

The Last Hike With Philip

Their first trip to Baffin Island had been one of their favourite adventures. So it seemed like the perfect place for their final journey together

By Margo Pfeiff

AS I PEER OVER THE EDGE OF THE SHEER SUMMIT OF Mount Duval, I see the waters of Pangnirtung Fjord far below, snaking dramatically into the distance through snow-capped rock walls. The last time my best buddy, Philip Kibler, and I were in this part of Baffin Island was 1995. We had finished a 10-day, 110-kilometre trek through nearby Auyuituq National Park, and had then motored by boat past the base of this peak en route to the small Inuit community of Pangnirtung.

Now we're back, perched atop this mountain in the middle of the Arctic on a gloomy June 20, 2009, four days short of what would have been our 16th anniversary. I pour a splash of Philip's favourite seven-year-old Cuban rum from his old Soviet hip flask into my indispensable Lexan wine glass and plunk myself down. No one could ever put a character like Philip in a box when he was alive, yet that is where he is now, in a small white cardboard container beside me. At the moment, I can't think of a suitable ceremony to send aloft the ashes of my long-time lover and soulmate, so I take a sip and wait to see what happens next.

PHILIP AND I MET IN MONTREAL in 1993, at a French-language night-school class. He was an über-outdoorsy biochemical researcher from Albany, New York, who had just moved to Quebec to work for a German pharmaceutical company. Philip had spent much of his youth at his family's cottage in the Adirondacks hunting, fishing and mucking about in the mountains. Even at 33, when I met him, he was one-half goofy, fun-loving teenager and one-half mature bush-survivalist who easily tackled every known sport, even competing in the Canadian whitewater kayaking nationals. He was one of those relentlessly resourceful guys, which is why he received a crate of duct tape as a farewell gift when he finished his post-doc at McMaster University.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARGO PFEIFF



Arctic junkie: Philip Kibler trekking on Ellesmere Island in 1997.

We were an odd match. He was a lanky six-foot-three while I'm all of five-foot-two. His idea of a perfect weekend was being in a tent. Anywhere. I was a jet-setting, five-star-hotel-loving princess. In the first year of our relationship, I took up eight new sports from snowshoeing to scuba diving, and spent countless nights in tents, aching from a back-country route best-not-taken or terrified of the next morning's class III rapids.

Philip liked me because I was game (or stupid) enough to try anything. I liked his existentialist take on life at a molecular level. "Civilizations rise and fall on your skin every day" he used to say, and he cheered "Go virus!" whenever one of his

Two years later we were strapped into the cargo hold of a Twin Otter on our way to what was then called Ellesmere Island National Park Reserve, 720 kilometres shy of the North Pole. "We're going to bring 'er in even if we have to do a barrel roll, so hang on," our bush pilot announced, as he bucked buffeting winds and dropped the iconic northern plane toward a bumpy gravel runway. Not long after, we had the world's northernmost national park to ourselves for two weeks, as we made the 135-kilometre trek from Lake Hazen to Tanquary Fjord.

On the flight back to Resolute, we were again huddled in a Twin Otter when Philip turned to me. "I figured out what I want to do with the rest of my life," he said over the engine drone. "I want to fly Twin Otters in the bush." A few days after we got home he signed up for flying lessons. Eighteen months later, he got his private licence, just about the time he was laid off at the lab. Throwing his PhD out the window, he vowed never to work indoors again and for two years shovelled snow in winter and cut lawns in summer to pay for his commercial licence. Anything to stay in the air.

In 2002, Philip returned to the U.S. where he flew grids for whale spotters over Cape Cod Bay and deer surveys over New

Jersey. Every summer he headed for wilderness flying gigs from Alaska to Maine, his pickup stuffed with fly-fishing and camping gear. He also packed his trademark herbs and spices. "How ya gonna find epazote in Lost Prairie, Montana?" he shrugged. We met up when we could, usually at his folks' cabin in the Adirondacks.

On the evening of Friday October 5, 2007, I got a brief e-mail from Snohomish, Washington, where Philip, now 46, was finishing up a summer dropping skydivers from a Cessna Grand Caravan. "Just back from my first flight as a Twin Otter pilot!" he crowed. "Now I'm on a mission to find a Twotter job." He had one last flight to do that weekend, ferrying nine young skydivers to Idaho for a "boogie." Then he'd pack up and drive cross-country for a date we had at the cottage the following week.

Three days later, Philip's mother, Nancy, called from Albany, frantic. "Have you heard from Phil?" A television news alert had reported a Caravan a day late en route from Idaho to Snohomish. I opened my mouth to reassure her, but my stomach did a back

flip. I knew. The plane was found 24 hours later, its nose slammed five feet deep into the side of the Cascade Mountains. There were no survivors.

FOR TWO WEEKS IN A ROW in May 2009, the weekly horoscope that lands in my inbox insisted I should "expect a visit from an ex-lover." It wasn't until a barrage of Arctic assignments started piling up and it was time to go north again that the penny dropped. Oh, *that* ex-lover!

The day after Philip's death Nancy had asked if he had ever mentioned any "special wishes." I remembered lazing in a hammock in 1998 after a morning dive in the Turks and Caicos when I had asked Philip if he ever thought of where he wanted his ashes spread. "The Arctic," he answered without hesitation. I mentioned it to his mother, but when I never heard back from her on the issue, I gratefully let it slide.

After the gut-wrenching grief had finally eased, however, I was surprised by a persistent niggling of unfinished business, a sense of obligation. I dreaded opening the emotional spreading-ashes-can-of-worms, but I decided to take Philip on one last hike.

I pored over maps in search of the perfect spot. Ellesmere was my first choice, but unaffordable. Auyuittuq also seemed like a good destination, but Parks Canada's Pauline Scott nixed that idea. "Scattering ashes is not in our pre-trip list," she said, "but we don't allow leaving anything behind in our national parks." By then I had also decided to do this alone so I didn't want a solo trek deep into polar bear country. I called Matty McNair, an Iqaluit-based guide who knows every route in the north. "Easy," she said, "go to Pang and take Philip to the top of Mount Duval for a look back into Auyuittuq."

First I had to face the landmine of memories at his cottage when I went to pick up some of Philip's ashes (the rest had already been sprinkled there by his family). His folks and I diluted the emotional onslaught by pouring much wine. By day's end we were on the sundeck laughing about their oldest son's wacky antics. Then it was time to go. As I stood beside my car, Nancy handed me a white cardboard box without saying a word.

A kilometre down the road, curiosity got the better of me. I flipped open the lid to find a mundane waybill, the kind you find scrunched up with mail-ordered sneakers, but this one was from a Washington state crematorium. Underneath was my portion of Philip in two ordinary zip-lock



Happier days: Philip and the author first travelled to the Arctic together in 1995 to hike in Auyuittuq National Park.

research subjects displayed a particularly clever mutation.

On the trail he was a hard teacher, explaining things once then letting me flail on my own so the lesson would stick. Gradually I got the hang of pushing myself physically—in a kayak along coastal Maine—and mentally—on precipitous telemark slopes in the Rockies. I began to love a down sleeping bag as much as Frette's Egyptian linen and started to embrace Quebec winters rather than fleeing to the Caymans with the first snowfall.

In 1995, after watching me travel to the Arctic several times to write stories, Philip decided it was his turn to go as well. Somehow he convinced me to do that 10-day trek in Auyuittuq National Park. Throughout the hike—the longest I'd ever done—he revelled at simply being out there, far away from the lab where he felt increasingly confined. Over fabulous freeze-dried stews and curries he'd concocted, we discussed alternative careers, from guiding to becoming a chef. That first trip north stole his heart and he became an Arctic junkie.

sandwich baggies, each containing about a cup of beige dust. Not really ashes, but “cremains.” I picked one bag up gingerly, caressing the lumpy powder looking for...what? This little shard, was it part of his chiselled cheekbones? A sliver of those long, runner’s thighs? As I belted my buddy into the passenger seat, I felt strangely relieved.

I arrived home to find an e-mail from Philip’s brother, Bill, who shared his sibling’s macabre humour: “I’m glad you’re



Final goodbye: The author carried Philip’s ashes to the top of Mount Duval, above Baffin Island’s Pangnirtung Fjord.

taking Phil along. I hear ashes are good for scrubbing pots and if you’re going to lug him all that way, the least he can do is help with the dishes.”

NUNAVUT HAS NO TIM HORTONS, so it is *de rigueur* to arrive with deep-fried treats for friends. At Montreal’s airport I pick up some Timbits, tucking the cardboard suitcase in my carry-on bag alongside Philip, exactly where it used to sit on our road trips. Happily, the airport security system doesn’t detect his presence (cremains occasionally set off metal detectors—something about fillings). When I cross the tarmac for the connecting flight to Pangnirtung, I stop in disbelief. First Air has substituted the usual prop plane with a chartered 1942 DC3. “Damn, this is perfect!” I whisper to Philip in the no-frills cargo hold crammed with plywood planks and pallets of pop.

Mount Duval rises up just behind Pangnirtung. The summit is a day hike from the hamlet of 1,200, and I set off immediately from Pang’s only hotel. Back in ’95, after our Auyuittuq hike, we had made a beeline for that hotel, each of us paying \$19 for a much-needed shower, a bargain especially for Philip who was caked to the thighs in mud from a close encounter with quicksand earlier that day. I stomp down the dirt road and pass the Pangnirtung Fisheries

building where we bought an Arctic char that night. Then I skirt the campground where we cooked the fish up into chowder, our first fresh food in two weeks.

Turning off the road, I head uphill. As usual in the Arctic, there is no trail. I veer around patches of deep, mushy melting snow. I have forgotten how tiring it is to trek across spongy tundra hummocks, cauliflower-sized knobs of vegetation that wobble underfoot as if you’re hiking on down pillows. My waterproof boots are soon soggy and grinding at my first-hike-of-the-season heels. On a Band-Aid break, I remember how Philip never chose the easiest hiking route, opting for the high roads that tortured my feet. The next day, he would slip out of our tent early to pick tundra blueberries for my oatmeal, which I sullenly ate as he cheerfully sculpted moleskin doughnuts with his Swiss Army knife to stack around toonie-sized blisters. Annoyingly, he took scientific pleasure examining the anatomy of my fluid-filled sacs of skin. But in the end I always had to admit his routes were more scenic than mine would have been.

Mount Duval is a steady climb. I stop frequently and spot the skull of a small carnivore alongside a stream. I pick it up and carry it as Philip used to do for further examination at our next break. Approaching the halfway ridge, one Inukshuk lines up with another and points me toward the summit.

When folks discover you’re going to spread a friend’s ashes, the weirdest stories come out of the woodwork. One scientist friend has lost count of the number of times she’s seen ashes dumped off whale-watching boats. Another friend repeatedly filled pant cuffs with an uncle’s ashes to unlawfully spread them in London’s Hyde Park according to his relative’s wishes. Disneyland has experienced such an epidemic of ash-scattering in recent years it has purchased special HEPA vacuums to clean up the two most popular locales—the Haunted Mansion and Pirates of the Caribbean. And conservationists in Wales and Scotland have asked people to stop leaving cremains on mountaintops because the phosphate added to the soil is overstimulating plant growth and significantly changing the landscape.

When I finally reach the top of craggy Mount Duval, it strikes me that the barren Arctic could do with a few handfuls of

fertilizer. I pull out Philip’s old Soviet flask and have my shot of rum, while Lenin looks on disapprovingly from the lid. Afterwards I stare at the white box, feeling nothing, disappointed by the lack of a sign, a bolt of lightning, a jolt of inspiration. There is only silence and dead calm. I reach into my pack for a stack of pictures I brought with me. The first one out of the envelope is a silly photo of Philip poised in mid-air in his dive gear about to hit the Caribbean Sea. I stare at it and a wave of anger catches me off guard. “You bastard!” I shout. “How could you leave me?” I never get to the second picture. I jump to my feet in a sudden rage, pick up a rock and throw it over the cliff. “We’ll never get to cook dinners together again!” I throw another rock as hard as I can. “I’ll never get to whip your ass at Scrabble again!” I bawl. “This one’s from Moe because she lost her telemark buddy.” And another. “And this one’s for your folks for having to live through the hell of their son’s funeral.” I keep throwing rocks, shouting until I’m panting and exhausted.

Then I’m weirdly calm. I open the box, take out the first bag and grab a handful of ashes. I hold them a moment, then pitch them skyward. Sun sparkles on one small patch of the fjord below and the ashes glitter as they slowly flutter over the edge. “I miss you,” I say softly each time I let a little more of him go. And then he is gone. “How about a sign you miss me too?” I say, knowing it sounds stupid.

Something has shifted. It’s time to go. But first, I need to do something with the empty box. There’s no way that’s going into some Arctic landfill. I find an old fire pit I’d spotted earlier, rip the cardboard into small pieces and reach into the front of my pack for my lighter. I rummage awhile and pull out something I haven’t seen in years—a box of waterproof matches. Philip loathed them so much that he had vanquished every last one long ago. But somehow here is this box. I strike the first match and it smears its useless green head across the striker. I laugh. The head snaps off the second. I laugh harder. By the time I’ve unsuccessfully tried half a dozen matches, I am doubled over in hysterics. I reach back into that same pocket and instantly find the lighter. I briefly warm my hands over the flames, then start back down the mountain feeling I’ve shed far more than just the weight of that little white box. **e**

Margo Pfeiff wrote about polar-exploration school in our Winter 2008 issue.