

The Same Trousers

Driving rain greets us as we start our climbing procession up Hevellyan. Katie, my daughter, down from University, is joining me for my company's annual Lakes weekend.

Within minutes, our group of twenty, of mixed abilities, is strung out for hundreds of yards up the lower slopes of the fell. We are soon merged with others, in a long, single-file, queue for the summit. Disguised in our waterproofs, partially-sighted with clouded goggles, we all become strangers, facing the challenge of the climb alone. I soon lose contact with Katie, in the mist. I can't tell whether she is in front of me or behind. I just keep walking up, following the man or woman in front, whoever they are, until reaching our designated halfway meeting point at the Hole-in-the-Wall.

I am not the first of our group to arrive there. Some familiar faces peer from multi-coloured anoraks perched on the wall. I scan the costumes but I can't see Katie. She must be behind me. I sit and wait as the line snakes up.

One by one our group arrives. Still, there's no sign of Katie. I ask around. No one has seen her stop or fall on the way up, but then she is unknown to most of the group. Has she gone on beyond the Hole-in-the-Wall, on towards Striding Edge, a very dangerous place to be in this wind? Can I risk going on, in search of her, and getting separated from the rest, with the possibility that she isn't ahead anyway? Should I press the panic button and instigate a wider search? There's just a chance I can avoid this.

This is 1994 and mobile phones are heavy, expensive and mainly for posers. There are two amongst our group, two mobiles I mean. Bill, our expedition leader, has borrowed one from work, and given it to John from accounts and designated him our official communications officer. The other phone is in Katie's anorak pocket. We bought her one so we can contact her at university.

Fortunately, I am still young enough to remember phone numbers, and, maybe through some freak conditions in the ether, there is a network signal over Helvellyn. Most important of all, Katie has her phone charged and switched on.

"Katie, where are you?" I shout against the howling wind.

There's a connection and the answer comes back crisp and clear.

"Dad, I thought you were in front of me, I've been following your blue trousers for ages, and you're just about to go over Striding Edge."

Fifteen minutes later, with waves of relief flooding through me, I watch Katie walk back from the precipice to the Hole-in-the-Wall.

It may not be the first use of a mobile phone for a mountain rescue but it is an impressive demonstration for our group and a lesson for me. Find something else distinctive to wear if you have the same coloured waterproofs as nearly everyone else.