

Winter 2015

## Missing

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### Recommended Citation

Nickol, Ben (2015) "Missing," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 82 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss82/8>

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MISSING

Dusk arrived at three. The throngs jamming the chairlifts evaporated, revealing the corded lanes that all day had organized them. It was like the discovery of a skeleton. Below the village, down the road to town, the terraces of parking drained, revealing expanses of stained snow.

Claire, who hadn't skied that day but who nevertheless wore snow bibs and a parka, crossed from the hotel to the bar at the lodge. Luke, the bartender, came down the taps and flicked a towel at her. He poured her a beer.

"What's going on down here?"

"It's a bar," Luke said, and set the glass in front of her before walking back to the kitchen. Sipping her beer, Claire watched the patrons at other tables, and some men playing pool. The bar's windows, all down the wall, were darkening slabs of ice. The men finished a game and started another, the balls lurching into the carriage. She walked over. "Who's the pro here?" she said.

"This guy," one of them said.

"Har, har," said his friend. He racked the balls, "You want to play?"

She shot a game with them. Between shots, she considered angles and options, but then stepped to the table and simply fired at the densest cluster, hoping commotion masked incompetence. The game finished, and something passed between her new friends. "We're headed out," one said. "Have a good one." And they drifted off.

She ate dinner at the bar, where Luke checked in on her.

"I'm out of here," she told him. "I'm done with it. All of it."

He followed his wiping hand down the counter. When he returned, some minutes later, he said: "So what were you saying?"

"Fuck you."

She took her food to a table by the window, where a chill exhaled from the glass. She was at the window when the night skiing came on, the lamps strung like pearls into the sky, through which floated skiers, just small shards of darkness chipped free and falling—and at the window when she saw, high above the night skiing, some lights all their own, floating oddly up the ridgeline.

And at the window when they came through the bar with the photograph.

They were ski patrol guys in red jackets with white crosses. They stopped at the first table and handed the photo around. She couldn't see it, but saw the sober way each person studied it, then passed it on, shaking his head. They brought it to Luke, then to her.

"Have you seen this girl?" one of them said.

She looked at the photo. A girl in summer, standing in tall grass. "Who is she?" The photo was so warm. She doubted, on such a night, she'd recognize anyone photographed in sunlight and grass. She handed the photo back, "I'm sorry."

"If you see her, call the desk. All the phones 9-1-1 the desk."

"Andie," the other one said.

"What?"

"Her name's Andie."

When they'd left, the bar was still. The music, which before had been unnoticed, now was a sharp, ugly presence, like a provocative sculpture. She went to the bar. "God," she said, but Luke was on the phone. Other people crowded around her. Finally Luke hung up. "They lost her," he said, "She went off the ridge."

"Jesus," Claire said.

"They're getting ready," said someone at the window. The group of them, Luke included, left the bar and crowded at the glass. Below, under flood lamps, a team of riders ran checks on snow machines, their exhaust fogging the night. Before they left, one of them stood on his machine and addressed them through a bullhorn. He gestured at the mountain, finning his hand up routes. Finally he climbed down and the riders, saddled in pairs on the machines, some with skis or snowshoes strapped to their backs, tore out through the dark.

Everyone had a drink, then Luke closed the bar and they went downstairs. The ski patrol office, behind its glass partition, was bustling, people zipping back and forth. Farther within, at a vast topographical map, stood a cluster of gesturing officials. They weren't alone in convening there. People came in sweatpants and pajamas, or clomped down the stairs in boots. Luke talked to some guys from the kitchen, still in their breasted jackets. When he

returned, Claire said: “We need to do something.”

“Do what?”

“Do you know the patrol guys?”

“They don’t need us, Claire.”

Something was happening. Someone was pushing through the crowd. It was the guys she’d seen earlier, the guys with the photo. “Claire...” Luke said, but she stepped past him and blocked their way. “Hey,” she said.

The men tried to step past her, but she got in front of them. “Hey,” she said again. “I want to help.”

“Ma’am,” one said.

“I’m serious.”

They tried to step past her, but again she stepped in front of them. In the end, to appease her, they printed off some photos she could take around. She tried to find Luke, but he’d left.

For all the commotion in the lodge, it was a still, deserted night. The night skiing was off. Floating up the dark mountain, like phosphorescent bubbles, were the isolated stabs of snow machines’ headlamps. She heard their engines, vaguely, but then was walking and heard only her own breath and crunching snow.

The hotel was dark, but she left photos at the desk and by the fireplace. A man crossed the lobby and she put one in his hand. “Her name’s Andie. She’s missing.”

“Jesus,” the man said, and she kept going. She left copies by the elevator and courtesy phones. After the hotel, she walked down the road, knocking at cabins and condos. Most of the doorways were dark, but where a door opened, she provided a photograph. “We’ve been looking since this afternoon. Any information...”

They were sorry to hear that, they said.

“We need to find her. If you see her...”

If they heard something, they’d be in touch. They were sorry, they said. She moved down the road. It was a cold night, but away from the

village a milky light that was almost warmth descended through the pines. Below, in the valley, lay the shimmering lights of town. At the end of the road, an old couple answered in pajamas. The man fumbled glasses onto his nose, “What’s this?”

“It’s her photograph. She’s missing.”

He held the picture away from him, then studied Claire over his frames.

“If you see her, you need to call that number.”

“We will,” the man said.

“My name’s Claire,” she said.

When she returned, the room where the crowd had formed was vacant and dark. The only light came from the ski patrol office, where now a lone man stood at the map. Others sat at a table with papers and laptops. Stenciled on the door were the words STAFF ONLY, but in her hand were the rest of the photographs. She stood in the dark, rapping the sheets on her thigh.

When she entered the room, a woman looked up from the table and said, “Excuse me?”

She lifted the pictures. “The flyers,” she said. “Mike had me pass them out.”

“Mike?”

It’d been a guess. Still, she kept on: “Are these not yours?” She brandished the flyers.

The woman studied Claire, then nodded at a shelf. Claire set the photos on the shelf, then waited, watching the woman work. “What can I do?” she said.

The woman again lifted her eyes. She folded her arms and sat back.

“Who are you, again?”

“Mike had me help. He said to help.”

“Anyone know a Mike?” the woman said.

There were shrugs. “Could be a Mike,” someone said. “Could be with County.”

“He said to help out. I’m helping out. What do we need?” Claire said.

“Look,” the woman said, “we don’t need...”

“Coffee? Anything like that?”

Some heads lifted.

“What about food?”

“Or,” the woman threw up her hands, “you could bring us some food. Sure.”

Claire left and crossed to the hotel, where after bickering with a clerk and manager she was shown into the pantry. Everything she took—salads, sandwiches, breads—the clerk recorded and added to her room bill. When she returned to the office, carrying plastic bags and an urn of coffee, she was greeted like family. “There’s our girl,” one said. “Atta girl.”

They circled like hyenas, peering in bags. Once they were eating, she asked about the search.

“Nothing yet,” one said.

“No?”

“It’s a lot of land,” another said. He was an older guy by the room’s standards, a handsome guy. A radio crackled, and he unclipped it and jammed buttons. “Fucking thing,” he said.

“So what do we do?” Claire said.

“We invest in radios. Fucking Soviet era. Look at this thing.” He showed it to her.

“Let me see that,” one of the young guys said, and the old guy tossed it to him. “Fucking radioshkinev,” he said.

They ate awhile, chewing their food like cud, before the old guy stood and fed his arms into a jacket.

“Where’re you going?” Claire said.

“Here,” the woman said, “take them the weather.” She handed the man a printout.

“Wait,” Claire said, and pulled on her coat. She grabbed the coffee urn.

“No,” the woman said. “No, you’re staying here.”

“No, I’m not,” Claire said.

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Any vehicle that could go up the mountain already had, but Charlie, the old guy, called a lift operator, who met them at the quad. It'd been frigid earlier, but now it was arctic. The sky had cleared, releasing all fumes of warmth. They floated through the housing, then jumped cables and flew into the sky, each breath cutting her lungs.

It was a still night. Even soaring in the air things were still. Trees ghosted by, slumped in their wedding cakes of snow. What light there was emanated from the snow, from within, as if an overcast day had dropped from the sky and now smoldered on the mountainside. Stars shone above them, and to their left and right. The valley glimmered.

Charlie poured coffee. "Should you check in with Mike?" he said.

"Who?" she said.

He laughed. "Look, I don't care." He gave her a cup, then poured for himself. "I get it, I think. It's a good feeling."

"It's not about how it feels," she said.

"No," he said. "Of course not."

They floated up the mountain. As they neared the ridge, a wind kicked up, carrying grit that stung her eyes. The chair swung wildly. Within the blur, passing from view, were the floodlights and orange tent of the search party.

Inside, the tent was musty, and surreally lighted, as if it were surrounded by fires. There were tables and cots, and at the far wall a kerosene heater that looked like a cage for something radioactive. The walls sagged with wind, an icy draft leaking through. The two men in the tent stood when they entered, and conferred awhile with Charlie. They poured coffee without acknowledging where it'd come from. They studied the weather printout. Finally, one of them glanced at her.

"Oh," Charlie said. "And this is..." He snapped his fingers.

"Claire," she said.

"Claire. She's from County."

"You're not a monitor, are you?" one of them said. He was bald, with

thin stubble where his hair would grow. “What, are they making us accountable?”

“That’s what it sounds like,” the other said.

“Unacceptable,” the bald one said. “Unacceptable.”

“I’m just helping out,” she said.

“Well, that’s fine. But let’s keep that monitoring to a minimum. I’m Scott,” he shook her hand, “and this is Sam.”

From outside came the surging rip of engines, something like chainsaws, and then abrupt silence. Two men ducked into the tent, covered in snow. “Wind’s blowing!” one of them shouted in his helmet. Then they removed their helmets. “Hey,” one said. “Who’s she?”

Scott brushed them off. “That’s our monitor,” he said.

“They making us accountable?”

“Let’s go,” Scott said.

While the new guys unzipped, Scott and Sam zipped up. They pulled on gloves, took helmets from the rack. “Monitor?” Scott said, offering her a helmet.

“I’m going?”

“Got to find Andie, don’t we? Yeah, you’re going. Let’s go.”

In the floodlights, the snow was a whirling blindness, like sand infused with glare, but they soared off the ridge and soon the snow was confined to their headlamp. She gripped Scott’s torso, her chin at his ear. The headlamp passed over tracks, and caught in its scalloped periphery the low hang of timber. “Where’re we going?” she shouted, but the helmet reverberated her voice. She doubted it went anywhere, and if Scott replied she didn’t hear.

They followed a descending track, in the bend of which she saw, over her shoulder, the headlamp of the other machine. It was far back, drifting through the trees like a spirit. After a while, they arrived at a boundary rope. Scott stopped the machine, exhaust wafting forward, and lifted his visor, “You good?”

“Yeah,” she said.

The other machine stopped beside them. “Do the basin?” Scott yelled,

and Sam flashed his thumb.

Scott clapped his visor down and idled forward, lifting the rope over their heads. They went through a creek bed, then climbed out in timber. There was no path then, just snow. What had been a sturdy machine now wavered beneath them, like a kite. They ascended a ridge and she leaned with Scott's body. Off the back of the ridge, he leaned back against her. She watched trees pass over. In the ambience of their headlamp, the trees were like discovered things, their boughs shielding faces.

They crossed a meadow, the two machines in tandem, then angled off and killed the engines. Sam tossed them snowshoes, each shoe thumping the powder, then dropped his own and stepped on.

"You used these things?" Scott said.

"Yeah."

"They're pretty easy."

"I've used them," she said.

The shoes were steel hoops with plastic stretched over them. They shifted when she stepped on, and she had to catch herself on Scott's shoulder. She leaned and fumbled the straps.

"Other way," Scott said. He jumped in the snow and fixed the shoes himself. He climbed out and strapped on his own. He turned on his headlamp, then Claire's. Sam handed them poles.

"We ready?" Scott said.

They killed the snow machines' headlamps, and instantly the world was three glowing embers. They started out, but almost immediately her shoes caught the powder. She leaned on one foot and worked the other free, but the next step it happened again.

The headlamps swung back at her. "Step higher," Scott said.

"What?"

"Higher. You ever wear your dad's loafers? Walk like that."

It was difficult, but eventually she squared a step, and another, and then it was working, they were fanning up the mountain. As she climbed, Claire peered at the surrounding darkness. For such open wilderness, it felt

close around her. She had her radius of light and smoking breath, beneath which passed snow, like seafloor in the lamp of a submarine. Brush appeared, its tangled shadow stalking wide of her, and then cattails, their heads so thick the snow couldn't fall through. She saw birches, invisible in that whiteness except as a picket of shadows.

The creek they followed corralled her Scott's direction. When she reached him, he was inspecting boulders in the current. He stepped to one, then to the opposite bank. He offered a pole and helped her across. With Sam on the first bank, they fanned up the drainage, their headlamps flashing the water.

After a while, Scott called the girl's name. "An-die!" he called. And then Sam joined him, "An-die!" Claire expected an echo, but there was none. The night swallowed it.

"An-die!" Scott said, and then said: "Monitor, where are you? Let's hear it."

"An-die!" she called.

"Louder," he said, and she called out again: "An-die! An-die, where are you, girl?"

They passed through timber, the pines slipping among them. It was hard going, her legs gelatinous and quivery, but she kept on. They came out in a meadow, where the creek vanished in drifts. Her lamp passed through thickets, at the deepest of which she paused and parted branches, craning her beam at the shadows.

"An-die!" Scott called.

"An-die!" Sam echoed.

It was farther, near the top of the meadow, that their voices found each other. "An-die," Sam said, and his tone lay as a platform for Scott, who after a pause sang, "Oh, my sweet An-die!"

They fell silent, peering in brush, but their melody lingered. Finally Scott took it up again. "You're caught in the snow..."

"Don't know where to go..." Sam said.

And after a moment Scott crowned it: "Come out from the woods,

and we'll take you home!"

"An-die!" Sam began.

"Oh, my sweet An-die!"

And then together: "Caught in the snow, don't know where to go, come out from the woods and we'll take you home!"

"An-die!" Claire began, and they loved it, they howled: "Oh, my swe-eet An-die!"

"Belt it, Monitor!"

She sang: "Caught in the snow, don't know where to go, come out from the woods and we'll take you home!"

"An-die," Sam began.

They were singing like that, and searching the timber over the meadow, when night paled to morning. They reached the rock field at the top of the basin and circled back to the machines.

In the tent, they flopped on cots and melted together as a single thing, their nerves interwoven. They were so tired, so linked, that it seemed any one of them could touch any other, and it would be permissible. It would be no different than touching oneself. Once, Claire walked outside and watched a helicopter thumpet up the mountain, its nose to the pines. As it lowered, the snow beneath it billowed and raced off. But then she went inside again. She wished to dwell in that heat forever.

That afternoon, the search was suspended. Weather had moved in, a blackening howl that surged the tent walls, knocking gear from the shelves and once blowing out the heater. They were joined by others, other heat and voices. Then that evening, the call came through: they were taking people down.

They walked out into blackness, and hard cold. Near the tent idled a massive snowcat, the storm whirling its headlamps. They piled in with other guys, guys from County. Finally the engine snorted, and they lurched into motion. As they descended, the guy next to Claire wiped his glove on the fogged window. "Not looking good," he said.

When no one replied, he said, "This one's on the books."

They nosed off a ledge and down a steep slope of powder. No one endorsed the man's opinion, but also no one disputed him, and soon the air sagged with defeat. They seemed already to have called it. The group of them, in that cab, seemed already disbanded.

"They won't call it," Claire said.

No one answered.

She said, "Well they haven't called it yet. It's still going."

The village appeared in the windshield, a milky haze from which the hotel and lodge gradually dissociated. The cat parked at the lodge and cut its engines. "We're still doing this," Claire said, but the men were gathering gear, wandering off. She managed to marshal maybe five of them, Scott and Sam included, but even these five were only too tired to resist. "Let's go, let's get some rest," she said, herding them towards the hotel. She guided them through the lobby and into the elevator. In her room, they peeled off coats and snow pants and hung them in the bathroom. They draped socks and gloves on every doorknob, rod, lampshade. "Okay, what do we want?" She picked up the phone, "I'll get food. What do we want?"

But when the kid from the kitchen knocked at the door with soup and tuna sandwiches, with French fries, pasta, and rolls, no one answered. He knocked again, then swore under his breath and pushed the cart up the hall.

In the room, they'd collapsed like narcoleptics on the bed and floor. Someone had hit the lights, but that was it. They lay where they'd fallen.

Though even sleeping, if she could be said to be sleeping—it was more nearly a fugue of near-sleep not wholly distinct from waking, from trudging drifts—even then, there was an ache in her. She lay on the bed between two of them, one before and one behind, and at some hour, in the dark, she reached for them. The one before her she gripped with her hands, drawing him near. But he was out cold. She pressed into the body behind her. He didn't respond, but she stayed there, coaxing, until he stirred and they stirred together. It would go on like that, she believed. Garments drawn aside, he would press and discover her. They would fall through shared breath. But no—they were still again. He was sleeping.

In the morning, a shovel was scraping under the window. A newspaper thumped the door. And in the room's pale light, it was hard to believe any part of the night was recoverable.

"Let's go, we've got to go," she said, climbing stiffly from the bed. She shuffled over them, their sleeping forms, and hit the lights. She went to the window, already pulling on gloves. Only nothing had changed. The lodge, maybe sixty feet off, was visible only as a grainy thing, an irregularity of shadow. A man in a neon coat trudged at the wind.

"It snowing?" someone mumbled.

For a long while, as the rest of them slept, she remained at the window. Something would happen, she believed. The weather would lift. But it snowed, and gradually the men in her room rose and shuffled to the bathroom, sorted for coats. They wandered out, thanking her vaguely. Soon, it was just Sam and Scott.

A radio squawked, and Sam punched buttons. "Repeat," he said, resting the receiver against his eyes. There was static, then: "No go. We're shutting it down."

Then the two of them left, too.

That day and the day following, Claire stayed in her room. Something still would happen, she believed. Snow machines would convene at the lodge. But the weather cleared, and rather than snow machines the village filled with smiling throngs. They packed the chairlifts. Under a canopy by the lodge, a woman was giving massages.

After checking out, she stopped by the bar. Luke was wiping counters.

"Well lookie here," he said.

She mounted a stool, "What're you doing?"

"What's it look like?" He walked down the bar and flipped on the TV.

"I'm leaving," she said. It hurt to say. It was like the pronouncement of some dreaded thing, past which there was no orientation, no gravity. Only Luke was confused. "Again?" he said. "You've got to make up your mind."

He had no idea about any of it.

"I know."

“That’s your problem,” he said. “You’re always going somewhere.”

Outside, every surface was aflame. Eyes throbbing, she made her way to the parking lot, where the valet had her car.

The road off the mountain wound through cabins and condos, then fell through heavy timber. She drove slowly, her breath fogging. It was weeks before the doctor from Spokane, skiing the glades under the lift, glimpsed the mitten or part of the hat, the pink scrap clinging to brush—glimpsed it and skied on. It wasn’t her, he decided. What was her name again? Angie something, Annie. He’d read about it. But they’d lost her out of bounds, out in the canyons. You died in the canyons, skiing beyond the ropes. Inside, they would hear your screams.