsville, she headed for a Wal Mart in Oakland, where Bobby had convinced her—for the sake of time—to purchase some flashlights and bottled water. She headed to a friend's place to have breakfast, chat and wait for Bobby and Steve Graybill to drive the three hours from Bobby's home in Clear Creek, Maryland, to Tucker County, West Virginia.

Maggie would meet them there, according to the plan—sometime around 11 a.m. They'd set shuttle immediately—up a winding snowy mountain road—and hike the 45 minutes into the top of the Moore Run. The decision would commit Maggie, a five-year boater with Class V skills, to two miles of West Virginia's hardest whitewater—though she planned to portage any rapid with which she was uncomfortable. And then, only then, would she get what she came for: Seven miles of Otter Creek's Class IV-V boulder gardens.

She had made this deal once before. Eleven months earlier, on a 60-degree February day, Maggie and four other kayakers hiked into the Moore Run. None of them had ever attempted Canaan Valley's mythical creek, so they didn't know they had hiked in too high. They didn't know they'd spend most of the day portaging a half-mile boulder marsh and crawling through Rhododendron. Maggie and the two other kayakers didn't find the Otter Creek trail until dark. None of them got out before midnight. Bobby and his buddy Joe Stumpf, the only two of the group to actually paddle, were the only ones who left the Canaan Valley without the enraging sensation that they had wasted their Sunday.

This time would be different, Bobby had assured her. Yes, Maggie's plan to portage and photograph the big rapids would soak up some valuable time, but she'd be doing that while Bobby and Steve were scouting them. They'd be on the creek by 1 p.m., guaranteeing them more daylight. They'd hike in below the boulder marsh, cutting out two hours of portaging. They'd know the lines and the terrain a little better. *And, Bobby promised her, you'll be able to run Otter Creek—seven miles of Class IV-V boulder gardens.*

At the put-in, the creek was six inches deep and 10 feet wide,



Maggie Snowel wanted to run the in-between rapids and photograph the bigger ones. Things turned out differently.

way higher, Bobby admitted, than last time.

Maggie was already starting to regret her decision. But it got worse. Within 200 yards, Maggie flipped in a steep Class IV rapid, lost her paddle and hand-rolled. When the water drained from her eyes, she saw that her paddle was floating beside her. Relieved, she leaned over to grab it and right then, she fell sideways off a one-foot ledge and pinned on the bedrock. She was upright, stable and breathing, but she couldn't budge her kayak. The best way out of this, she figured, was to grab the Rhododendron branch dangling above her head and step onto the creekbank just beside her.

As soon as she popped her skirt, the creek flooded her Pyranha Burn and trapped it there. No way was that boat coming out without mechanical advantage.

For the next hour, Steve and Bobby scraped with the Rhododendron to set up a Z-Drage—a fairly inefficient one—and then wrestle the kayak off the ledge. Once it wiggled free, Maggie knew exactly what her next line was: Up 200 feet of loose rocks and Rhododendron, down the trail and out. She'd have liked both Bobby and Steve to come along. With or without them, however, she was getting out of there.

She waited for Bobby to decide. But he was waffling, refereeing between his id and his superego. He didn't want to bushwhack through the 40-degree night again and, now, after Maggie's pin, that scenario seemed rather likely, he said. The water level, he kept saying, was much higher than when he and Joe had been here last and Maggie was hiking out for sure. On the other hand, he was saying, the Moore Run is in. *When am I going to get the chance to run it again?* He just couldn't decide.

"OVER THE ROAR OF THE CREEK, AND THE SILENCE OF THE SNOW-PATCHED FOREST, BOBBY RECEIVED A RESPONSE: 'BOBBY.'"

The next voice Maggie heard was Steve's: *We can do it*, he said. *Let's go*. His tone was adamant, and persuasive. And just like that, Bobby and Steve disappeared.

It was dark when Maggie reached her car. Probably 6 p.m. or so. She had gotten a little disoriented on the trail and had gotten lost coming down the winding mountain road. She was tired and frustrated and she didn't want to wait on Bobby Miller for the next six hours. Not again.

So she dropped their gear bags at Steve's Sentra, scribbled a note to them: "Please call me as soon as you get off," and headed for the warmth and comfort awaiting her at her boyfriend's house in Sharpsburg.

All evening, she thought about Bobby and Steve—worrying, then consoling herself with the reminder that each of them was tough and that Bobby had been in this exact situation once before.

She was about to slide the blankets over her tired body when her cell phone on the nightstand began ringing. It was Bobby Miller. The same Bobby Miller who had called her with all the energy and all the answers 14 hours earlier. But this was a different Bobby Miller than she'd ever known. This Bobby Miller had very few answers and very little energy. This Bobby Miller was scared.

BOBBY MILLER

As Bobby watched Maggie disappear down the trail, he realized he could be in for some *déjà vu*. Of the hundreds of runs the 29-year-old fourth grade teacher had paddled in his 17 years of kayaking, two had ended in the darkness. He didn't mind that so much. If that's what it took to paddle a new classic, he was more than willing. On the other hand, he wasn't especially eager to throw himself into such calamity.

But Steve wanted to continue. And despite his best intentions, Bobby just couldn't seem to convince himself not to. So that's what they did,

through some of the run's hardest rapids, despite the waning daylight and the plentiful and unpredictable logjams. And then, all at once, their momentum halted with a thud. Steve plunged over a six-foot ledge and landed in a sieve. It wasn't an especially dangerous pin. His yellow Wave Sport Y was stable and his torso was dry. But Bobby lost another 20 minutes of dusk-light getting Steve out.

No way, he thought, would he and Steve be able to finish the mile remaining on the Moore Run and the seven miles of Otter Creek's Class IV-V boulder gardens. They'd have to hike. Now. Before the trail vanished into the coming darkness.

And while they portaged the sieve, Bobby explained his logic to Steve. But Steve didn't agree. Steve thought he could make better time paddling down the creek than he could by crawling through the Rhododendron. He was going to give it another push.

Steve put in first. And then it was Bobby's turn. While he was situating his boat on the sandstone bedrock, he watched Steve paddle ahead, and then disappear over the next horizon line.

"Steve!" he yelled. "Steve!"

No answer.

He took off after him, chased by the consuming night and with the thought that Steve was impatiently waiting for him at the bottom of the next drop. He accelerated his stroke rate, despite his increasing struggle to see. Around the next bend, a tree had fallen over the 200-cfs creek, creating a mandatory portage. Steve would definitely be on the other side of the strainer, Bobby had thought.

But he wasn't.



Bobby Miller, pictured here and left, had experienced nightfall on this creek before.



LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF BOBBY MILLER. RIGHT PHOTO COURTESY OF MAGGIE SNOWEL.

Bobby kept paddling. He dropped a six-foot ledge, rounded another bend and encountered another strainer. This time, he decided, it was too dark and too dangerous to keep paddling by himself. He scrambled 30 feet above the river to an old, overgrown fire road and began hiking. Downed trees forced him to climb over them, straddle along them, limbo beneath them. But the fire road was heading in the right direction.

Eventually, he heard a thump, like the sound of a boat falling onto rocks. It was a violent sound, one that threatened to take his imagination hostage.

"Steve! ... Steve!"

Over the roar of the creek, and the silence of the snow-patched forest, Bobby received a response: "Bobby."

It sounded like he was on the other side of the creek. No way, Bobby thought, that he was still in the creek. The night was as black as a theatre room. Bobby called back, almost certain now that he'd be reunited with his partner. He kept calling and yelling. Over and over again. But he received no answer.

After another 45 minutes of hiking, he reached the Otter Creek confluence. Assuming that Steve was, in fact, on the other side of the creek and that he was bushwhacking his way to the Otter Creek confluence, Bobby figured he was ahead of Steve. So he sat on his boat and waited. He sat there for an hour, waving his flashlight and blowing his whistle and hoping, hoping desperately to see Steve's beam of light slice through the darkness.

But he never did. So he started dragging his Fluid Solo and paddle down the Otter Creek trail. Early on, he saw something that still haunts him: fresh footprints in the snow. Footprints, he figured, that must have belonged to Steve. Somehow, Steve had gotten ahead of him.

For the next several hours, he hiked along the trail, searching for the footpath that crossed Otter Creek. He'd find it, follow it, then realize whatever it was that he was on was just a side trail. He tried searching for it by boat, ferrying back and forth across the swollen creek with his right hand clutching both the paddle shaft and his flashlight. Back and forth. Back and forth. He was ready to give up; to do what the survival experts insist: find a spot out of the rain and hunker down. But before doing that, he figured he could give it one more attempt. So he climbed up the muddy hillside, using downed logs and Rhododendron bushes as holds. Up there, he found the trail. Three miles and a swinging footbridge later, Bobby dragged his tired body, his Fluid Solo, and his paddle up to the parking lot, where his Subaru Forester was waiting for him.

"Alright, I'm here Steve," he was preparing to say as he closed in on the gold wagon. "Sorry I made you wait. It was a long hike out."

But Steve wasn't there. Steve had never been there.

STEVE GRAYBILL

Bobby's voice was blending into the darkness. So too were the logjams, boulders, and horizon lines. Steve knew he had created too much distance between himself and Bobby. He thought about waiting for him; about paddling to shore, finding the trail and bushwhacking the mile to the Otter Creek trail and then hiking the seven miles out.

But he didn't. Propelled by his unwillingness to spend a night in the December rain and the snow-patched Rhododendron, he kept going, running drops he knew he should have scouted. Eventually, he noticed, he could no longer hear Bobby. And he knew Bobby could no longer hear him. For the first time all day, Steve was alone. And that scared him. So he promised himself he'd run just two or three more drops and then he'd hike out. The rapids did seem to be easing a bit and though he couldn't see detail, he could still tell the difference between whitewater and a boulder; between a boulder and a log—or so he thought.

The very next rapid began with a deep-water slide. It had a curling seam in its center, which flipped Steve leftward onto a subsurface



Steve Graybill and his girlfriend
Helene Scalliett, prior to the
December incident.

boulder. The boulder ripped the paddle from his grasp. He hand-rolled, saw his paddle drifting toward a boulder, and began stroking toward it.

As he closed in on his stray paddle, he realized something that would affect his immediate fate more than any decision he had made in the last 12 hours: The paddle wasn't drifting into a boulder. It was drifting into a strainer, and he, like a hunted bear, was following it into a tangled, sprawling trap.

In that epiphany, Steve abandoned the paddle and backstroked toward the left bank. But a strong thread of current grabbed his stern. The current thrust Steve downstream and yanked him upside down, just as it sucked him over the next seven-foot ledge. On his way down, Steve bashed his head against the bedrock three or four times. Something smashed his nose. Ripped his lip. Split the flesh above his eye. He was disoriented, but still attempted a hand roll, which failed. He pulled his skirt and swam left, where he dragged his tired body onto

"A HORRIBLE THOUGHT CREPT INTO HIS BRAIN: HOW COULD HE BE SURE HE WAS GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?"

the snowy bank and doubled over. As the current and the eddy fought over his yellow Wave Sport Y, Steve watched the blood draining out of his face turn the snow at his feet from white to bright red. He never even thought to retrieve his boat; or about the flashlight, Clif Bar and bottled water that he had tucked into its stern. His mind was consumed with something even more basic.

Steve knew he was losing too much blood to survive out there. He called for Bobby and when he heard no reply, he started hiking. Steve knew the Moore Run confluent with Otter Creek about a mile downstream and that Otter Creek merged into the Dry Fork seven miles later. He also knew a trail accompanied Otter Creek all the way to the Dry Fork and that Bobby's Subaru Forester was sitting there. All he had to do was find the Otter Creek trail.

For 15 minutes, Steve thrashed through Rhododendron until he reached a sort of game trail that ran along the Moore Run. The trail was clear enough that he was able to jog. For about 45 minutes, Steve really believed he was going to make it out. But the night got darker. And his left foot plunged into uneven terrain. His ankle rolled, his ligaments stretched and sprained. Now he was hobbling. Dragging his left leg. Every once in a while, something—a branch or a leaf—would reach out from the darkness and jab Steve in the nose, re-opening the bloodflow.

He kept stumbling along the creekbank for another few hours—his ankle sprained, his nose clotting, then bleeding, clotting, then bleeding again—until a horrible thought crept into his brain: How could he be sure he was going in the right direction? Just to be sure, he trampled back down to the creek and dipped his hand into the water.

It was flowing the wrong way. He was going the wrong way. He was more confused than he'd ever been in his life.

For the first time that day, Steve realized he was going to be spending the night in the forest. He could not find any flat terrain, of course, so he had to be content with a spot with a downed tree below him—that would arrest his tumbling descent into the creek if he were lucky enough to fall asleep—and a slightly overhanging rock that provided his head with some intermittent protection from the rain.

For the next 10 hours, Steve developed a ritual that began with a set of jumping jacks, pulling the sprayskirt over his head and torso, covering himself with leaves; talking out loud, so he could detect the intrusion of hypothermia in his speech; dozing for five, maybe 10 minutes; praying out loud to God that he might allow Steve to see his parents and girlfriend again; that Bobby was okay and finally, removing the sprayskirt so he could look around to see if morning had come yet.

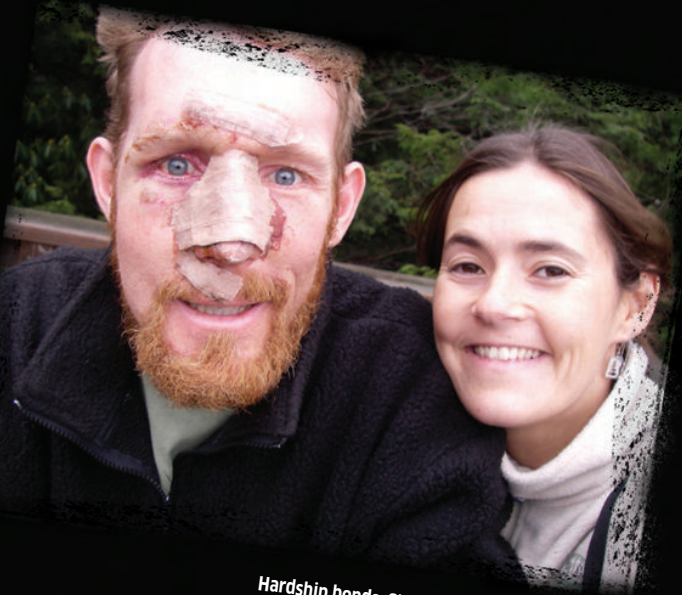
It was the longest night of Steve's life; one that began no later than 8 p.m. But like all nights, it ended. Not immediately

with a dramatic sunrise that lit up the tiny creek, but with the slow illumination of dark gray clouds. He trampled downstream along the bank for 90 minutes before he saw where he needed to be—the Otter Creek trail on the other side of the creek. He'd have to swim.

He identified a couple of eddies on the other side; divided from him by a Class II section of current. He was too tired to prevent the current from dragging his body below the eddies and into a hole, which sucked him in and spat him into the middle of the creek. But he managed to swim out above a more serious rapid and resumed his escape—this time down a well-maintained, eight-foot-wide path.

Around the next corner he saw two hikers walking toward him. Maybe, he thought, they could help him. Maybe they'd have some water they could share with him; or a little food. Wouldn't that be great?

The hikers had water and food. They had warm, dry clothes, hand-warmers, bandages, bottled water, cool mint Clif Bars. The hikers were Helene and Alden.



Hardship bonds. Steve and Helene married shortly after the Moore Run misadventure.