

A Truth About The Dylatov Pass

Ten little skiers set off into the forest, into the mountains, into the unknown, murmuring and tittering, occasionally laughing. All well-trained, about to be more so, they shuffled closer and closer to “Don’t Go There” Mountain. At least, that was what the Mansi people called it. But did the ten little skiers listen to them?

The answer was in the shuffling, their demeanor suggesting nothing ominous. In fact, quite the opposite. The ten little skiers were jovial in their adventurousness, in their intrepidity, in their camaraderie. What a grand time it was, in the frozen isolation and the repetitive shushing of skis against the snow.

The Mansi called the range The Mountains of the Dead. This, too, was ignored by the ten little skiers, though perhaps it passed like a veil over their minds when one little skier complained of pain and had to turn around. Nine little skiers mourned his passing as he skied by, geologic samples in hand, but they glided forward all the same.

So it is said, so it is written. Only nine little skiers went on to death and doom by forces unknown, debated for decades. So it is said, so it is written.

But the Mansi have seen, and have known. Now it shall be said. Now it shall be written.

One little skier, pockets heavy with rocks, did not make it far. The Mansi saw the shadow of menk descend, envelop, feed. It was seen, it was known.

The menk were the dead of the mountains, the reason not to go there. The Sherpa called them yeti, and the Salish called them sasquatch. Perhaps the same creature by a different name, but perhaps not-- a darkness hangs in the air when “menk” is spoken, a bitter taste fills the mouth, a heaviness the heart.

Thus, the Mansi did not, could not, tell. The menk do not appreciate narcs anymore than the mob. Passively, they watched the little skier shrivel, drop his rocks, and die. Only, death is reserved for the living.

Eventually, he rose to turn back toward the Mountains of the Dead, filled with the shadow of the menk. It was only a matter of time.

Nine little skiers had no idea what was to befall them as they jubilantly greeted their dearly departed comrade, who was just in time for a birthday celebration. This joy was not sustained. He was quiet, rockless, not himself. The group had questions that the strange little skier answered tersely, unsatisfactorily.

“What happened?”

“Turned around.”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.”

An intangible heaviness descended over the group, and no one would make eye contact. They went to bed early.

The strange little skier slept alone, groaning stertorously through tortured fever dreams that tossed and turned him. If he had had a bedfellow, perhaps the warping of not just mind, but body, would have been noted. They could have been warned.

But no.

Again, ten little skiers shuffled into the shadow of the mountains. They were no longer convivial, morphed into a skiing funeral procession. The gloom that shrouded was nameless and ageless, something not easily spoken of. Thus, silence followed, and the landscape was broken only by the whisper of skis.

The group passed a Mansi shed, nothing notable save for the rustic effigies of protection above the door. Even then, it was only the strange little skier, acting as the group caboose, who recoiled and hissed at their presence. A few little skiers heard, but passed it off as an expression of pain; worry festered about his sciatic nerve, but it was totally misguided. The Mansi, wordless, peering from the shed-- they knew, but how were the little skiers to know?

However, by the next morning, there were changes even the most naive would notice. The strange little skier was taller, larger, hairier, and took extreme offense to any mentioning of it. It was horrifying and bizarre, but it need not interrupt the expedition-- the group skied on. It is hard to know if they continued in sheer, unbelieving incredulity or under duress. But we know they continued, with the strange little skier's shadow towering over all.

There are sacred places all around the world; if we know the earth at all, we can sense when we have arrived at one. Nothing is more sacred than the home of the dead, where the little skiers put themselves-- indeed, as Dante described it, a frozen wasteland far from the love of God where lost souls howl, tortured, into the wind.

No one argues of its divinity, but that does not mean it is comfortable. Nine little skiers were miserable, a cross between infirmary and depression. The odd little skier, however, felt phenomenal. His transformation aligned him with the other side of the veil, and he basked in the darkness that riddles that land. It was the anguish of his own party that he relished most.

Finally, the weather halted them, stranding them on Death Peak. It was decided, ironically for self-preservation, that everyone would crowd into one tent. After all, aren't there safety in numbers?

Nine little skiers curled up to sob into their pillows. One little skier grinned into the darkness, awaiting everyone to cry themselves to sleep. This little skier was, in fact, no longer a skier.

He was fully monster-- a menk. A hulking, thick with hair, be-fanged menk that surveyed the group from reflective, ruby eyes. Mansi know even the darkest tendencies of these creatures, and can identify an experienced feeder from a frenzied newbie. Truly, one need no special expertise to tell the difference: the former, you will never see, the latter is an apparent utter mess.

Is it any surprise what fate befell the nine pitiful skiers?

Without any plan, the menk pounced. It pinned the nearest skier and drained its life so quickly the body crumpled like an errantly crushed toothpaste tube. The other skiers could not watch, and slashed their way free, escaping into the arctic air in little more than underwear.

A hypothermic human, unsurprisingly, cannot flee as fast a menk. It picked them off one by one, draining former comrades like flimsy juice pouches. The residual snapping of bones could barely be heard over the cries, the pleading, the obscenities, the sobs that created no sense of obligation within the menk nor the universe at large. Death rattles such as these do not even echo against the Mountains of the Dead.

The final victim, in an ode to the Hero-Princess, scrambled into the river, looking to attack from below as prescribed. If a menk could laugh, it would have. Fairy tales did not exist here, only nightmares.

It inflicted special evil on her, taking the signature trophy of their people: she lost her eyes, her tongue, her lips, her face, shrieking as she did. The menk ate some and wore others.

Ten little skiers had set off into the forest, but only one little skier, having had their fill for this cycle of evil, returned to the village from whence the group originally came. He returned

lively, exuberant, electric, a dried ear in his pocket. He waited a week to gleefully telegraph the authorities that his party had, for some reason, not returned on time. Perhaps something happened to them?

The last little skier slipped off to live his life as the university, then the army, then the world went off to search and study what everybody but the menk called a tragedy. He provided no answers, he attended no funerals, he expressed no emotions.

Those that suspected him did so indirectly-- peer-labeled "crackpots" cried menk and were quickly dismissed. Thus, he was able to reintegrate into society with his secret and was able to continue "skiing" during each cycle; who is to say that a menk cannot live a successful life among us, even without being alive? Maybe it is an asset to success.

Yet, the Mansi know the truth. Here it has been printed, gifted to me to be gifted to you from the guardians of the Mountains of the Dead. So it is written, so it is known.

Often, such a gift is an obligation in disguise-- you, as the new holder of the gift, must now do, now tell. The Mansi ask an inverse, in that they ask an inaction: please, refrain from the Mountains of the Dead. Surely the tale of the menk is reason enough, but the Mansi remind us that the dead have been through enough-- they need not your own death to disturb them.