

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 6 - Episode 4

Struck by Lightning on the Trail

Torah Kachur:

Clouds in the high mountains are different. For starters, they're really close to the ground because, well, the ground is a lot closer to the sky. So they're really on top of you. And when they're storm clouds, they have a different colour.

Minko Nikolov:

They're on the purple side, like the eggplant type of a cloud cover. So, you know, it's not going to be just like a little drizzle. It's going to be a pretty bad storm.

Torah:

That's Minko Nikolov, he's a climber, and today he's hiking in his back yard — Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. He woke up planning to go to one of his favorite spots and do some bouldering, but the weather has turned on him.

Minko:

So I decided to bail, and as I started hitting the trail down the storm actually started catching up on me pretty quick. When I opened my eyes I was very disoriented of where I was. I was expecting to wake up in my bed.

Torah:

But he isn't in bed. He's alone on a mountain trail, confused and badly injured.

Minko:

I couldn't move my legs, I was bleeding.

Torah:

And there is smoke rising from his torso.

Minko:

At one point my eyes started closing and I couldn't keep them open and I did not thought like I'll survive.

Torah:

I'm Torah Kachur. This is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. And we are now in our sixth season of sharing

these stories with you.

We believe that every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help, or if you'll be a person who helps someone else. This show is here to remind us that any of us could be either one of those people every day.

Minko Nikolov lives in Denver, Colorado.

Minko:

I'm an accountant so I spend majority of my weekdays at the office.

Torah:

When he isn't crunching numbers for clients, Minko likes to get out of the city. Like way out and way up.

Minko:

I'm an avid climber. So I've been climbing for about 24 years. It's more of a lifestyle.

Torah:

You see, Minko doesn't have a lot of friends at work, and he hardly knows his neighbours. His community is other climbers. Those are the people he identifies with. They always try to find something new, go to a different place and have some type of a challenge that distinct them towards accomplishing something difficult.

It's lunch time, and Minko is headed to Chaos Canyon. It's a very remote part of Rocky Mountain National Park. For him, it's a two-hour drive from his house, followed by a three-mile hike from the parking lot to the climbing site.

Minko:

And the distinct part about this place is the trail ends maybe two miles up the hill and the remaining of the hike it's on something called a talus field. In a talus field it's like a river of fallen rocks that no longer move. So it's not the most enjoyable hike.

Torah:

By Minko's standards this isn't a major expedition. Actually, he was climbing last night with a friend, and tomorrow he's got a family thing for his Mom's birthday. So this is just a quick afternoon trip to do some bouldering.

The forecast is for a clear, dry day. But, well, it's wrong.

Minko:

And when I got on the parking lot, I got hailed by a very strong storm that passed through for about 20 minutes. And I sat in my car and I waited. And that's very typical. It just rains a lot in the afternoon and 20 minutes later it's sunshine and rainbows.

Torah:

When the weather clears, he starts his hike. It's just a day trip so Minko's only carrying the essentials: climbing shoes, rain gear, food, water, and a basic first aid kit. All stuffed in his backpack.

Coming the opposite direction he sees a couple of park rangers — climbing rangers to be specific. These are people who work for the park service, but they don't just drive around in their trucks. They actually do the climbs. They inspect the walls, they make sure that everyone is safe. They're an essential part of the climbing community.

Minko:

They just came from a big wall climb and they did not look in really good shape, right? Like they just got rained and hailed.

Torah:

They'd been hit by the same rain and hail as Minko, but they didn't have a vehicle to hide in, so they got soaked.

The rangers tell him there's more bad weather building on the other side of the mountain: it might stay there or it might come his direction. It's hard to say. Minko continues his hike until he rounds a bend.

Minko:

I got to that point which gave me the visibility of the full spectrum of the mountain. I saw that there are really dark clouds indeed on the other side and that they are coming my way. And I kinda hesitated for a while what to do.

Torah:

It's not an easy decision. He's driven two hours. He has all his gear with him and it's still early in the afternoon, but he didn't come equipped to ride out a storm.

Minko:

So, I decide to bail.

Torah:

He turns around and heads down the hill, back towards the parking lot. Every so often he glances over his shoulder at the massive purplish cloud that's rolling down the side of the mountain. It's getting closer.

Minko realizes he isn't going to outrun it. So he sets his backpack on the ground and fishes out his rain gear. He pulls on his waterproof jacket, re-shoulders his pack and continues walking as quickly as he can.

Minko:

It was a very strange feeling. And I woke up and I lift my head a little bit and I was in a pile of blood. And that blood was dripping from my face into a small puddle on the

ground.

Torah:

He tries to sit up but can't.

Minko:

I was not feeling my limbs. So everything below my waist, I wasn't feeling it. And I grabbed my right hand with my left hand and the right hand was very cold and I could not feel my right hand at all. I lift it up and it fell back on my chest and at that point of time I was like wow I just lost my arm.

Torah:

Alone, confused, and badly injured, Minko lies motionless on the trail.

Minko:

At that point I saw that my legs are steaming, like a smoke was coming out from my legs.

Torah:

Then, through the rain, the wind, and the distant thunder, he hears a voice. It's coming from behind him so he can't see the person, but they're only a few feet away.

Minko:

And he was like, "Don't move. You got struck by lightning."

Torah:

This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help, whether you're lost in a strange town, fleeing from a wildfire, or struck by lightning high up in the mountains.

Minko Nikolov has been hit by lightning.

His timing, and it's odd to say it this way, was actually quite fortunate. Despite being in a remote part of the park, there was a group of four hikers on the same trail just a few hundred yards away when he got struck.

Now those strangers are looking down at his body lying in a pool of rainwater and blood, smoke rising eerily from his torso and legs.

Minko:

And I was like, "All right, help me get up. I want to get out of here." And that person was like, "No, I'm too scared. Like, I don't want to get electrocuted."

Torah:

One of the strangers holds an umbrella over his face to keep the driving rain out of his eyes and another tries to get him to drink some water. One of the hikers has enough signal on their phone to call 911. All the while, Minko is drifting in and out of

consciousness.

Minko:

I thought that was it. I was just looking at the mountain and getting rain. I got really calm at that point.

Phil Magistro:

I started rock climbing when I was a kid in high school in a climbing gym. And then in college, I learned to climb outdoors.

Torah:

That's Phil Magistro.

Phil:

And that has more or less been a thread throughout my entire life and underpinned a lot of the things that I've done professionally.

Torah:

That includes being a 'climbing ranger' at Rocky Mountain National Park. In fact, it was Phil, soaking wet from the rain, that told Minko about the second weather system forming on the far side of the mountain earlier in the day.

Phil:

My primary responsibility was fitness and familiarization so that I would be ready to respond for search and rescue incidents.

The park gets millions of visitors per year. They tend to get hurt in inconvenient locations and having a crew of people who are super familiar with all of those locations really facilitates the search and rescue response. So when somebody calls 911 and says, you know, my partner just got hit by a rock and we're at the end of the Flakes Traverse on the casual route, we know exactly where that is, how to get there and have a rough plan for how to get them down.

The typical summer weather is afternoon thunderstorms. So we expect almost every day that somewhere between like 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. it's going to cloud over, and there's going to be thunder, lightning, hail, rain, and that may continue for an hour, it may continue into the evening.

Torah:

But today is looking better than usual. The forecast says the chance of showers is between zero and 10 percent. So, together with his climbing partner, Phil plans an ambitious day – a vertical climbing route up to Hallett Peak.

Phil:

We met at 6 a.m. at the office and I think we were at the base of the route at like eight in the morning. But when we got to the base of the route, it started raining on us.

And so we called into dispatch and asked them to look at the weather radar and they saw that there was rain, but there was nothing past that rain, and that to the west was clear and that there was no lightning activity anywhere in the state. And so we thought, well, let's just give it a half an hour and see if it stops and dries out. And sure enough, it did. And so we were able to climb the route, which was really cool.

Torah:

Their climb up was "cool," but from the summit, the view was ugly.

Phil:

The sky had turned green. There were these big, ugly clouds just blanketing the Western sky. So from the top of the peak, we descended it as quickly as we safely could, right? There's a, a scramble down to a single repel. And so we started hustling back down the talus field to the lake and the hail just unleashed on us.

Torah:

The storm passes and the weather calms down. That's when the two soaking wet rangers cross paths with Minko. Phil and Minko have known each other for years as fellow members of the climbing community.

Phil:

Generally speaking, as a climbing ranger, I never told people to turn around.

Torah:

But he will let them know what they're facing.

Phil:

Hey, just FYI, there's significant lightning. And the weather radar was showing just line after line of storms stacking up west of the divide. And so we knew that this was just going to continue now all day despite the forecast.

Torah:

Minko says thanks for the warning, and promises he'll modify his plans to stay safe. Not long after that conversation he sees the storm with his own eyes and turns around.

Music out

[SFX thunder rolling in the distance]

Torah:

As soon as Phil and his climbing partner get back to their truck, they get a call on the radio. A hiker on the Cub Lake Trail — about two-and-a-half miles away — has broken their ankle and needs to be evacuated.

Phil:

The Cub Lake ankle incident, that's bread and butter. Like that's the kind of thing

that happens, literally every single day in the summer.

Torah:

But this one has a wrinkle. As Phil and some other rangers gather at the trail head, preparing to carry a stretcher (more accurately a 'litter') up the trail, they get told by the incident commander to stay put. There's a lot of lightning activity, and they don't want anyone going into the exposed areas.

Phil:

And as we're waiting for the weather to allow us to go, it turns out a visitor on horseback found the woman with a broken ankle, put her on the back of the horse and started carrying her out. So the litter team was no longer necessary.

And right then we get the call from the search and rescue duty officer saying, all Cub Lake search and rescue units standby. We're receiving an emergency call for a 31-year-old male struck by lightning near Dream Lake. The patient is conscious and breathing, bleeding from his ears, mouth and nose, and smoking. And so that was kind of a pretty shocking radio call to receive. It was pretty visceral description of what was going on.

My immediate thought was that the severity of those injuries and the distance up trail, it's like two miles up trail, meant that this person was going to receive care, significantly delayed compared to like on a golf course or something and that it may be a rescue, but it may also turn into a body recovery.

Torah:

When he gets to the trailhead, three emergency medics have already started up the hill ahead of him. Phil and his colleagues — there's now a dozen of them in the response team — gather their equipment and follow.

Phil:

And so you know two people have half of the litter strapped to their back. Somebody has a wheel strapped to their back. Somebody else has a couple of sleeping pads. Somebody else has a sleeping bag. You know, we've got some medical supplies.

Torah:

Forty-five minutes of strenuous hiking later, they arrive on the scene. It's pretty chaotic. Some of the crew start assembling the litter. There's random hikers trying to get down the mountain, unable to get by the crowd on the narrow trail. And the original strangers who were first on the scene, maybe they're still there, maybe not. No one knows. Phil, who has advanced medical training, joins the first responders.

Phil:

So I walked up and there's a person laying under a sleeping bag on the middle of the trail, a paramedic on the one side, two rangers on the other side. One of them's kind of talking on the radio, making plans. The other is helping with medical care. And I

look down and it's Minko. And so I'm just immediately like, "Oh no, this is my friend."

Torah:

Minko's face is caked in mud and blood. His breathing is erratic, and he has no movement in his legs or his right arm. His clothes are charred and smoldering. Then, to everyone's surprise, Minko opens his eyes.

Phil:

And he looked at me and he said, "Hey Phil, I bet you did not think you would be coming back to help me today."

Torah:

It was a dry piece of humour in a crazy situation, and, interestingly, Minko has no memory of saying anything like that. To him the entire incident is a blur.

Meanwhile, the first responders have to make a difficult decision in the face of a ticking clock.

Phil:

It's a huge balance in wilderness medicine is always like, what's the priority? Should we be doing medical care on scene, or do we need to get this person out?

There's very little that we can do in the dirt by the side of a trail, with another storm cell queued up behind this one, to help this person, compared to what they could do in the back of an ambulance or in a hospital. And so really the, the, the, the drive is to get this person out of there and to do so without making anything worse.

Torah:

The EMTs start him on an IV and give him some pain meds, then lift him into the litter. The litter has a single large bicycle wheel, so they can roll along the flat sections, but much of the terrain is too rugged for that and it needs to be carried.

It takes an hour to get to the parking lot.

From there Minko is loaded into an ambulance, taken to the medical center in the park and then air lifted to a hospital. There, they check his heart — that's the biggest risk with lightning strike victims — heart failure, but Minko's heart is OK.

The bad news is, he has a broken jaw, a burst eardrum, and serious burns to 30 percent of his body. He's taken to another hospital, one with a specialty burn unit.

In all, he spends a month in hospital and has a dozen surgeries. The first six to remove the burnt and damaged muscle from his shoulder, back, and legs. The rest are skin grafts.

Minko:

Just to put it in perspective, the accident happened on August 17. The first time I put

two pairs of shoes and walk freely was Thanksgiving.

Torah:

From there he starts doing physiotherapy, then training, and eventually, incredibly, gets back to climbing.

That includes going back to the spot where he was struck and climbing the boulders he was planning to tackle on that stormy day.

The incident happened six years ago. And although they've both moved on with their lives, Phil and Minko know they are forever connected.

Phil:

At least once a year I try to reach out or he reaches out to me and just touch base and see how life is going.

Minko:

He knows how I feel about him helping me and organizing the rescue mission. So, yeah, I'm just thankful for him. He'll be a good friend and remember forever.

Torah:

Phil now teaches wilderness medicine. And the class includes a unit on the danger of lightning strikes.

Phil:

Lightning is pretty indiscriminate. It's going to choose the path of least resistance. And we as humans are basically made of saltwater and we're much less resistant to electrical flow than the air or rocks. And so when lightning happens to be queuing up in the area where we are when there's a lot of static electricity right around us, we're a great pathway for it.

Torah:

Of course, the real heroes of this story are those four anonymous strangers who saw Minko get struck, comforted him, and called for help. Their role was essential.

Minko:

I would have died. I am very convinced that that will happen because you could not move. You're getting hypothermia. I'm thankful to them, I'm very thankful that they stopped by and helped me.

Torah:

What happened to Minko might seem totally random, a one-in-a-million, freak accident type of thing.

But it's not — it's actually common enough that people like Katie Flanagan have dedicated their professional careers to helping people avoid being hit by lightning.

She's a member of the National Lightning Safety Council — and her focus is sports — keeping both athletes and spectators safe. And it's a good thing she's doing that because before she started her research, people were just winging it.

Katie Flanagan:

I did a survey saying, asking the division of athletic teams that were in our conference, what do you all do when you encounter lightning during practices or games? And the feedback was, well, we just sort of know when we should stop, which was not good. So, we made a policy back 25 years ago, when you should be mindful, when you should evacuate, and how long you have to stay in a safe place before you can come back.

Torah:

So what are those parameters and guidelines?

Katie:

The bottom line, if you are outside and you see lightning or you hear thunder, you are in danger of being struck by lightning. It's that simple. What we tell people is the most important thing is to act: like see the lightning, hear the thunder, and go to a safe place. And a safe place is a place where you live or work. So a library, a gymnasium, an office building something. But that's not prudent for a lot of people that are having picnics or climbing mountains or hiking. So the next best thing is your car, if you're at a beach or something and roll up the windows because lightning will go around the car, it'll hit and then go around. But again, if you're hiking or on the water, that's not a safe place. So we suggest that you try to be about the same size as other things. Lightning happens because there's a channel that goes up from the earth and down from the cloud, and if you're in that channel, you're a tall thing, a pole, a tree, it will more likely strike that tall thing than a row of bushes.

Torah:

Do you want to be around places where the trees are taller than you?

Katie:

Not really, because it'll probably strike a tree. And so the number of people that are impacted by a lightning strike because they are taking shelter, which is a terrible word, shelter under a tree or under a pole or in a park shelter is high. So if you're not getting wet and you're thinking, oh, I'm safe. That's not true. You really need four walls and a roof and electricity and water, a bathroom that's on a hiking trail that has plumbing go there.

Torah:

What's the importance of the plumbing?

Katie:

So lightning, will travel more easily through dirt, through water and if it hits the ground outside of a swimming pool, it will follow the water pipes. If you are taking a shower inside or taking a bath during the lightning storm, you have a potential,

and it has happened of feeling the impacts of a lightning strike while you're in your big soaker tub or while you're taking a shower. Washing the dishes with the water running, no, not a good idea.

So in a house, it will hit the house or hit the ground, go around through the water pipes.

Torah:

What kind of myths out there that are, what kind of myths are out there that you would love to correct?

Katie:

So many things. Old wives' tales as we call them that are myths that lightning, is attracted to metal, which is completely false, that it only strikes in one place and then you can go back out because it will never strike there again.

And that reminds me of something. Lightning is not electricity. If somebody stepped on an electric wire, rescuers cannot touch that person because they will also get the electricity because it's attached. Lightning is 50 times hotter than the surface of the sun, but it's instantaneous. It hits them and gone. A rescuer touching somebody who was just struck by lightning is not going to get electrocuted.

Torah:

What does a lightning strike do to your body?

Katie:

Well, 50 percent of the people that get struck by lightning or have an impact of lightning, they rupture their eardrums. So then you have hearing loss. What it also does is it stops your heart commonly, but people's whose heart stop, they're still breathing. That's how that happens. But unless someone is there with an AED to put on your heart, to shock you to start again or do CPR, those people die. The best way to prevent the lightning death is to be mindful about the weather and not hike or be aware of storms are coming and plan accordingly.

Torah:

That's it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, thank you for listening.

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On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.

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