





Down Death Hollow

Following Everett Ruess and a desert-rat ethic

HERE'S ANOTHER FOOL APE clinging to a Utah wall for life. Naked except for boots, sun-burnt, soaking wet. Looking for a hat.

I crawl out on the lip of rock where the hat has blown and look down: Off the cliff edge are welcoming arms of poison ivy hailing to heaven 30 feet below. Not a fatal fall, with luck. But the ivy ... even the cliff fears the poison ivy in Death Hollow, which grows in bunches the size of yachts. *Toxicodendron rydbergii* loves water, and in Death Hollow there is water beyond the dreams of desert kingdoms, water in narrows and in subways and in chutes and ladders, water in gold and silver coinage when the sun cracks the canyon.

The poison ivy drinks at it from every bank. Now if I slip trying to grab my hat, consider the possibilities: Here comes first of all a full-body dose of the ivy, head to toe, mummified in the oils ... and maybe a broken ankle at the bottom of the fall ... and three days' hike out in the stumblings of the water. Or not.

I think about Everett Ruess, Utah's loneliest canyoneer, who also got a body dose of *toxicodendron* and who, in the winter of 1934, at the age of 20, having left a precocious collection of art and poems and travelogues, vanished into the Escalante country and was never found. His last recorded camping spot was at the mouth of the Escalante River, nine miles from its confluence with Death Hollow.

That's where Mike Dolan and I started, right by the cottonwoods in a place very like where Ruess prepared his final journey.

With high, saffron-colored walls that lurch out of sandy corridors, slot canyons like this one (left) can trap lone hikers in a sudden downpour. For some, the solitude is as spectacular as the scenery.



"I have seen almost more beauty than I can bear ... I am always being overwhelmed. I require it to sustain life."

—Everett Ruess



THE MORNING WE SET OUT, bound down-canyon along the weak-kneed little trickle of the Escalante River, I made a joke about early birds getting the worm. "No person in his right mind," laughs Dolan, "wants the worm."

Good credo for canyoneering. We planned four nights in Death Hollow, maybe five, with food enough for six, time enough for ever. "Not into the adrenalin junkie thing," Dolan had said, and it was agreed. "Mountain bikers, rock climbers, the whitewater freaks, the ski bums—can't understand 'em, don't want 'em around. I'm a backpacker. I go into wilderness and I do *nothing*. Boring! I sit. I think. I read." A desert-rat ethic.

I imagine sometimes that Dolan is the last of the desert rats. "Oh, they're still out there," he tells me. "In the Gila region in New Mexico, along the San Francisco River, I met one in a canyon. He was a kid, 18, had a whole library on his back. Alone. *Reading.*" *Reading*—Dolan said it as if it was the only thing that mattered.

Everett Ruess, the desert rat/boy artist and poet, had the same mind for learning. He was a good enough artist that he traded prints with Ansel Adams. Then he'd disappear for six months into the Sierra Nevada or the Grand Canyon or the Navajo country.

As a society we don't trust people like Ruess and Dolan,



those with small footprints but also ample brains, those who could—but don't—have homes or cars or mortgages or purchasing power. In the big cities, we call them "the homeless" or "the jobless" and shake our heads—their situation looking desperate, a trap. In the West, in the high lonesome country of the corners where Utah and Colorado and Arizona meet, we might call them free, because they have space to be free. To wit: Dolan in the canyonlands, talking about Everett Ruess and all the canyons he and Ruess had seen; talking about the rocks like old friends, and about the places where he'd followed Ruess's steps; living for weeks alone in his tent, and sometimes in no tent at all, on the ground on a pad and a tarp; surviving on peanut butter and on water from seeps; mad with the stardust of those perfect, clear spring nights broken only by dust storms. Dolan, who grew up in Boston studying drums, teaching music, and working at a bar his father owned, and then making good money as a day trader and a wine merchant; who 10 years ago, at the age of 34, abandoned the city of his birth and all his possessions (four drum sets, 100 cymbals, 2,000 books); who came West and worked for Greenpeace and the Earth Island Institute as a canvasser and cold caller; who can boast, as of last count this spring, of hitchhiking 350,000 lifetime miles ("I never drive!"); who last year spent 200 days in the open air, surviving the agon of a



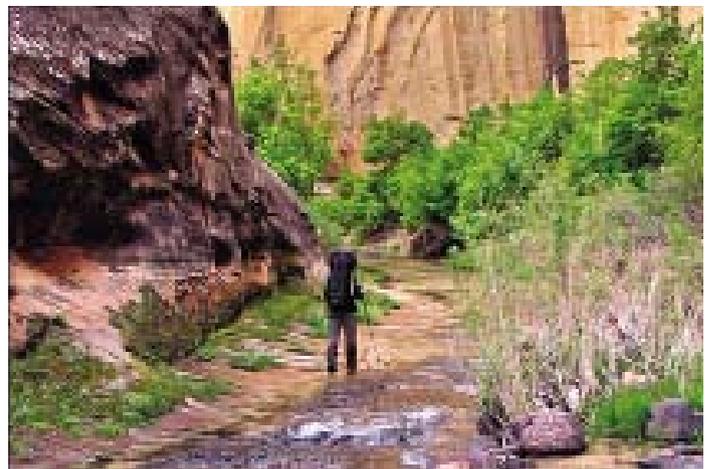
Mike Dolan (above) gave up his job, money, and status to become a desert rat, a lover of time without time, and a fanatic for the beauty of redrock canyons. "Most of my friends are locked in ... Mortgage. Credit card debt. Huge cars. More debt. Unhappy. Working all the time. They think I'm crazy," Dolan says. "There just doesn't seem to be a middle path anymore. You're either locked in, or you're locked out."

The Escalante wilderness (above and far left) drew the young Everett Ruess (black-and-white photo) in the 1930s. He disappeared at age 20, leaving behind nothing but art, poetry, travelogues, and a couple of mules. "I've done things alone," Ruess wrote, "chiefly because I never found people who cared about the things I've cared for enough to suffer the attendant hardships."



Durango winter (man vs. frozen-zipper-on-tent); who can tell you that Mormon tea is also called Mormon scrub brush and is so named because it has silica in it, which helped Mormons in the wild scour their pots; who can assure you that Flann O'Brien's best book is *At Swim-Two-Birds*, that conservationist Bob Marshall hiked at least 30 miles a day, and that Death Hollow is exactly 29 miles long, the first 11 bone-dry at the highest elevations but the lower 18—our goal—an obstacle course of waterfalls, pools, boulders, continuous wading. "Big water," says Dolan. "Cold. There've been two deaths I know of. Hypothermia."

DEATH HOLLOW, LIKE DEATH VALLEY, is one of those desert zones secretly spilling with life, but named for gruesomeness because human beings were unable to subjugate the place. Ranchers particularly had trouble getting their cattle up into Death Hollow, the creatures breaking legs, drowning, needing to be shot. Hence, along the twists of the wide and easy-riding Escalante River Canyon, the ground is beaten-down, cow-burnt and desertified, browned with invasive weed trees—Russian olive and tamarisk—and the river itself is foggy, limp, warm as urine ... but this devastation stops at Death Hollow. Here, suddenly, the water runs fast and silvery between banks of oak and willow and cottonwood and box elder and hackberry and intricate wild-haired tapestries of grass, all embraced in the



rich black-green explosions of poison ivy.

The ivy forces us full on into the river and it's slow going: quicksand everywhere, boots packing with mud, potholes hidden in the froth of the water, and the rocks underfoot like iced bowling balls ... but we are too thrilled to care much about broken limbs or soaked packs and I even laugh at the way the poison ivy stretches out to say hello. At last, we find a camp in a bed of sand as soft and warm as velvet, under a great, monstrous, overhanging promontory of salmon-colored stone, ensconced by walls of the promiscuous ivy. Dolan spreads out on a holey old tarp with his only belongings, what he can carry on his back: He has cook stove, pots, water filter, tent,

Desert rats wearing backpacks blissfully wade through washes while the sun rolls against the high cliffs. In some parts of the wilderness, the ground is beaten-down and cow-burnt but this devastation stops at Death Hollow. There, water runs fast and silvery between banks of oak and willow and cottonwood and box elder and hackberry and intricate wild-haired tapestries of grass, all embraced in the rich black-green explosions of poison ivy.

sleeping bag and pad, old gray shorts, old shoes worn thin as skin. Someone forgot all clocks. Time is told on that first day and night by the rising up and rolling down of the sunlight on the cliff, by the glimpse of Cassiopeia in the narrows turning her crown around the pole star. By the second day I am certain there is no time except canyon time, the song of the water in echo. Listening at night, sleepless with joy or half in dreams, I am compelled to remember the “thousand twangling instruments” that Caliban heard on Prospero’s Isle.

THE HEART OF THE NARROWS: the walls sheer, white-pink, 400, maybe 500 feet high. Tall as sky. “This is almost Zion,” Dolan will later say. All light refracted in the walls and sent forth as hue, haze, musical resonance, thrumming, and full of voices. The water so clear it moves like liquid glass. Fast as mercury. A glow of gem light from deep in basins sculpted like oyster shells. Sudden pools, deep and luxurious and long and oval, and colored like emeralds. The sinewy stone curretted by the flow. All this water, a gift from the 10,000-foot Aquarius Plateau to the north, the heights of the Water Bearer. Now I find a garden of boulders, now chutes and tiers and steppes, the water chasing end over end. Edging the sheer pools to avoid falling in—I always fall in. Not by accident. Time to swim laps when the sun hits the canyon floor.

I headed up alone, Dolan staying at camp. I thought of a story he told me regarding Sir Edmund Hillary’s famous climb up Mt. Everest. Everyone knows about Hillary making it to the peak, said Dolan, but almost no one knows about the Buddhist sherpa who led the way. “Not the conquering, arms-swinging Englishman saying ‘Me! Me!’ but the humble sherpa, who shrugged and said, ‘Not me.’”

High on a ledge, I found a spring of manganese as rich and thick as blood. Painted my face and chest with it.

That’s how I ended up with the wind stealing my hat. I’ll spare you the adrenalin-junkie moment that ensued. Suffice to say that the naked ape in a desperately calm maneuver retrieved the prize (favorite old desert slouch hat!), escaping with a finger grab on sandstone. Later I figured it was the spirit of Edmund Hillary that got me screwed to that wall and nearly into the poison ivy, and the spirit of the sherpa that got me down safe.

EVERETT RUESS, WHO SPENT three years wandering the Colorado Plateau on mule-back, sojourned for months alone in places similar to Death Hollow. “I have seen almost more beauty than I can bear,” he wrote. “I am always being overwhelmed. I require it to sustain life.” Occasionally this enthusiasm got him in trouble. “Yesterday morning I managed to pry my lips far enough apart to insert food,” he wrote in a letter to his family describing an attack of poison ivy in the summer of 1934, a few months before he disappeared. His eyes became “mere slits in the puffed flesh.” He “writhed and twisted in the heat, with swarms of ants and flies crawling” over his body, “while the poison oozed and crusted on my face and arms and back.”

There was another cost of this joy in wilderness, one that I noticed in Dolan. “I’ve done things alone,” Ruess wrote, “chiefly because I never found people who cared about the things I’ve cared for enough to suffer the attendant hardships.”

Soon, Ruess was gone down the Escalante River as it twisted into a region of slickrock and plummeting canyons as unexplored as Mars. Did he stop to look in Death Hollow on the way? Did the poison ivy scare him off? We don’t know. We know his burros were found near deep and remote Davis Gulch, 50 river-miles south, where Lake Powell now backs up into the Escalante. Search parties hunted far and wide but found no corpse. Did Ruess die? We assume so, but we don’t know for certain. And so his legend came to be: Ruess as the ultimate desert rat, who gave his final devotion to the canyon country, who could no longer live in civilization.

Sometimes I worry this will happen to Mike Dolan. One night he was pacing around under the cliff—a bout of awful insomnia—and woke me up, so we started talking. The problem with Dolan, it seems to me, is that he has given up on the notion of success in a system that, for many, is a soul-destroying hoax. “Most of my friends are locked in,” he told me. “Mortgage. Credit card debt. Huge cars. More debt. Unhappy. Working all the time. They think I’m crazy, giving up all my possessions. There just doesn’t seem to be a middle path anymore. You’re either locked in, or you’re locked out.”

I remember, not long after we climbed from Death Hollow, when Dolan crashed at my house last summer, how it was to be locked in. Having a roof over his head made him a nervous wreck, produced that same crushing insomnia. He stood up at 3 a.m., twitchy and hollowed out, his long hair Medusan from sweat, and gathered up his sleeping bag and pad and disappeared into the piñon forest out the door. For some reason, I thought I’d never see him again. **WJ**

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