



## AAC Publications

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### Rockfall During Descent

Washington, Morpheus Boulders

**On March 21, with COVID-19 shutdowns and social-distancing guidelines in place, my housemate, Will, and I decided to avoid crowded Mt. Saint Helens and instead go search for unclimbed boulders near the established Morpheus area, south of Highway 2 and Skyhomish. I had been climbing outside for about five years at the time of the accident, including multiple climbs in remote areas.**

It was a mostly sunny day, with the temperature starting out a bit above freezing and rising steadily. Around midday, we crossed the West Fork Miller River to the north side and decided to head away from the river and up a washout in search of potentially unclimbed rock. There was generally less snow on this south-facing aspect, with only a few patches along our route. After a lot of exploring and a bit of bouldering, the sun began to set, so we decided to pack up and head down the way we'd come.

Will was out in front and I was lagging a safe distance behind, which was fortunate, given what happened next. For context, I weigh more than Will and was also carrying our pads, so I probably had 30 pounds on him. As I got to the steep section in the washout, I turned around to downclimb, placing my hands on a block the size of my torso and stepping down to a smaller block. The foothold broke free when I weighted it, and then the larger block shifted and broke free. I instinctively jumped back, pushing myself to the right of the fall line of the massive block as it careened down the wash. However, it crushed my left hand against the adjacent rock slab as it crashed past.

A moment later, I noticed my pinkie finger dangling, with the middle phalanx displaced and the fingernail hanging by a thread, and the white of the bones in my ring finger showing. Then everything was swallowed in a red gush of blood. I immediately wrapped my right hand in a fist around both fingers to apply pressure and held both hands above my head, and clearly remember saying to Will, "I just lost one, maybe two fingers. We need to get to a hospital now!"

The area had no cell signal, I didn't own a satellite communicator at the time, and we hadn't passed anyone all day. Given that the sun was setting and I could still walk, self-rescue seemed like the right call. I dropped my crash pads, had Will grab a small pack containing my wallet, keys, and headlamp, and we set off down the creek. With my hand still clutched above my head, I kept a steady but brisk pace, consciously trying not to spike my heart rate and increase the bleeding. Many downed trees presented tricky obstacles to clear without the use of my hands. After about half an hour, we made it back to the car.

It took us another 15 minutes of driving before we had cell signal, at which point I decided an ambulance would be slower (and more expensive), so we just continued on our own. It took us about an hour more to reach the emergency room in Monroe. A couple of hours later, I was transferred to a hospital in Kirkland, where I underwent surgery around midnight.

### ANALYSIS

Given that we descended the same path and everything had felt secure on the way up, my hypothesis is that warming temperatures during the day may have thawed some ice or frozen soil holding the blocks in place. Will's lighter weight likely wasn't enough to break the foothold, or perhaps he

descended slightly differently.

I now always carry a satellite communicator, so I can get help in areas without a cell signal. We also should have carried a real first-aid kit—we essentially just had a pair of gloves and some band-aids.

(Source: Jamie Sookprasong.)

**Images**

Article Details

Author	Jamie Sookprasong
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports