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# The White Death

By Unknown

Some call it the "White Death"  
and an ancient riddle asks,  
what flies without wings,  
strikes without hands  
and sees without eyes?  
Every year more than a million  
avalanches fall world wide.  
Avalanches are simply part of  
our planet's natural order.  
It is only when we get in their way  
that tragedy strikes.  
Utilizing unique methods,  
we continue our quest  
to better understand the dynamic  
power of raging snow.  
But the magic of  
the mountains lures us...  
more and more place themselves  
in harm's way.  
My machine just moved over me  
and everything just started moving  
and I just yelled.  
I just screamed "Help me God."  
My whole life's flashing  
in front of my eyes.  
You go to inhale and you were just  
inhaling a mouthful of snow.  
I was sure I was gonna die.  
They're not to be trusted.  
They're awesome terrible things.  
They'll rip you to shreds.  
They'll Maytag ya.  
Something we need to  
learn something about.  
Annapurna in Nepal,  
one of the most dangerous mountains  
in the world.  
October 15, 1997.  
Brothers Jose Antonio  
and Jesus Martinez Novas,  
veteran mountain climbers from Spain  
plan to ascend over 26,000 feet  
to the summit.  
Cameraman Alejandro Rocha

is to record their departure  
from Camp 2  
and then await their return.  
Recent storms have left deep snow  
on the mountain side.  
It is slow going as the brothers  
set off to establish Camp Three  
some 3000 feet higher on the peak.  
An hour after they begin to climb  
they are just two tiny dots  
on the face of the mountain...  
as Allejandro shoots video  
from the tent.  
As he faces death.  
Allejandro captures  
a final self portrait.  
But just as it reaches the tent,  
the avalanche is spent.  
Allejandro is astonished  
to find himself alive,  
but has little hope for his friends.  
Are you alright?  
Like specters they emerge from  
the white eager to tell their tale.  
The following day  
the weather got worse  
and they were driven off Annapurna.  
Some 20 percent of the Earth's land  
mass is crowned by mountains.  
In the Andes, the Caucasus,  
the Himalaya,  
the Alps and the Rockies avalanches  
exert their terrible power.  
in the United States  
from Vermont to Alaska.  
And here deep in the back country  
of Alaska...  
Three experts are seeking to  
photograph the perfect avalanche.  
With cinematographer Steve Kroschel,  
world renowned avalanche experts  
Doug Fesler and Jill Fredston,  
are here both to trigger  
the snow slide

and ensure the safety  
of Kroschel's film crew.  
I realize the power of the avalanche  
and I try to capture that on film.  
I mean it really rouses people.  
It stirs in all of us something.  
I don't know, primeval.  
It's very interesting.  
But to get those images,  
I must go down into these  
dangerous zones  
where the avalanche  
is going to come down  
and if I make a mistake,  
if I'm wrong, it'll cost me my life.  
So being with people  
like Doug and Jill  
who are experts  
and know snow safety to a T.  
That's what their main objective is  
to make sure that  
I don't get killed.  
I'm aware of the lighting conditions  
that he wants.  
And I'm aware of the kind of  
avalanche he'd like to have.  
But sometimes I feel like  
I have to do a little reality check.  
Because there's exposure  
from crevasse fields  
that are in the run out zone,  
that people could fall down  
and have avalanche potential  
if they're on adjoining slopes.  
And so those are the things  
that I'm looking at.  
First and foremost I want to  
make it a safe spot.  
Can we go along this ridge to  
this little peak  
where that cornice is just  
go right along so I can look out.  
This is a good spot isn't it Doug?  
Well it's good so far up there.

This kind of concerns me  
all those seracs up above  
as far as landing down there.  
We'll have to take a look at that.  
This is the peak right here.  
That should rip out Doug.  
I believe it will rip out.  
Doesn't that look good to you?  
I don't like it because  
of the crevasses.  
And some of the exposure to  
some of these chunks of ice  
up here coming off.  
I don't think it's safe.  
It takes several hours to find  
the spot that satisfies everyone.  
It looks like we could drop  
charges right down  
in that little pocket there  
where the cornice is.  
Doesn't that look good to you?  
Yeah.  
Lower 'em in there like  
it's my unborn son.  
One camera is positioned inside  
a padded steel crash box  
which is placed directly  
in the path of the avalanche.  
Timing is everything  
in this mission.  
The camera must begin shooting  
when the avalanche is triggered  
or it will all be for nothing.  
One. Two. Three. Four. Five.  
Six. Seven. Eight. Nine.  
Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.  
Fourteen. Fifteen.  
OK!  
On your mark get set and go!  
Steve positions himself behind  
a second camera at a safe distance.  
Second one out.  
Okay keep going... keep going.  
Several sticks of high explosives

will be used to  
trigger the avalanche  
Most avalanches are  
naturally triggered,  
when the weight of the snow exceeds  
its ability to hold together.  
And most of these occur far  
from human eyes.  
I think the usefulness  
of seeing avalanches in motion  
is that a lot of the people  
that we deal  
with in our avalanche workshops  
have never seen an avalanche  
in motion before.  
But when they see  
this thing in motion  
and they see the power  
that's associated  
with an avalanche  
it's a wake up alarm  
Like the snowflakes  
they are composed of  
no two avalanches are alike.  
Even very small avalanches can kill,  
and the big ones are true monsters.  
They can attain speeds of  
over 200 miles per hour...  
traveling a mile or more  
on level ground.  
No place in avalanche country  
is entirely safe.  
In 1988  
the Austrian town of St. Anton  
which had not experienced  
an avalanche in over 60 years,  
was struck just after dawn.  
Houses which had stood for  
almost 400 years  
were destroyed in an instant.  
Remote areas in less developed  
countries are the hardest hit.  
The greatest known avalanche  
disaster took place in Peru

where an ice slide  
decimated the town of Yungay,  
killing 18,000 people.  
They're awesome terrible things.  
They'll rip you to shreds.  
They'll Maytag you.  
But they're also  
beautiful to watch,  
they're delicate,  
they're graceful, they dance.  
They're a double edged sword  
in that sense.  
They're not to be trusted.  
Something we need to  
learn something about.  
In the western world most  
avalanche victims place themselves  
in the path of danger,  
and see the mountains as  
a playground beautiful and benign.  
The interesting thing about  
avalanche accidents is that  
most of them  
happen on nice blue sky days.  
It's also very interesting to me  
that roughly 95% of the people  
who are caught in avalanches  
are the ones  
who triggered the avalanche.  
And really the question isn't really  
why is so and so getting caught,  
it's why did they let themselves  
get caught,  
because there's so much knowledge  
available today that nobody,  
nobody needs to get caught  
in an avalanche by accident.  
The trap is set over  
a period of time.  
One snow flake is light  
as a feather.  
But the stealthy accumulation  
of trillions can  
form massive layers weighing

millions of pounds.  
What triggers slides can only  
be discovered  
by digging into the snow pack.  
Doug Fesler introduces  
a group of students  
to the deadly archeology  
of a slab avalanche.  
What kind of force  
is it gonna take to rip it out?  
That's all I really need to know.  
First of all do I have a slab?  
I'll start feeling here and  
I feel resistance as I pull down.  
It goes fairly hard to begin  
with now it's starting to go going  
a little easier.  
A little more resistance again.  
Right here a little bit easier.  
Right through here is a crust layer.  
Now it's very easy right in there.  
Another shear plane possibly.  
This is a nasty shear plane.  
Look how this stuff just falls out  
of here.  
Shear planes allow colossal  
avalanches to be set off  
by the slightest disturbance.  
We're corroborating the opinion  
we have about the hardness  
and weakness of  
these various layers.  
This stuff is so weak it...  
just falls out.  
Intermediate faceted snow.  
The sugar snow.  
More people have probably died  
in the world as a result  
of this weak layer than  
any other weak layer there is.  
These snow crystals can be  
more dangerous than dynamite.  
Fluctuations in temperature  
cause some crystals



to lose cohesion  
and become slippery.  
These frozen ball bearings  
allow everything above to slide.  
Notice I have my hand ready  
just in case.  
Okay now we have a  
free standing column.  
Want to make sure the ski  
is nice and vertical.  
See how that came out just like  
it's spring loaded?  
By integrating all that  
information together  
there should be a picture flashing  
in front of your mind.  
And the picture is one of  
the serious instability that exists  
from a human triggered  
point of view.  
And so the message there is  
to stay away  
from steep leeward smooth slopes  
because those are the ones that  
are waiting to eat you.  
What I want you to do is  
on the count of three.  
I want you to go. One. Two. Three.  
Up in the air punch your heels  
in real hard. Ready Banzai warriors?  
One two three. Banzai!  
An avalanche on the move  
is a dynamic event,  
a slab will rip out new slabs,  
transforming, becoming ever larger,  
and triggering billowing clouds  
of powder.  
Fortunately, nature can warn  
of avalanches  
with subtle sights and sounds.  
But if you're hard blasting  
a 130 horsepower vehicle  
at 85 miles per hour,  
it's unlikely that you'll hear

or see any of nature's warnings.  
Snowmobiles can swiftly invade  
the heart of avalanche country.  
Riders enjoy jetting up  
a steep incline as high as they can,  
unwittingly teasing  
a potential avalanche.  
The game is called "high marking."  
Whoever gets the highest wins.  
These snowmobilers almost lost it  
all one morning near Kellogg, Idaho  
A friend videotaped the action as  
a wall of snow came plunging down.  
They would all escape unharmed  
and spend the rest of the afternoon  
tempting fate on other slopes.  
But in January 1998,  
three friends exhilarated by  
a crisp clear day outside of Bend,  
Oregon were not so lucky.  
It was all virgin snow.  
Everything was smooth and  
just real billowy and soft looking.  
And being the first one to make  
the tracks is kind of a thrill.  
That's where you really get your  
adrenaline going  
and just let the throttle do  
what you can with the machine.  
And we could get twenty or  
thirty miles away  
from anything and see country  
see a lot of country in a day  
that was nobody else was around.  
The snow just looked like a big  
a big pillow  
it was just smooth  
and soft looking.  
When you got on it it would kind  
of fall apart beneath you  
because there was nothing holding  
it from below.  
Both Art and I looked at this  
big clearing off to the right of us.

Art took a couple of stabs at  
and I watched him go up the mountain  
or go up the slope.  
He must have gone up I don't know,  
I'm guessing six seven eight times.  
He came down and I decided to go up  
and I got up on top and I got stuck.  
At that point in time  
I was pretty much stuck like this.  
So I got off the low side of my sled  
and pulled down on my front ski.  
My machine just moved over me and  
everything just started moving.  
I was almost to the bottom getting  
ready to turn around and go back up.  
I just got a big push from behind  
and snow dust everywhere.  
And when the dust had gone down  
enough I turned around.  
The snowmobile  
was buried to the seat  
and my legs were  
buried right along with it.  
And I turned around  
and I could see the ski  
of Brian's snowmobile, but no Brian.  
Buried alive, Brian has little more  
than 30 minutes to live.  
And when everything came to a stop  
it just turned real dark.  
My eyes couldn't focus on anything.  
And I went into a  
very frantic time frame.  
After trying to get control  
of the situation and just calm down,  
I tried to move anything and  
everything I possibly could.  
I tried to move a finger  
in my glove inside my glove  
and I couldn't even do that.  
And I ran up to where his  
snowmobile was  
and looked around  
but I didn't see any sign of him.

It's about the most helpless feeling  
you can have.  
You know that there's somebody  
that needs help  
and you don't have any idea  
where they are.  
The snow was compressed  
to my chin like this  
I... I could move...  
I felt my cheeks moving  
and my eye, my eyelids.  
I could only move my stomach inward.  
I just screamed.  
And after I calmed down  
I just remember saying  
"help me God."  
And we kinda started digging just  
with our hands within just a minute  
we realized that that wasn't  
getting us anywhere.  
We could only dig maybe  
a foot or two deep.  
It was just gonna take too long.  
So then I figured out  
that I thought we needed a probe.  
And I asked Mark if he had anything  
and all he had was a saw.  
So Mark took off with his saw to  
find a stick or tree  
or something that we could use.  
When you try to search for  
something you can move other  
then your lips and your eyelid  
you just surrender.  
I just remember surrendering.  
And I just kind of went to sleep.  
I didn't know what else to do.  
We were probing close to  
the snowmobile  
and started working up the hill,  
and probably within 10 probes  
I hit something that felt...  
it had some elasticity, it wasn't,  
it didn't feel solid.

And I told Mark I think I have him.  
Brian was seconds from dying  
of asphyxiation  
not just from the lack of air  
but from the extreme pressure  
on his chest  
Barely a few feet down, he might  
as well have been cast in concrete.  
They reached him just in time  
and learned a lesson they are  
eager to share.  
In retrospect there were some signs.  
And had we been as educated then  
as we are now  
about avalanches we probably  
would have recognized them...  
But the basic bottom line I think  
is just  
common sense and the awareness.  
Being snow smart out  
there carrying shovels and probes  
and beepers is a big factor.  
I would like to see the people  
that are gonna go in the back  
country get some basic survival gear  
and some basic survival knowledge  
and just try and be prepared for  
some of the events that can happen.  
Such events have been happening  
for thousands of years  
and no one has experienced a longer  
or more grievous struggle  
with the avalanche  
than the stalwart people  
of the Alps.  
In the Great Saint Bernard Pass  
sits a hospice founded  
in the 11th century to aid  
and protect weary travelers.  
Today the hospice  
still welcomes those  
who come to visit the ancestral home  
of the legendary Saint Bernard.  
In earlier times,

both the monks and their dogs  
quickly responded to travelers  
in distress.  
With their keen sense of smell  
and massive strength,  
nothing could stop  
the noble Saint Bernard  
from locating avalanche victims.  
During the several centuries  
that the Saint Bernards served  
at the hospice  
more than 2000 lives were saved.  
But the legendary brandy keg  
never actually hung around  
the Saint Bernard's neck.  
The tradition originated with  
beginning with Sir Edwin Landseer.  
The last thing a hypothermia victim  
needs is brandy.  
In World War I,  
the Alps saw  
a more sinister response  
to the danger of the avalanche.  
When Austrian and  
Italian armies met here,  
each side deliberately triggered  
deadly snow slides upon the other.  
An estimated 40,000 men were lost  
in this lethal use of nature.  
Avalanches are intentionally  
triggered today...  
but for  
an entirely different reason.  
Fire in the hole!  
Artillery and explosives are used  
in preemptive strikes,  
releasing potential avalanches,  
preparing the mountains  
for another kind of invasion  
Each morning before skiers  
hit the slopes  
the ski patrol hits them first,  
to make them safe.  
But for some a tamed mountain

is not a sufficient challenge.  
Extreme skiers seek remote places  
where the powder is fresh and alive.  
In 1996, three of them were shooting  
an adventure film  
that almost ended in disaster.  
Miraculously, they all survived.  
Others filming the glory  
of unbounded snow sports  
have pushed the margin  
of safety a little too far...  
These experts escaped  
with their lives  
but near ski resorts,  
those caught in unsafe  
areas can find themselves  
in trouble with the law.  
Here in Loveland Colorado,  
instead of going to jail  
this avalanche  
offender chose to be buried alive.  
I'm kinda scared right now actually  
to tell you the truth.  
Buried beneath the snow for up  
to half an hour,  
he'll have plenty of time  
to identify with avalanche victims  
And retrieving him is great training  
for the dogs.  
Angel search. That's good.  
Easily the furriest and friendliest  
part of any rescue effort,  
rescue dogs often arrive too late  
to save lives  
and end up being used  
to recover bodies  
Humans on the scene are usually  
the only ones who can help in time.  
Therefore avalanche safety schools  
across the country teach  
as many as possible the techniques  
of rapid rescue.  
Avalanche "victims"  
are taught various

means of escape and survival,  
such as using swimming motions  
to stay on top of the slide  
and creating a breathing space with  
their hands before the snow hardens.  
Radio beacons are a modern aid  
to fast rescue.

A transmitter worn by a victim emits  
a signal that others can home in on.  
But the best defense remains  
avoiding the avalanche altogether.

The danger is well known.

Warnings abound but sometimes  
they are discounted or ignored.

On January 23, 1998,

a French Alpine guide broke  
all the rules

as he led a group of teenage hikers  
and their teachers  
off of marked trails near Les Orres  
in the Alps.

None of them were wearing beacons.

Some of the children slammed  
into a grove of larch trees they had  
just walked through.

Their bodies caught in branches  
and wrapped around trunks.

More than 150 rescuers  
combed the scene  
in a heart breaking search  
for survivors.

Yet it could have so  
easily been avoided.

The group had discussed avalanches  
and had even watched  
a video illustrating the risks.

But when some of the children  
questioned the wisdom  
of hiking that day,  
they were ignored.

The accident gripped the heart  
of the nation.

Eleven died,  
nine of them school children.



It was the worst avalanche disaster  
to hit France in almost 30 years.  
the Cascade Mountains of Washington,  
disaster struck travelers who had  
never expected to even touch snow.  
Number 25, a Great Northern Railroad  
passenger train  
is followed by Number 27,  
Great Northern's fast mail train.  
Heavy winter storms  
trigger avalanches  
causing both to stop  
just before the Cascade Tunnel.  
On the following day  
the tracks are finally cleared  
and both trains  
slowly steam through.  
The trains are diverted  
to a side track  
outside the railroad town  
of Wellington.  
There they remain helpless.  
Crews work to clear the tracks  
but for each foot they clear  
another falls  
and the peaks above  
are a looming white wall.  
Without warning  
an avalanche crashes down  
from the mountains  
destroying the cook shack  
where passengers had eaten  
the night before.  
The tracks ahead and the tracks  
behind are now completely blocked.  
There is nowhere to go.  
Five days pass.  
Some passengers slog to Wellington  
for food and comfort,  
returning to the train to sleep.  
A few risk the perilous trek  
to the next town.  
Everyone else remains.  
Then on March 1st around 1:30 AM

the white death falls hard  
from the mountain.  
A slab a half mile long,  
and twenty feet deep  
surges over the tracks  
Rescue workers follow trails of  
blood in the snow to unearth bodies  
Mothers, daughters, salesmen, sons,  
lawyers, ranchers,  
shepherds and miners crushed beyond  
recognition in the frozen deluge.  
The final toll is 96 dead,  
with 22 survivors  
This remains America's worst  
avalanche disaster.  
In Europe, the threat of  
such tragedies has hovered over  
Alpine residents for centuries.  
Some homeowners fearing  
what their ancestors  
called the "avalanche beast"  
have built barrier walls  
for protection.  
A 17th century church meets  
the avalanche head on,  
like a ship plowing through  
a sea of snow.  
One of the best protections  
is the natural one.  
Dense forests of trees can prevent  
some avalanches  
and slow others down.  
Yet years of mindless deforestation  
have left some towns hanging  
precariously  
on the edge of disaster.  
Today as the slow process  
of reforestation continues,  
steel and concrete barriers do  
the work of trees.  
Although unsightly and expensive,  
they offer some protection.  
While the search for  
better methods continues.

With their dense population  
and mountainous landscape,  
the islands of Japan are a  
prime target for avalanche tragedy.  
A devastating slide hit  
near Niigata, in 1986.  
It was one of the worst avalanches  
to hit Japan since World War II.  
This disastrous slide would provide  
crucial data  
for scientists in Japan.  
Prompting Dr. Kouichi Nishimura  
of the Institute  
of Low Temperature Science  
at Hokkaido University  
to begin his research on avalanches.  
A computer model shows just how  
the tragic slide progressed.  
Here in Sapporo at the sight  
of the 1972 Olympics,  
he recreates an avalanche  
on a small scale  
to increase his understanding  
of the internal flow of snow.  
Tracking individual particles  
of snow  
as they behave in an avalanche  
is all but impossible.  
Nishimura's inspired substitute  
over 300,000 ping pong balls!  
The behavior of the balls  
will be fed into a computer  
to learn more about how hard,  
how far and how fast  
an avalanche will run.  
Dr. Nishimura hopes to  
better predict  
how and where it is safe to build.  
In Juneau, Alaska,  
that lesson has still to be learned.  
As the city has expanded  
into several avalanche paths,  
Juneau is a disaster  
waiting to happen

Just past 5 AM on March 22, 1962  
above Behrends Ave  
in the Highland district...  
a fast moving avalanche raced down  
Mt. Juneau  
and smashed into  
the neighborhood below.  
Miraculously no one was hurt.  
But there was  
an immediate public outcry.  
Yet none of this should have come  
as a surprise.  
Avalanches had fallen in the past  
and Behrends Ave lies directly  
in their path.  
Studies were commissioned.  
Plans were made,  
but nothing happened.  
Mayor Dennis Egan remembers...  
The city and borough of Juneau  
has spent  
hundreds of thousands of dollars  
doing avalanche research,  
doing studies.  
In fact what we did was list high  
hazard areas right on the maps  
so when folks see those  
and go out to purchase a home  
from someone else  
and come into  
our Planning Department,  
they'll know that they'll be buying  
a piece of property  
that's in a high hazard area.  
Now we tried to put language  
in the deeds that  
when the property was sold  
and was refinanced through lending  
institutions  
that they were  
in a high hazard area.  
But the property owners  
were violently  
opposed to it as well as

the financial institutions  
and it didn't pass.  
In fact, we had talked about  
a program to buy the properties back  
and the folks were violently opposed  
to that as well.  
It's the place they want to stay,  
it's the place they want to retire  
and they don't want anybody  
telling them what to do.  
They know they're  
in a hazardous zone  
but they've come to accept it.  
This summer I started in July  
and I've now built this deck  
and I'm working on this building  
which...  
I'm building as I think of it.  
I'm not  
I don't have an exact plan but it,  
I know what I want.  
I want a hot tub right here.  
I want to be able to see  
that avalanche come and get me.  
And I guess it's sort of  
a King Lear thing,  
uh blow ye winds and  
rage ye hurricaneos.  
I like the weather.  
I love the weather. It's everywhere.  
Apparently the risk of dying  
in an avalanche  
is less than that  
from choking on meat  
and I'm not a vegetarian  
so you know,  
it's just... whatever you do,  
wherever you live,  
I mean, people live in flood plains,  
people live in mud zones,  
people live in hurr...  
I went to school in Sarasota Florida  
where we waited for hurricanes  
on a regular basis.

You know, there's no place on earth,  
I don't think,  
that is completely hazard free.  
My friends they make jokes about it.  
They call this Fort Liston.  
And I get a charge out of it,  
I think it's pretty funny.  
And they say, well we know  
you're going to be seeing  
the avalanches coming down  
and I say... Bring it on!  
In 1972, a powder blast rocketed  
straight into the center of Juneau.  
Luckily by the time it hit town,  
it's energy had already dissipated.  
Many residents thought it was simply  
a fast and furious local blizzard.  
A look up should have been enough  
for all to see the truth.  
Experts say that it's not  
a question of "if"  
but "when"  
the next disaster will happen.  
While some choose to live  
in danger zones  
others must earn a living there.  
One of the most incredible  
survival stories  
took place at the Bessie G mine  
high in the La Plata mountains  
of Colorado.  
In November 1986, Lester Morlang  
was working frantically  
to build a snow shed  
with his partner, mentor  
and best friend Jack Ritter.  
We knew this storm was coming  
and we had to get this timber  
in place before the storm came.  
That was the whole purpose was  
to keep that old east portal open  
for our ventilation inside.  
Because of winter weather,  
the Bessie G had only been

worked three months a year.  
But Jack Ritter, who knew more about  
gold mining than just about anyone,  
had figured out how to  
operate her year round.  
Yet this was the worst weather Jack  
had seen in over a decade.  
Two feet of snow had already fallen  
and both men were  
in a race with the storm.  
Lester was in the bucket  
of the skip loader  
and Jack was handing him timbers  
when everything  
suddenly turned white.  
When it initially hit  
when I come out of the bucket.  
I'm sure that was only a matter  
of seconds before I landed.  
And just naturally  
you put your hands  
in front of your face  
in kind of ball up  
because you don't know  
what's happening to you.  
But for the first few seconds,  
my whole life's flashing  
in front of my eyes.  
And I'm seeing things  
I could never remember normally.  
I'm actually seeing things  
like my son graduating from college  
and you know I was sure  
I was going to die right there.  
Although the snow was  
packed loosely around him,  
Lester Morlang's odyssey  
had just begun  
When I come to of course  
I had my hands  
in front of my face  
and everything was packed.  
One of the first things I could do  
was get the snow away from my face

because you go to inhale  
and you were  
just inhaling a mouthful of snow.  
And then of course, I was screaming  
for Jack, you know, I just,  
screaming and crying  
and everything at the same time.  
I mean it's trying to  
take your mind over.  
Jack was already dead.  
And now... buried only  
a few feet from Lester,  
the skip loader's diesel engine was  
spewing deadly exhaust  
into the snow.  
I could feel the vibration  
in the snow and I could hear it,  
definitely hear it and I knew  
to keep away from it  
because I knew it would have been  
a big pocket of gas.  
For if I'd a dug into that loader  
why that would have been it.  
Lester knew where not to dig.  
But which way was up?  
And when I had my face free I was  
kind of overlaying over on my side.  
I had moisture from my mouth  
and I could feel it running across  
the corner of my eye.  
So I knew I was laying kinda  
of on my side, head down,  
so I knew I wanted to start  
the incline you know to get back up.  
What Lester couldn't know  
was that he would have to dig  
through almost 30 feet of snow  
fighting cold, claustrophobia  
and a fear so intense,  
it sickened him.  
Several times I would go  
into convulsions and I did throw up.  
It seemed like every half hour,  
why you'd have the dry heaves



and some convulsions  
kind of like attacking you.  
I wasn't thirsty at first  
I knew not to  
try and eat the snow  
but my mouth was drying out  
and everything and I'd take  
a little bit of snow in my mouth,  
just to wet my lips,  
and spit it back out.  
Every second. Every hour.  
Every minute there's something  
there wanting you  
to lose control of your senses.  
And you know I'm thinking  
about my family  
and the position  
I'd be leaving them in  
and a couple of times  
I almost thought  
my wife was right there with me  
because I could smell her perfume,  
it was just as distinct as...  
I know it was there.  
I could smell her and it  
and that was good  
because that kind of  
gave me some strength  
to know that I was,  
somebody was thinking about me.  
Many people were thinking about him.  
Word of the missing miners reached  
Sheriff Bill Gardner.  
As soon as I heard  
I knew that this was the real thing.  
I can't describe the feeling.  
It... My heart sunk.  
My stomach turned and  
literally chills went up my spine  
because I knew  
what we were up against  
This was a significant winter storm.  
We had snow of at  
least two inches an hour.

We knew that we had winds of  
in excess of 50 miles an hour.  
And we knew that the site  
was totally isolated.  
That the only way to the site  
was either by air,  
or through a canyon that  
was literally avalanche alley.  
Avalanche safety expert Chris George  
was brought in to bomb the area,  
clearing it of potential avalanches,  
making it safe for the rescue team.  
The road into the Bessie G up  
the La Plata canyon was already  
a serious hazard  
I mean just driving that road.  
Just because one avalanche runs  
doesn't mean to say  
that everything else is secured.  
You know you'll have one or  
two people trapped somewhere.  
You send another 40 people in there.  
It's not secure.  
It's something we have to do.  
After almost 22 hours of digging,  
Lester finally inched closer  
to freedom  
I could tell I was seeing  
a little bit of light  
and so I was about,  
maybe two feet under  
and of course  
the adrenaline started pumping then  
and I just started digging  
and beating and jumping  
and I can remember just breaking out  
and just screaming  
Thank God, you know, I just,  
I made it.  
I can't believe, I made it...  
and then, to get out  
in a freezing storm, snowing,  
blowing, that's when I got cold.  
Bitterly disappointed

with no rescue in sight,  
Lester was forced to return  
to his snow tunnel for warmth.  
He attempted to settle  
in for the night.  
I tried to go to sleep  
and wake up real quick  
and think I was in bed  
and had a bad dream.  
But a very sad thing when  
I did wake up,  
I was still in the cave.  
Then another avalanche hit,  
burying Lester for a second time.  
To hear that crack and  
that sliding sound  
and I just assumed it  
was gonna squash me like a bug  
in my little hole there.  
Luckily it just slid over the top.  
Morning came I knew I'm gonna get  
started as early as I can.  
I'm gonna dig my out again.  
So it was about six.  
I started digging my way out.  
Course I only had a couple  
three feet of snow to go through.  
and I got out. I just started...  
the only direction  
I could move was down.  
Finally in mid morning  
the winds abated enough.  
We sent in Chris George to do  
our first aerial surveillance  
of the accident site.  
And we flew by the east portal  
looking for tracks.  
There was no indication  
of where that portal was,  
it was just  
one smooth angle of snow.  
I had absolutely no idea  
that Lester had gotten out  
and was at the foot of

the mountain which is quite  
a desperate descent under  
any circumstances.  
I'll never forget that  
helicopter flying  
approximately the same elevation  
that I was, but they were looking,  
I could look in and see them  
and they were looking up  
at the avalanche,  
of course, they didn't expect me,  
where I was and then,  
yeah it made me mad,  
I was, I was mad.  
They just flew past me.  
I could almost I thought  
I felt prop wash they were so close.  
This must have been  
a half hour later.  
I heard the thunder or  
what I thought was thunder  
and then I realized  
they were dropping bombs  
on the slope to secure the slope  
for the rescuers.  
So I knew I had to get out of there.  
I finally got up  
and got behind a tree  
and it wasn't 15 minutes,  
I could hear the roar.  
It was louder than any  
thunder you've ever heard.  
If the first two didn't get him,  
the third avalanche certainly  
wouldn't  
Lester was almost to Junction Creek  
when he heard the sound  
of the helicopter overhead.  
This time they saw him.  
He was flown 10 minutes away  
to Mercy Medical Center  
where he was treated  
for severe frostbite.  
They wanted to cut off several

fingers but Lester held on.  
With physical therapy and  
personal strength,  
his fingers remain.  
I can't express the mixture  
of joy and wonder  
that someone survived this.  
I mean veteran mountaineers  
and search and rescue people  
were looking at each other.  
People were hugging each other.  
And we were going  
we can't believe this is true.  
I have read hundreds of reports  
of avalanches.  
I've been teaching snow safety  
for 35 years.  
I've been in mountains, you know  
for 40 odd years.  
To me it's one of the greatest  
survival stories I've ever heard of.  
It's good for me because it gave me  
a new outlook and I,  
I'm a lot tougher than I was  
and I appreciate things  
a lot more than I did.  
Like a nice warm house  
and a loving family.  
I'm rich, I didn't need to extract  
all the gold out  
of this mine to get rich.  
I know now what rich is  
and I'm rich.  
Experience teaches  
when we pay attention.  
Wisdom arrives after we learn.  
Winter will always come.  
Snow will always fall.  
All things obey the law of gravity.  
In the mountains,  
ignorance and arrogance can place us  
in harm's way.  
We have a choice.  
But if we remain unaware

and the mountains continue  
to lure us,  
the white death will strike again...  
and again.