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THE CALL OF KILIMANJARO

FINDING HOPE ABOVE THE CLOUDS

JEFF BELANGER

HOST OF *NEW ENGLAND LEGENDS* ON PBS

YOU CAN STARE AT A MOUNTAIN FOR ONLY SO LONG. EVENTUALLY, YOU HAVE TO CLIMB IT...

An honest and engaging account of one man's journey to transformation as he climbs to the summit of the mountain that the Maasai people of Africa's Serengeti refer to as the "House of God."

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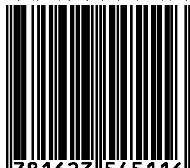

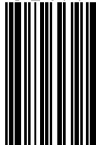

THE CALL OF KILIMANJARO

FINDING HOPE ABOVE THE CLOUDS

JEFF BELANGER

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF CHRIS

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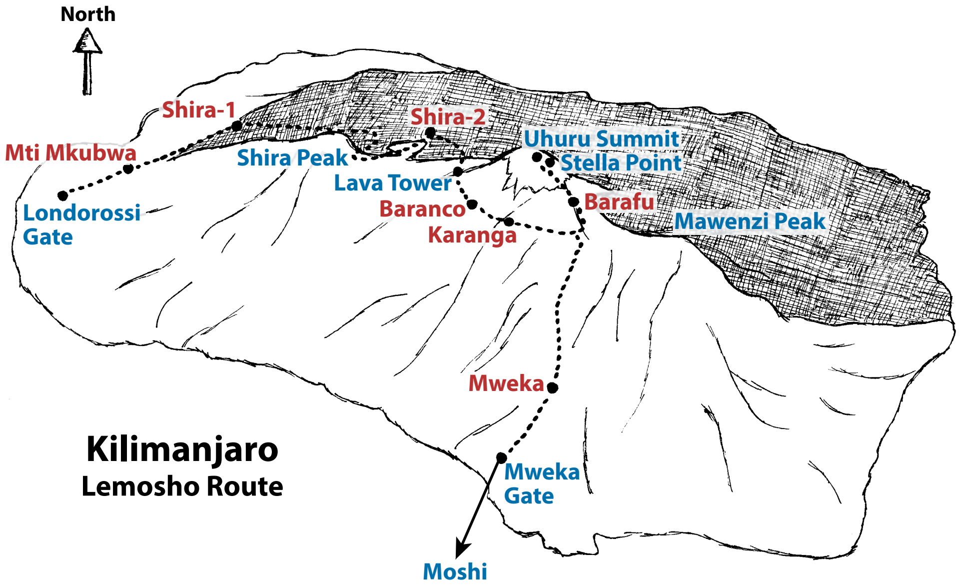
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Mweka
Mweka
Gate
Moshi
Kilimanjaro
Lemosho Route

PROLOGUE

IT'S JUST AFTER THREE in the morning, and I'm as cold as I've ever been in my life. I'd estimate we're at around the 18,000-foot level. I can't breathe. I'm fighting for every molecule of oxygen. I suck in air as deeply as possible, but my face is so cold. I cover my mouth with a mask for warmth, but then I can't get enough air. I alternate between warmth and breath.

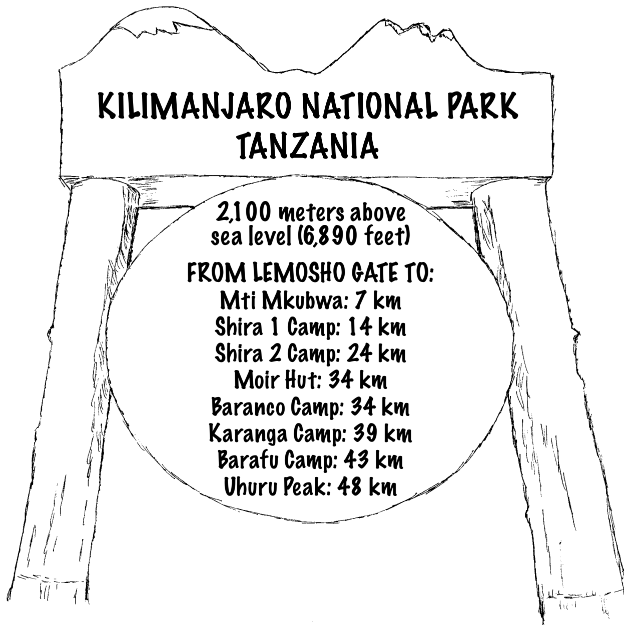
I'm back in my childhood, suffering through an asthma attack—my ribs ache from the strain of deep inhaling. It's dark. The only light is a hazy, tan halo around my feet from my headlamp. My body is sore from six days of climbing this mountain, and from my muscles screaming for more oxygen. I don't think I can go any higher. It would kill me to get this close and turn back. Yet pressing on could also kill me. We've already passed two plaques marking where people have died.

I can't help but question (yet again) why I'm doing this. Between gasps for air, I think about my brother-in-law, Chris.

When cancer took him just over a year ago, he was only a few years older than I am now. I'm doing this in his memory, but if I'm being completely honest, I'm mostly doing this for me. I'm testing myself at a time in my life when I'm otherwise in a rut.

Every step is part of that test. I lift my right foot higher on the mountain, then my left, pushing through air that's growing thinner by the step. But that's the only way I know to reach the top: one step, then another.

Time bends and stretches on this mountain like clay worked in the potter's hands. Was it only six days ago since I took that first step, somewhere far below?



1 MONDAY

LEMOSHO GATE TO MTI MKUBWA

I HAD IMAGINED what the first step of this journey would feel like. I had thought about taking a photo or video of that monumental footprint so I could show everyone back home how I would put my foot down with authority at the beginning of the six-day climb to Uhuru Peak—the highest point on Mount Kilimanjaro. But in truth, I am fifty yards up the trail before I can wrap my head around the fact that we're on our way. My T-shirt is already wet with sweat beneath my backpack. My water bottle bounces from my right hip as it swings from the carabiner attached to my pack. Beneath the midafternoon equatorial sun, the temperature around seventy-five degrees, the African forest makes its way into my retinas, slowly coming into focus as if I've emerged from a dark cave into bright sunlight.

It's fitting. My mind is as scattered right now as it was back home. I think about the work I'm missing. I feel selfish for taking this time and money away from my family. I ask myself if

The view of Mount Kilimanjaro from the roof of my hotel in Moshi, Tanzania—my first in-person glimpse of the mountain.

I'm physically and mentally prepared. Did I train enough? Did I pack everything I was supposed to? And why am I doing this, anyway?

I'm a forty-two-year-old dad and husband. That's who I am. What I am. And it succinctly describes my life. My body isn't in perfect shape—I have the "Dad Bod"—because I don't get enough time for myself, I work a lot, and I struggle every day to find the balance between family, career, friends, health, and my own well-being.

Back at home in Massachusetts—more than 7,000 miles from here on Kili—my life has been a treadmill. Wake up, work, family, sleep, repeat—a rut. It's a rut of my own design, but a rut nonetheless. There have been plenty of days when I only get about an hour of quiet after my daughter goes to bed. And considering how much spinning around my typical day entails between dead-

lines and appointments, an hour isn't enough time to delve inside and try to shine some light on that wide-eyed inner kid I once knew, who had questions about everything and wondered about big stuff.

Jack Kerouac wrote in his 1958 novel *The Dharma Bums*, "In the end, you won't remember the time you spent working in an office or mowing your lawn. *Climb that goddamn mountain*." I get it. Shoot, I got it when I first read it years ago, before marriage and family. That doesn't mean I've always heeded the advice.

But you can stare at a mountain for only so long. Eventually, you have to climb it. Usually a mountain is a metaphor for something big in your life. For me, at least this time, it's literal. Mount Kilimanjaro is *my* mountain. Kili has called me for years, but this time I'm answering. At 19,341 feet, it's the tallest peak on the African continent. Sitting just south of the equator in eastern Africa, on the border of Tanzania and Kenya, it's the largest free-standing volcano in the world.

This is the region where, almost three million years ago, the earliest ancestors of the human species first walked out of the Great Rift Valley to begin their endless journey to wander the Earth. Their task: be fruitful and multiply. And multiply they did! Now there's billions of us. No wonder I feel lost in a sea of people at times. I can't help but rub my belly button and consider its former connection to my mother, and her belly button's former connection to her mother, and so on, and so on, all the way back to somewhere near here in Tanzania.

That kind of time frame creates perspective and makes me wonder why I'm making this trip. Cosmic enlightenment? Finding my inner child again? Maybe it's to prove something to myself

and to others. Or maybe it's because the Maasai people in the Serengeti refer to the summit as the "House of God," and I'd really like to meet the creator of all of this.

I stumble on a rock in the path, which pulls me back to the moment of walking up this meandering dirt trail, engulfed by a lush, dense, green forest in a strange land. I laugh. It's a good stumble. I've been staring in wonder and not paying attention to the ground. Plus, the trail is well groomed and not overly challenging just yet. My misstep is nothing to be embarrassed about. I stumbled because the forest and reality of Kilimanjaro are sinking in.

My high school English teacher, Mr. Clark, didn't mind swearing in front of students. He was old, white-haired, balding, and loved Guns N' Roses—in short, he was one of my favorite teachers. He said there are two kinds of people: the first are those who look down all the time and see shit everywhere. By looking down, they avoid stepping in it. The second consists of people who look up: they see the scenery, but they're bound to step in some shit along the way. At home, I often look down to avoid the shit. Here on Kili, I just had my first step in shit—I stumbled on a rock and I'm grateful to fall into the category of people who take in the scenery, even if just for this moment. Still, the summit calls to me. The goal. The objective. How fast can I get there?

Christine, who is hiking behind me, asks if I'm okay.

"I am," I say.

Most stories don't begin with a profound moment. They just start. You jump into a movie already playing and trust you'll be able to catch up with the plot. So I'm asking you to jump in here, fifty yards in. When I forget to notice my first stride on Kilimanjaro. Not only have I not stopped to smell that rose, I didn't even

see the damn thing. It's taken a stumble to remind myself of the gravity of what I'm doing.

In reality, my first step wasn't fifty yards ago; it wasn't back in Moshi, Tanzania, this morning; it wasn't back in Boston three days ago, when I boarded the plane for this trip. It was years ago—so far back that the memory is hazy, and in this moment on the mountain, it's no longer relevant. I'm here because of a million steps I took before right now.

In 1936, Ernest Hemingway published the short story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." I didn't get around to reading it until two weeks before I left, as I was packing for Africa. There's a line in the story that stopped me in my tracks. When pondering the trip to the Serengeti, Hemingway's narrator says that he has come to Kilimanjaro hoping "in some way he could work the fat off his soul the way a fighter went into the mountains to work and train in order to burn it out of his body."

Work the fat off his soul.

I pray that somewhere on this mountain in front of me, I will lose the fat—the emotional baggage I've carried from childhood, the petty, personal issues and insecurities that I still lug around. I want to leave them here along with my footprints. Yet I don't plan to leave *everything* on these trails. I want to rid myself of the bulk, like wringing the water out of a wet towel but leaving the condensation that defines me. I'm the sum total of my scars and my triumphs. I don't want to change those things.

THE AIR FEELS A LITTLE thinner now. Maybe it's my imagination, or maybe my subconscious is calculating my elevation and

comparing it to places I've been before—like Estes Park, Colorado, at 7,522 feet above sea level. Standing still in Estes Park, I didn't feel a difference. But when I walked briskly up a slight incline, I was as winded as if I were jogging. Right here feels a little like that; I walk through a rolling sea of deep-green ground cover and huge, towering trees that stand like ancient sentinels along the road to enlightenment.

There's something about a dense forest. I feel like I'm walking through the internal organs of nature. As if the woods are lungs and the trees are bronchi filtering the air. I'm walking through the middle of this great organism, and I can't tell if I'm in a symbiotic relationship or if I'm viewed as an inconvenient parasite or bacterium that somehow got into the system through grand design or dumb luck. The trees and shrubs stare at me curiously, as if they're trying to figure out if I'm a threat or a harmless passerby.

The very act of walking is primal. I'm doing what humans do. What we've done for hundreds of thousands of years. We keep moving because there's so much to see. Because we know from nature's example that all living things must keep moving. If a shark doesn't swim, it dies. And I'm not that far removed from our ocean-dwelling cousins. As I walk, I'm buffeted by a range of emotions: wonder, fear, awe, guilt, pride. Although training for this adventure over the last eight months has burned some fat off my body, it's the fat on my soul that's my concern now.

I hike past trees and foliage much like the forests back home in Massachusetts, but I notice subtle differences. New England woods have evergreen, maple, oak, white birch, and other hardwood trees. Here on Kilimanjaro, the trees have similar size and leaf cover, but a second glance reveals the differences—more mys-

Lush, green plants of the rainforest beneath towering East African camphorwood and yellowwood trees.

tery. The shapes and sizes of the foliage are different. Large vines hang from some of the taller trees, and the ground cover alternates between the familiar fern and other greenery that looks as foreign to me as I do to it. The woodsy, musk smell of the forest is familiar, but the sounds are slightly different. Birds, bugs, and other animals are chittering, but they're in the distance, chittering in their own African language—but not so drastically different from home that I notice them as anything other than background noise.

I keep walking. And thinking. Although I can't pinpoint the first step of my Kilimanjaro journey, I can mark a significant milestone on the road that brought me here: July 30, 2016, around seven in the evening. I was hosting an event at the Murdock-Whitney House in Winchendon, Massachusetts. I'm a paranormal guy. I write about the supernatural, ghosts, and legends for television, in books, and in public lectures, and I sometimes host

events where I go to a historical place to raise money for the preservation of the location and allow the public to come in, shut the lights off, and hunt for ghosts.

If you're thinking, "That's the strangest way to make a living that I've ever heard of," you'll get no argument from me. It's not the kind of career one plans. I wanted to be a writer, but this subject drew me in because I love history, spirituality, psychology, and philosophy, and all of those fields of study intersect in what many call the paranormal. Exploring these mysteries has been a study of my own spirituality. But studying spirituality from the armchair can take you only so far. At some point, you need to dive into the muck to figure it out for yourself.

My self-employed life is filled with "have-to's." If I don't work, I don't get paid. I have a family counting on me, which is why I say yes to almost every project that comes my way. While that has kept beer in my fridge and pizza on my table, it leaves very little time for myself. I'm lucky that my work is also my passion because I get to explore strange locations and mysteries. But still, when someone pays you to do something, it's work.

So far, I've lived my life between the seen and unseen—the intangible, but still very real. Although I make a living in legends and the paranormal, in all other senses, I'm pretty . . . normal. I can change the oil in my lawnmower with one hand while waving "howdy, neighbor" with a beer in the other. I've swapped all the hardware on the toilets in my house at least twice since I bought the place, and I can look in the mirror and optimistically see a work in progress. I'm happy, but there's room for improvement. And of course, at times I get restless. There's got to be more to life, right?

At this event in Winchendon, we were wrapping up the dinner portion of our program when Amy, one of our regulars who works for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS), said to me, "Hey, we have a new fundraiser you might be interested in."

I sighed. A few years ago, my wife, daughter, and I participated in one of the society's "Light the Night" walks in Worcester, Massachusetts, which involved walking on a city sidewalk for two miles while holding a balloon with a glow stick inside. Through social media, I was able to raise a chunk of change for LLS. It's a good cause, but the biggest physical accomplishment in that endeavor was that no one in my family had to stop to pee during those two miles.

When Amy mentioned they had a new fundraiser, my brain raced through excuses: *I'm so busy right now. I have multiple projects I'm trying to get through, more events, and my busy fall season is approaching. Of course, I want to help if I can, but there's only so much . . .*

"Mount Kilimanjaro," she said. She sat there smirking like she thought this was the coolest news ever. Her spiky, blonde hair and smiling face waited for my response. I was carrying two paper plates with some pizza crust on them, a soda can with a tiny bit of liquid still sloshing around the bottom, and some napkins. I had one foot on the threshold of the front door, as I was about to go inside to find the trash can.

Time slowed. I stopped midstride.

"Kilimanjaro?" I asked. But really, it was more of a statement.

The next day, I talked to my wife, Megan, about the short discussion I'd had with Amy the night before.

"I'd be gone for thirteen days. I'd have to train a lot between now and March, and it will cost us a lot of money for me to go," I said. (I don't believe in sugarcoating these things.)

Megan gulped. "I need a little time to process this," she said. "Let's talk about it in another day or two."

I've been married to Megan long enough to know that she's both supportive and open-minded, but it's not a good idea to try and back her into a corner for any kind of quick decision on big things. So I let it go. Meanwhile I pored over the information Amy sent me. The trip would cost about $4,500 (I'd learn later that the amount was optimistically low), and the climb would require six days up the mountain and two days back down. I would fly to Tanzania, stay in the city of Moshi for two nights, do the climb, spend two nights back in Moshi, and then fly home.

Two days later, Megan said to me, "I know you're going to do this. You have to. Just give me another day or so." I could tell by her smile that the green light was coming. She was genuinely excited for me. So I made the commitment to Kilimanjaro and fundraising for LLS a week after Amy told me about the trip. It was the day of my forty-second birthday.

THE FIRST LEG OF OUR ASCENT is the seven-kilometer hike to Mti Mkubwa Camp. As I climb, memories of my preparation for this adventure flash through my head like abrupt cuts in a grainy movie: running extra miles on my treadmill, watching my diet, training with the group from LLS with our coach, spending hundreds of dollars on gear, telling everyone I know I'm going to climb Mount Kilimanjaro—and knowing that telling them will

further compel me to go through with it. My concerns—that I was exercising enough, hiking enough, that I was focused enough—are all becoming irrelevant now. I'm just a guy walking up a hill. One step, then another. Left foot. Right foot.

Today's hike to the first camp is only four hours. It isn't a test of my limits or endurance. Not yet. As the movie reel fades from my mind, Africa comes back into clear focus: greenery around a well-maintained dirt trail that winds upward, around hills, to higher places I have yet to see. Something deep inside me starts to tingle. I look around and feel like I'm finally part of this new forest, no longer looking at it the way you see a zoo animal through cage bars; I'm *in* it as I follow the trail and follow our guides. The trail dips down by a stream, then back up a steep hill. Then another Africa moment: sounds of a foreign, yet not unfamiliar language, Swahili.

WHEN AMY TOLD ME about the fundraiser eight months earlier, she couldn't have known it, but Kilimanjaro had been on my bucket list for years. In my college years, at Hofstra University, I had a foreign language requirement. At first I took French because I had studied it throughout high school, and my family heritage is French. But my French is *merde*, as they say in Paris, and I failed my freshman class. Having to change course, I switched to Spanish, but the two languages are so close that I was confused. I passed, but barely. *Dios mío.*

When I lamented to a friend that I needed to take a language unlike French or Spanish to fulfill the language requirement, she said, "You should take Swahili. I took it and loved it. Plus, the professor is awesome."

“Swahili?” I asked. “Where do they even *speak* that?”

“Mainly Tanzania and Kenya in eastern Africa,” she told me.

It sounded weird. And historically speaking, weird and I have gotten along, so I signed up for the class my sophomore year.

“When the hell are you ever going to use Swahili?” my mother asked me over the phone.

“You never know when I’ll be in a mall someday and someone will yell out, ‘Does anyone here speak Swahili?’” I told her. (Full disclosure: this has yet to happen to me.)

And my friend was right: the professor was awesome. You know how throughout your years of school and college, there are those rare amazing teachers who make a big impact on you? My Swahili teacher was one of them. Dr. Robert Leonard’s background was as interesting as the language and culture he taught. Going into his class, I already knew about Dr. Leonard’s former career, but it was more fun to hear him talk about it himself—a story that he would tell within the first week of every semester of his teaching career. He told the story—as he had so many times before and still does, I’m sure—with well-polished aplomb, but the heart behind it made it ring as true as the first time he related the tale.

It was the first day of class. In his melodic baritone, he greeted us in Swahili. “*Hujambo*,” he said, a term I would soon learn was a formal greeting. As Dr. Leonard was describing what we could expect from his course, a hand in the classroom sheepishly rose. Anticipating the question, Dr. Leonard smiled.

“Yes?” he said.

“Dr. Leonard,” the student asked. “Is it true you used to be the lead singer of Sha Na Na?”

Sha Na Na was a doo-wop group that started up in the 1960s and eventually went on to have their own television show. Dr. Leonard smiled, put down his syllabus, leaned back against his desk, and said, "Okay, let's do this now."

He explained how he was the cofounder of the group, how he performed at Woodstock—going on right before Jimi Hendrix—wearing a gold lamé suit, and how he toured all over the world with them. But in 1977, even though the group had landed a television series, he'd had enough. He left the group and moved to Kenya to find himself and to teach English. He wound up also learning Swahili and falling in love with the people and culture there.

I was hooked. I not only took Swahili I, but Swahili II. We learned about the many greetings, the terms for the young, the old, and the middle-aged, and also about the culture of those who spoke the language and a little bit about the great mountain, Kilimanjaro. But no, of course I'd never actually have the need to use the language for myself . . . *would I*?

THE AFTERNOON SUN filters through the trees and canopy above. Twelve of us, plus seven guides, are making our way up the Lemosho Route toward Mti Mkubwa. The point where we had started a few hours earlier was 6,890 feet above sea level, hundreds of feet higher than the tallest mountain I've ever hiked back home. At 6,288 feet, New Hampshire's Mount Washington is the tallest peak in New England. But here on Kilimanjaro, we're just getting started. Two hours into the hike, I figure we've gained close to another thousand feet in elevation.

The twelve of us were strangers to each other a year ago. It was the LLS that brought us together for this trip. Five of us are from New England. Each of us signed up through LLS and agreed to raise funds to fight blood cancer. The first person I met from the group was Christine. Back in November, as we were loading up our gear and starting our first training hike into the Blue Hills of Boston, I said to her, "So let's get the elephant in the room out of the way first—we're going to be pooping together on Mount Kilimanjaro."

She didn't miss a beat. "That's right," she said. "Behind trees, rocks, or just out in the open. There will be no pride left."

I knew we'd get along. In the coming months, we talked a lot on those training hikes, led by our New England coach, a man we affectionately called "Sherpa Tom." Christine was a personal trainer and an orphan. She lost her mother to lymphoma, and her father died shortly afterward, mostly from a broken heart. This cause haunted her, which made this experience deeply personal.

Then there was Gayle, who I met on a training hike to Mount Monadnock, in southern New Hampshire. She was in her mid-fifties, and a year earlier, she had been bald from chemotherapy treatment for acute myeloid leukemia. She received a lifesaving bone marrow transplant in September 2015, and there we were hiking Monadnock together only fourteen months later. So I pretty much thought she was a badass out of the gate. Maria was from Connecticut. She was in her forties, short, bubbly, new to hiking, and taking on a big challenge. She joked that her name was pronounced "Ma-rear" because she often brought up the rear.

Finally, there was Brian, who was my roommate at the hotel in Moshi and would be my tentmate on the mountain. He was tall

The approach to the summit of Mount Monadnock in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

and wiry, with dark hair flopped back on his head. He was a young guy, twenty-eight years old, and it was obvious at first glance that he was in the best physical shape of all of us. (He had to cut one of our training hikes short so he could go on a twenty-mile bike ride—yeah, *that* guy.) I cracked a few jokes with him about being stuck in a tent with me and my body smells at high altitude, and he laughed. He was pretty easygoing; I knew we'd be fine.

The other seven in our group were mostly new to the New England gang. Jason joined us from New Jersey. Although I was meeting him for the first time in Tanzania, he had been on a training hike with Christine and Maria on Mount Greylock, in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. Belinda, Vanessa, Shannon, Suzanne, Nancy, and their coach, Robert, hailed from California. I was also meeting them for the first time on this trip.

OUR PACE IS UNNATURALLY SLOW. If we were walking in front of you on a crowded city sidewalk, you'd be yanking at your hair and groaning in frustration until we got out of your way. Picture Grandma with a walker . . . OK, slightly faster than that, but still too slow for my usual taste. "*Pole pole*," our guides say. Although the word looks like *pole*, it's pronounced "poe-lay" and means "slow" in Swahili.

"This is way too slow," one of the California contingent complains.

I look at Christine, "It's not like we have something else to do today, right?"

She laughs.

"What time does the Starbucks close at the camp?" I ask.

Another snicker.

I'd also like to be moving faster, but I trust our guides. Others in our group make comments about our speed. I take it as good news that we're all in good enough shape to move up these hills. A few hours in, this is starting to feel like a normal hike, not the early stage of an epic journey. The forest, which just a couple of hours ago seemed foreign, has already become familiar. I recognize the trees now the way you start to recognize landmarks in a new neighborhood. Then, around four o'clock, some movement in the trees reminds me, we ain't in Massachusetts anymore, Toto.

Our guide suddenly stops to point at the branches above. I don't hear what he says at first, but our line of twelve pauses, and we look up to our left. Twenty-five feet or so in the air, the branches of one of the towering, leafy trees are moving.

"Monkeys!" Christine says. She points ahead, her mouth locked in a big smile.

I dig my camera out from the top of my backpack and aim in the general direction of the movement. If I were hosting an animal documentary, I'd likely get fired right now. *There's wildlife . . . over there . . . or maybe there.*

I click blindly, hoping my new camera will capture more than my naked eye. I'm told there are blue monkeys up there. A branch wiggles, some leaves sway and draw my attention, and I see a small, monkeylike shape. I zoom in tight as the monkey takes only a mild interest in our group.

Our guide, Mark, turns and points at another tree ahead of us. More monkeys, but these are bigger. There's two of them, black with bright white tails. They look like large skunks from a distance, but Mark tells us they're white-tailed colobus monkeys.

IT'S MY FIRST SIGHT OF A MONKEY in the wild. Monkeys, of course, are our ancient ancestors. We once competed for the same resources on equal footing. Seeing them in zoos does not compare. They lack freedom, and they depend on humans for their food and their very survival. Out here, they are free to go where they want. The thought that one could leap on my face in some kind of primate rage passes through me, but only for a second. Thirty feet above us, they're not bothered by our presence. The colobus monkeys move around the large tree like it's a jungle gym on the playground, swinging from one branch to another, and I click pictures. Of monkeys. In Africa. *This is cool.*

With each new step, the countryside feels more like another land. There are no wild monkeys in New England. I'm grinning like an idiot, walking through the forest of Kilimanjaro and

A blue monkey stares unconcerned at our group as we tread into his realm.

clicking pictures like some cheesy tourist. Where's a fanny pack when I need one?

I hit Christine's arm. "Dude! We're on Mount Kilimanjaro!"

The trail so far is well defined, groomed, and neatly marked with logs at the edge. It's considerably easy, especially compared to many New England trails I've hiked. No big rocks to navigate—just a walk in the park, really. If my friends back home could see me now, they would *not* be impressed with the physical challenge I'm facing today. But I'm not doing this to impress them. Okay, I'm not *only* doing this to impress them. But I do think there are some bragging rights in this for me.

Our head guide, Augustine, stops the hike to introduce us to a new term. "We going to stop and pick a flower," he says. His English is soft-spoken, slow, clear, and deliberate, but his Tanzanian accent flavors every word. Augustine is on the short side,

always smiling, with a gentle way about his speaking and the manner in which he carries himself.

"Pick a flower?" I ask.

"If you need to make pee, you can find a spot around here," he says.

"Pick a flower." Mountain-speak for "bathroom break." Being only a few hours into the first day, it's only a pee break. But I know what's lurking in the shadows ahead—we all do. You may not think about it when you are back home, but once you're up on that mountain, in those wide-open spaces, your most private moments become *very* public. The theme from *Jaws* cues up in my head.

The trail climbs, dips, and makes its way lazily up the far western slope of Kilimanjaro through the forest. The trees are tall, so there's no view below, and no summit anywhere to be seen either. We're gaining several thousand feet in elevation, though I don't feel it in my breathing. As we climb one last slope, orange-domed tents are revealed in the clearing in front of us. We've arrived at Mti Mkubwa Camp. *Mti Mkubwa* means "Big Tree" in Swahili. It's aptly named, as there are many large trees in and around this camp. As our group enters the clearing, our porters and guides assemble in front of us. They sing in Swahili, clapping and dancing. The songs transport my wandering mind back to right here, right now.

When the music hits me, I'm not worried about home, not worried about being perceived as a rich white American, not worried about climbing the mountain. *Hakuna matata.* No worries. These voices, the songs, the music hits my soul. It's *joy*. That giddy feeling that starts in my upper chest and radiates out.

Christmas morning as a child, opening presents. All of us join in, singing and clapping.

"*Zina, Zina,*" our guide Sunday calls out.

"*Zina,*" the rest of the porters and guides sing in unison. "*Zina*" refers to a woman's name. It's a tribute song to the girl you desire. You can always swap out Zina's name with the name of the object of your own affection. Sunday is stocky, with a strong, clear voice that he's honed in church choirs throughout his life. His left hand has clearly been through some kind of accident, because his fingers are scarred and bent in an unnatural way, but the old injury clearly doesn't bother him or slow him down at all.

Sunday calls out a line, and the men respond in song. There's no one among the guides and porters who doesn't know the words. They've been singing these songs their whole lives. The men are dressed in well-worn clothes, which I can tell have been donated because many don't fit quite right. They serve their purpose of coverage and warmth—nothing more. Some of the men jump in place to the rhythm of the song; others sway back and forth. All of them act like humble ambassadors to their language, their mountain, their songs, and their culture.

The songs continue for close to ten minutes. Then the crew members introduce themselves. Between the two head guides, Augustine and Wilfred, the assistant guides, cooks, waiters, camp crew, and porters, there are forty-eight altogether. All of them are from Tanzania. And there are only twelve of us. The guides speak perfect English in addition to their native Swahili and are the highest-paid people on the expedition. Next come the assistant guides, then the two waiters, and finally the porters who do all of

the heavy lifting and transport our tents and camps from site to site for us.

My personal porter's name is Wilfork. He carries my 140-liter dry bag each day and helps set up my tent before I get to camp. Wilfork speaks no English, but he has a big, bright smile.

I'm expected to carry my backpack, which weighs about fifteen pounds, plus my day's water, accounting for another four pounds or so at the start of the day. My sleeping bag, clothes, cold-weather gear, and toiletries are in the dry bag that Wilfork carries, which I borrowed from my friend Melanie back home. She used the same bag a few years ago to summit this mountain—so I figure it's got some luck in it.

My personal porter, Wilfork. Though he speaks no English, we find reasons to smile and laugh.

As the porters finish introducing themselves, a black-and-white colobus monkey appears a hundred feet or so behind us. Someone from the California group points and remarks how cute he is, but the porters, who know better, are already sprinting toward him. The furry bastard grabs a loaf of bread wrapped in plastic and darts back into the forest, easily escaping with the loaf for his trouble. Another good lesson—everyone and everything in Tanzania seem to feed off this mountain in some way. I can't blame the bandit for grabbing a free meal. The monkeys appear to have no interest in getting close to people. I'm more afraid of insects—specifically mosquitoes—thanks to the warning given to me by my travel doctor two months ago.

My travel doctor is Dr. Hanumara Chowdri, an old Indian man whom I had met only once thanks to a referral from my insurance company, when I went to him for shots and prescriptions to prepare for my trip to Tanzania. After my tetanus, hepatitis B, and typhoid shots, he prescribed Diamox to make life easier at high altitudes, and something for diarrhea because if that hits while I'm on the mountain, dehydration could become a life-or-death issue. Finally, he prescribed Malarone for malaria. Although I'll mainly be in the mountains, above the tree line, it takes only one bite at lower elevations to make me too sick to climb or do anything else. The doctor told me to start the Malarone a few days before I leave for Tanzania, and take it for at least a week after I return. The same for the Diamox.

Then he removed his glasses and took a breath, which gave him a solemn air. "I have to tell you this," he said, a little uncomfortable. He paused. "Don't have sex with anyone over there. HIV is very prevalent in Tanzania."

I smiled. Sex was *not* in my plans. But it was a reminder that if I happened to find myself around someone profusely bleeding or something like that, I would need to be aware. Then the doctor had something else to say, in the same somber tone.

"How tall is Kilimanjaro?" he asked

I told him, "19,341 feet," and then smiled, because I'd been rattling that number off for months.

"Have you ever been that high?"

"I've been to 9,000 feet in Colorado," I said.

"This is very different," he said. "If you can't breathe, if you're too sick, you'll need to come back down."

I nodded politely. He left the room. I didn't fear this trip until that moment. Rolling an ankle, a big fall and a broken leg—these are things I'm aware can happen on any mountain. But one little bug bite that could place me in a hospital, or if my body couldn't handle the altitude, they were now on my list of fears. More doubts crept in too.

Here at camp, I know it's still warm enough for mosquitoes, though I don't see or hear any. Brian and I are assigned to Tent 3. My dry bag is already inside. The tent is bright orange, oblong, and about three-and-a-half feet high. I suppose it could sleep three people if you had no gear. Most of us will be two-to-a-tent. Brian has camped a lot. I, on the other hand, would rather cut off a finger than camp in a tent.

I'll get dirty with you all day long. I'll hike from sunup to nightfall, I'll sweat and rough it all you want, but damn if I don't want a hot shower and clean bed by the end of that day. No such luck here. Brian sets up his sleeping bag and sleeping pad first, while I wander around the camp and take pictures.

Our first camp at Mti Mkubwa, which means “Big Tree” in Swahili.

I’m looking for something to do, in a familiar and compulsive way. I walk around the camp and take pictures of anything that grabs my attention. One of my biggest faults is that I’m overly goal-oriented. I’m all about the destination, not the journey. I’m not proud of that, but it’s a fact. It’s also something I’m working on. I bought this fancy new camera as a way to remind myself to capture moments along the way. So I wander through camp clicking pictures. I’m trying to see simple things from different angles.

Although there’s plenty of room for other groups at Mti Mkubwa, there’s no one else in our camp besides our team.

“How come we’re the only group here?” I ask Augustine.

“This is the last week of the season,” he said. “The rainy season starts, so no Kili for few months.”

The rain. It’s something I’ve prepared for, but also something I dread. I have the gear, but water has a way of seeping into every

nook and crack. It makes the ground slick and dangerous. But when I glance up, the cloudless sky allays my rain fears for the moment. There are a few large trees in the middle of the clearing, the ground is mostly level and dirt, and there are a few buildings, including a rusted metal relic from about fifty years ago and a small brick structure that looks like it can't be more than ten years old. Inside the building are holes in the ground for dumping human waste. Large trees encircle the camp like sentinels and grow darker as the light fades.

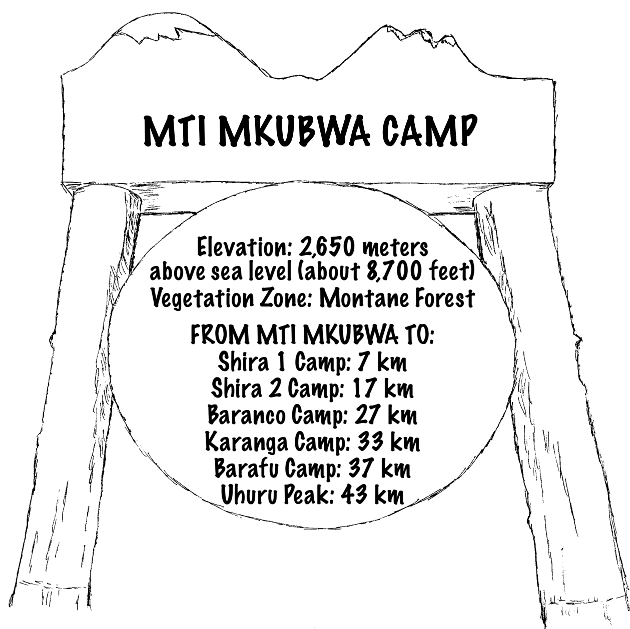
Back in Tent 3, it's my turn to set up. I have a self-inflating mattress pad that I also borrowed from my friend Melanie. While it's blowing up, or rather slowly unrolling itself and getting slightly thicker as air fills the inside, I unroll my bright yellow, zero-degree sleeping bag, which is like a ski parka with a hood, and then blow up my inflatable pillow with my mouth. I squeeze the mattress pad after closing the valve. Is this going to keep all 195 pounds of me off the ground? I'm skeptical of this whole setup.

Months ago, the national coach for the LLS Climb 2 Cure program suggested via email that we sleep outside in our sleeping bags for a night or two at home to get used to them. Purposely, I did not. I would have hated trying to get comfortable in my sleeping bag in my backyard, knowing that my warm, clean bed was less than twenty yards away. That would make my first experience in my sleeping bag a bad one. I figured I'd wait until I was on the mountain, until my bag was my very best option for the night, so I'd learn to love it. That was my plan. And I don't regret it. But right now I'm wrestling with this stuff. The mattress doesn't feel like much of a mattress. It's a far cry from my pillow-top, super-duper, wonder coil, mega-awesome bed at home.

When we aren’t wearing them, Brian and I keep our stinky boots in the vestibule area of our tent.

As a matter of policy, Brian and I agree to leave our boots outside the tent in its tiny vestibule area, covered by a small triangular tarp. As I pull my boots off, my nose immediately tells me our plan is a good one: our boots already smell. I switch into some sneaker-type shoes I brought and finish repacking my bag, setting it between the sleeping bags next to Brian’s so that they form a barrier. With a wall of gear between us, there’s no danger of someone getting inadvertently spooned.

Back outside, the Mti Mkubwa Camp sign lays out the journey ahead.



A porter sets a bowl of warm water and a crumbly bar of soap by our tent. I scrub my hands and splash my face in the water. I'm used to hotel sinks, so for me, this is roughing it. Still, I don't feel dirty yet. This cleanse hardly feels necessary, but I figure it's better to take advantage of luxuries when they're offered.

The view is obscured by tall trees all around me, but the clearing offers an opening above it that shows the sky turning from pink to deeper blue as the sun sets somewhere far away.

A large, yellow-domed mess tent has been erected for us. It looks space age—like something you'd see on a Martian landscape. Inside, a series of folding metal tables and chairs have been set out for us to eat dinner. Our porters have carried all of this up here for us. It seems extravagant given the circumstances, but as

Our mess tent with more creature comforts than I expected—a welcome sight after an afternoon hiking to Mti Mkubwa Camp.

I settle into a chair with the rest of the climbers, I'm grateful for the creature comforts.

I also see real plates and silverware. Not wedding china, but still, metal silverware and thin, ceramic plates. There are salt and pepper shakers, other condiments, napkins, and anything else you might pack for a cabin or a vacation home. In my mind's eye, I see a number above each item on the table. A weight. It doesn't matter if that number is ounces, pounds, or kilograms—it's mass that must be carried by someone. No wonder we have a small army moving with us up this mountain.

Our waiters, Victor and Philbert, bring out a soup course first. It's a salty but delicious vegetable soup that's mostly broth. Next, they bring us rice, fish, and some green beans. My food expectations coming here were low. Considering that we need to carry all the food we eat with us, I envisioned eating trail mix for days

on end. The soup and actual dinner are a treat. Given where we are and what we're doing, my only concern with calories is not getting enough of them. Anything consumed will be burned in the hike.

"*Tam sana*," I say in Swahili, "Yummy, delicious."

During this first dinner on the mountain, our group of twelve discuss some of our fundraising efforts. Each of us had to raise a minimum of a thousand dollars for the LLS, or else cover the grand ourselves. Most of us raised much more than that.

"I was shocked both by who donated and who didn't," I say. "There were people I didn't know that well who ponied up hundreds of dollars. Others I know very well, and who I also know have the means, gave nothing."

Gayle says she has a wealthy friend who told her, "If I gave to everyone who asked, I'd be broke."

Not a great attitude. Two years ago, I made a New Year's resolution to give money every time someone asked me. At the grocery checkout, "Would you like to donate to Children's Hospital?" "Yes." A homeless person on the street, Girl Scouts selling cookies, a solicitor at my door for charity. I said yes every time and gave something, yet I'm not broke. I'm not a rich person, and I couldn't afford to give hundreds to everyone who asked, but I can give something every time. Living that way for a year made me feel good. I gave every time. So I continue to do it.

I'm not perfect, but I like how giving makes me feel. Sometimes I miss something, or I have no cash on me, but otherwise my rule is to give because I was asked. I figure the universe put that person in front of me for a reason, and I'm here to help when I can and how I can. During my fundraising efforts so far, I've

had donations from over three hundred people, with an average donation of around fifty bucks. Some people gave five. I'm grateful to all of them. Giving anything was a gesture I deeply appreciate. Before I left for Tanzania, I printed the list of donor names on a piece of paper that I carry with me in my pack. It doesn't weigh much, and I figure it's the least I can do for them.

People parted with their hard-earned money because I asked them to. I don't take that lightly. It really is the thought that counts. It shows some effort of support. Not once did I look at any person's donation and think, "Is that all? Come on, you can do better." Gayle's story reminded me how easy it is to clam up and focus only on yourself. I have disdain for that attitude because it's easy for me to see it in myself. That karma stuff? It's real. All the good stuff comes back, and it comes back a lot quicker than you think. I try to focus on the good stuff because of how it makes me feel.

President Abraham Lincoln once said, "When I do good I feel good; when I do bad I feel bad, and that is my religion." I get it.

After we finish dinner, I step out of the mess tent into the twilight. I can see the tents, but there's only minutes of daylight left before night falls completely over our camp. The first few stars twinkle to life. There's no campfire or anything like that; the plan is to get to bed soon because tomorrow is going to be a long day. "We going to get up at six-thirty, eat breakfast at seven-thirty, and move out by eight-thirty," Augustine tells us in his slow, deliberate way, chewing each word as he translates it in his head to English.

Although there's little light left in the world, the forest is alive with funky, foreign noises. Monkeys call to each other, bugs

and other animals join in the cacophony, and yet the sounds seem in the distance, as though these creatures know to give our camp a wide berth. Vanessa and Belinda, from San Francisco, are in the tent next to us. They have brought battery-powered Christmas lights to put on their tent at night. I laugh at the notion of carrying the extra weight for something so frivolous. But as Mti Mkubwa grows dark, the lights look pretty damn cool. Why miss an opportunity to add flair?

Vanessa and Belinda drape their solar-powered lights over our tents. What I initially thought was frivolous turns into Kili-fabulous.

As I'm brushing my teeth near the edge of the woods, I look up through the tree branches and admire the clarity of the stars. They shine brighter than I've ever seen before. I can only imagine this view when we get above the tree line. As I awkwardly climb into the tent, hunched over, trying not to fall face first, I see that Brian is already in his bag, ready for sleep. I try to zip the door of the tent closed and end up splitting the zipper so it's open in gaping spots. I struggle with the zipper, and Brian sits up to assist. I'm helpless at camping—I can't even navigate a zipper! Brian laughs, I laugh, but I still recognize I'm behind the curve on this. I wonder what else I may not be prepared for.

Undressing while lying down is something I'm not used to. I slide my hiking pants down and slip on my track pants and a T-shirt. I flip over to try and get into my sleeping bag opening, and my ass hits the packs between Brian and me, sending my backpack tumbling on top of him.

"Shit! Sorry, man," I say. I pick the pack up and put it back where it was. I half fall into my side of the tent as I try and get my sleeping bag open enough to crawl in. From the outside, I can only imagine how the shaking tent must look to the guides and porters. From the outside, it either looks like Brian and I are getting along *way* too well, or it looks like a battle between a tent and its occupant, and the occupant is losing.

Still, I manage to navigate inside my ski parka of a sleeping bag. I'd guess the temperature outside is in the fifties, so this bag is a bit too warm. I try to zip up, but only get the zipper halfway up before it sticks on something. I'm *not* going to bother Brian again for another zipper. Leaving the bag half open makes sense anyway because in these temperatures, it may get too hot inside.

I position my inflatable pillow under my head and try to get comfortable on the hard ground.

I know that inflatable mattress pad is under me, but damned if I can feel it right now. Brian has all of his gear and clothes organized into neat plastic bags. Everything is precisely in its place, and I feel like the guy who uses industrial garbage bags for luggage. If we're the camping odd couple, I'd be Oscar Madison.

Once Hurricane Jeff gets settled inside Tent 3, I listen for a few minutes to the sounds of the monkeys in the distance, and the sound of some of the guides and porters moving around camp. I don't feel exhausted, but I know the week I have ahead of me. Have I trained enough to handle this? Am I strong enough? Fit enough?

EIGHT MONTHS AGO, when I started training for Kilimanjaro, I wasn't starting from zero. I would place my zero back to the winter of 2007, when my daughter was eight months old. I weighed 245 pounds, the most I've ever weighed in my life. When you have a newborn, it's kind of . . . *uhhhm* . . . exhausting? Debilitating? All-encompassing? All of the above?

I slept very little. I felt like a zombie in a fog. I worked, I changed diapers, I tried to take care of the house and chores, and the very last person I took care of was myself. At my lowest point, I needed something for dinner in the early evening. My wife was upstairs taking a nap. However bad it was for me, it was worse for her because she was nursing. My daughter was also napping, and I had emails and phone calls to return. But still, I needed food. I ate not one but two packages of Twinkies for dinner as I sat at

my desk typing. Although the sugar bombs made my inner child squeal with delight, my adult self felt gross. I ran my hands along rolls of belly that didn't used to be there. In that moment, I decided that I would start running.

I'm not now, nor have I ever been, built like a runner. I'm stocky and broad shouldered. I never enjoyed running. Why run if no one was chasing me? And if I was in such a hurry, no doubt a car would get me where I was going faster. We had this treadmill in our basement that Megan used. She *is* built like a runner and would peel off miles on that thing before our daughter was born. So I slipped on some shorts, a T-shirt, and my old sneakers, and down I went to the basement, iPod in hand.

I pushed the miles per hour up to 3.5, thinking I'd start with a brisk walk. Soon I pushed it up to 6 miles per hour and huffed and puffed. I made it just past a quarter of a mile before I had to slow it down to a walk again. My lungs were hurting. My calves and legs were also burning, and I was sweating. After walking for another couple of minutes, I pushed it up to 6 miles per hour again. I was angry and focused, but only in short bursts. I made it another quarter-mile and backed it down again to a fast walk.

When I hit a mile, after about thirteen minutes, I shut down the treadmill in an exhausted pant. I was ready to collapse. I sat on the floor in a heap next to that machine of torture and terror trying to catch my breath, sweat dripping off my brow. It would be easy to blame my asthma and go back upstairs and try dieting. But that day I didn't. I decided to run again.

I made running a regular part of my life. I didn't love it. Hell, I didn't even *like* it. But I did it because soon I could run that mile without stopping, and then two miles. I ran every Monday,

Wednesday, and Friday, and my weight dropped. I paid more attention to what made my body feel good. What made me sleep well at night. Just listening to my body, I ate better: less sugar; fewer carbs. And I kept running. I changed the way I was living. In about a year and a half, I dropped fifty pounds and felt better about myself. One very strange by-product of all of this running was that my asthma became almost nonexistent.

After that, I ran for health maintenance. I even took part in a few 5K races. Then work would get busy, and I'd cut down on my exercise time. But once I committed to Kilimanjaro, I never slacked off. No matter how busy my day was, I ran, I lifted weights. If I got tired and wanted to quit early, I would ask myself if that would help me get to the top. Plus, LLS gave us some exercise recommendations to help us train. Planks daily, training hikes, push-ups, and other activities to prepare my body for this endeavor. I did all of it.

The summit of Kilimanjaro gave me a fitness goal like I'd never had before. I didn't want to fail. It's estimated that about 35,000 people attempt the Kilimanjaro climb each year, and only 60 percent make it to the summit. According to one guide company, approximately one thousand of those people need to be evacuated from the mountain, and about ten people die. I don't want to fail. I definitely don't want to die. So I trained, I hiked almost every weekend, and I dreamed.

I REACH INTO MY BACKPACK for my iPod, knowing that music will help me relax and clear my head. I scroll through my old eighties playlist and cue up "Africa," by Toto. I loved that song as

a kid. As the drumbeats begin the tune, there's that giddy tingle in my chest again. Africa. Kilimanjaro. *I'm here*.

A few lines from the song call out to me for various reasons. The writer in me loves this one: "I stopped an old man along the way / Hoping to find some long-forgotten words or ancient melodies / He turned to me as if to say, 'Hurry boy, it's waiting there for you.'"

That's what writers do. We look for songs yet to be sung. Stories that haven't been told. I'm here in part for that reason. For me, finding a good story feeds my soul. Even though I've chased thousands of stories throughout my career, they're mostly other people's stories. I'm the teller of *their* tales. But this story is my own.

The other line hits closer to the rock-hard mountain under my back right now: "I know that I must do what's right / As sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti."

"I bless the rains down in Aaaaafrica . . ."

I take a deep breath and try to sleep.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEFF BELANGER is one of the most visible and prolific researchers of folklore and legends today. A natural storyteller, he's the award-winning, Emmy-nominated host, writer, and producer of the *New England Legends* series on PBS and Amazon Prime, and author of over a dozen books (published in six languages). He also hosts the *New England Legends* weekly podcast, which has garnered over two million downloads since it was launched.

Always one for chasing adventure, Jeff has explored the ruins of Machu Picchu in Peru, searched the catacombs of Paris, faced down a lifelong fear-of-flying struggle by going skydiving on his birthday, and ghost-hunted all over the world—from a former TB asylum in Kentucky to medieval castles in Europe to an abandoned prison in Australia.

Jeff got his start as a journalist in 1997, where he learned how to connect with people from all walks of life. For his work, he's interviewed thousands of people about their encounters with

the profound. A noted public speaker, he's spoken at MENSA's national conference, has given a prestigious TEDx talk in New York City, and provides dozens of live lectures and programs to audiences each year.

Jeff has written for newspapers like the *Boston Globe* and *USA Today*, and has served as writer and researcher on numerous television series, including every episode of *Ghost Adventures* on Travel Channel. He's been a guest on hundreds of television and radio networks and programs worldwide, including History, Travel Channel, Biography Channel, PBS, *CBS Sunday Morning*, NPR, BBC, and Coast to Coast AM.