

Knees jittered. Sweat on fingertips greased holds. Eyes blurred. Naught could I see but the thin manila line — the blessed, saving rope.

Monie kindly called down, "Take your time. We've got all day. You couldn't pull me off if you tried. You couldn't go anyplace if you fainted."

Fainting was precisely what I had in mind. But I wouldn't have the satisfaction of dying, I'd hang like a sack of potatoes and when I revived the wall would still be there. Monie wasn't likely to give me enough slack to return to the notch.

Hands fumbled — and gripped doorknobs. Feet stuttered — into buckets. The muddle came into sharp focus as a staircase, exactly as advertised. I joined Monie and instantly sat down so she wouldn't notice the shocking condition of my knees.

"You're ~~in a bind~~ ^{over the hump} now," she said. "That was the worst of it."

"Really?" I giggled. "That wasn't bad!" I'd mastered the first skill of a climber — how to lie.

Now Betty's turn, me belaying. By moans and whines I traced her unseen passage. Her pitiable face emerged from sky beneath my feet, chin quivering, tears rolling down cheeks.

"What do I do now?" she sobbed.

"Follow the rope," said I cheerily. "Walk up the steps. You can't fall. This belay has a moneyback guarantee."

Already I was an expert.

Upward we followed the vertical path ~~established by generations~~ ^{traced by hundreds} of

since the first ascent in 1929.

Mountaineers, Eyes, hands, and feet settled into rhythmic coordination. It was just like climbing a tree and as a kid I'd been great on trees.

All that air? I was inside the sky but on the rock. The rope would save me from flying off and down and forever away. An inch from death (or call it 7/16 of an inch, the diameter of the line) yet gloriously, victoriously alive!

One last sheer wall of lovely rock splendidly split by a cozy chimney and the South Face was over forever. We would descend by the easy north ridge. These pleasures I'd never have to repeat.

Betty toppled into a face-down coma. I scampered around the summit in a frenzy, had Monie take a picture of me on the topmost point wearing the rope — what shudders this shot would give hiker friends!

I gobbled squirrel food, raved at the views, laughed at everything and nothing.

I'd thrown such a fit on Delmonte Ridge in honor of ~~the~~ perils of a wildland week. Now I was delirious from a mere hour on The Tooth — an hour compressing more fear, more exhilaration, than a whole summer of trail-pounding, ridge-running.

So wild I was as to make a madman's joke: "Okay, Monie, now how about Cruiser?"

The witch cackled.

21 March 1974

1947

Chapter 4

BRUISER CRUISER

Early in September the president of Ernst Hardware made one of his notorious lightning tours of the lower depths, caught me in the middle of a coffee break reading Marlowe's Tamburlaine, concluded I'd never be a candidate for top management, and fired me out of the warehouse. Income abruptly chopped off, domestic tranquility threatened, I swallowed pride and returned to the University, to the placement office maintained to help graduates find a proper use for their education. ~~By good~~ They happened to have a perfect spot for an ~~English~~ English major, and right on campus, ~~tending~~ ^{running} a chemistry stockroom. The pay was a giant leap up from the warehouse, a pocket-bulging \$190 a month, with an automatic raise to \$210 after a year. Wealth enough to gratify the Jew of Malta! And Bagley Hall was a 10-minute stroll from the garret and next summer I'd get a ~~two-week~~ ^{week of} vacation.

As a bonus, the job didn't start ~~for a week~~ ^{immediately}, giving Betty and me an unexpected chance for a long walk. Where? Standing atop The Tooth, gazing eastward, I'd been impressed by the mass of big, rough peaks at the headwaters of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River, ^{peaks} an order of magnitude larger than those in the vicinity of Snoqualmie Pass and supporting ~~the a number of~~ living glaciers, the closest to Seattle. The names on the map there were intriguing --

Lake Ivanhoe, Lake Rowena, Lake Rebecca, La Bohn Gap. Some explorer of long ago obviously had found it a land of romance and adventure.

We were two days hiking from Salmon La Sac, on the east side of the range, up the Waptus River to Dutch Miller Gap on the Cascade Crest, then down into the Middle Fork and up again to La Bohn Gap. A fit lair it was for that villain, no mistake. Roaming grandly-bleak buttresses of glacier-gouged granite, I conceded the Cascades were more than a cheap substitute for the Olympics. Certainly the weather was just as spectacular ~~and~~ -- the storm that blasted us into a soaking-wet, half-frozen, semi-starving 20-mile retreat to Salmon La Sac was the most splendidly vicious three-day blow I'd seen since the Lost Ridge disaster in 1940.

Before gale-driven clouds engulfed Bears Breast, Summit Chief, Overcoat, and Chimney Rock, I learned another benefit of having climbed through the sky on the South Face. Formerly, every tall mountain wall was an impenetrable mystery. Now, knowing one cliff intimately with hands and feet, I knew something of all cliffs. The peaks had a new dimension.

I wasn't hooked and wasn't going to be, my determination was firm as ever to remain a ridgerunner. But one more hour of sublime fright would make the winter that much shorter. When we were out with Monie and I'd drunk enough beer to be foolish I'd repeat the mad joke from the summit of The Tooth.

One night Monie didn't cackle. Quietly, distantly, she explained that enticing hikers to the false summit to enjoy their disintegration was one thing. Hauling a hiker up the actual peak was another. She wanted me to understand Cruiser was no South Face. The crux was a chillingly-exposed

From Seattle, Wash, clear, dramatic. Cascade east. From V. R. 35 miles to the top of each - but Olympics more dramatic because of water discharges. And the high peaks of Cascade are better than Seattle - the welcome. Describe Seattle on the Sound

hundred-foot lead on tiny holds. No piton cracks. If the leader fell nobody could do anything but wave goodbye. And as it happened, she'd never led that pitch, always had had an upper belay.

Okay! All right! Enough said! I wanted to be terrified, not killed. I directed the conversation to other mountains, to lakes and ridges and meadows. Not for long.

From a remote and private place, Monie suddenly began speaking again of Cruiser. She said that on her last ascent, two years ago, the party left a fixed rope. If it was still there the leader wouldn't be stark naked. She'd like to try. But winter was close, we'd have to go soon. In fact, with the weather looking good for the weekend, we'd better go now.

The joke was over. Monie was dead serious. Was I? Incredibly, yes. A peak I'd never seen, not even in a picture, a peak the very sight of which petrified Bob, a lot nervier guy than me, was gnawing at my vitals.

Betty, hearing Monie and I come grimly to the decision, took flight. She'd be months recuperating from The Tooth and La Bohn Gap and anyway wanted to visit her folks in Portland. Her flat refusal ended the matter -- Monie declared we couldn't go without a third member. Why not? The only explanation offered was some poppycock about the "climbing code" of The Mountaineers. Was she worried about propriety? Not bloody likely, not her. The role of the third person must be to call the undertaker.

Well, that was that. Walking home from the Rainbow, I felt satisfied. I'd done my best to face Cruiser and it wasn't my fault Betty was a coward.

But next night Monie ^{called} ~~came by the house~~ to announce (no cackles) her brother Al had agreed to come along -- not to climb, since he'd never

succumbed to the malady that afflicted two sisters and a brother -- but to fish in Flapjack Lakes and loaf around the meadows. Thus the sentence for the crime of loose talk in a tavern. A cruel and unusual punishment indeed.

Saturday morning, September 28, Betty boarded the train to Portland and the three of us set out for the Olympics in my new 1935 Ford V-8 coupe. The sky was solid blue and the Weather Bureau said high pressure covered the whole Pacific Ocean and the nearest clouds were over Madagascar. No storm would stop us. Nothing would stop us except chickening out.

Not this time.

Astounding! I was resolved to risk death rather than quit. What the hell had happened to me? In the Graywolf I'd edged up to eternity -- but not on purpose, for God's sake. Why was it necessary to settle that score of last October, expunge that moment of cowardice in the great wind? What was I trying to prove, to whom? What could I win that was worth losing everything, including a passionate wife in a cozy garret, myriad ridges of Olympics and Cascades awaiting my boots, and a cool \$190 a month?

The V-8 was stuttering. There might yet be an honorable escape. From the time ~~of~~ I bought the awkward hulk, in July, I'd suspected a terminal disease, what with the trailing cloud of blue smoke. But ~~some~~ ^{everyone} said that was normal, the cars came smoking off the Ford assembly line in 1935, all you did was buy oil by the five-gallon can and stop every hour to fill the crankcase. To driving ^g and oil-burner and blotting out the landscape behind I could easily adjust, but not to descending from my wide-view Model A throne into a deep pit behind the steering wheel. Also, I missed being ^{master of} a square-cut anachronism skipping nimbly, helter-skelter, through the countryside, annoying

the super-streamlined, ^{high-speed,} heavy-haunched frogs that infested postwar highways. Nevertheless, though selling the Model A was like selling my youth, selling the Declaration of Independence, there was no denying that in the A any speed greater than 28 miles per hour was too ~~steep~~ ^{bone-rattling} to maintain hour after hour, whereas for all its slow-wittedness the V-8 ran comfortably at a steady 42, bringing the mountains much closer. But now, on an upgrade, the clumsy beast coughed, faltered, quit. Was I saved? No. Al revealed himself as an expert on fixing V-8 gas pumps with chewing gum. Onward, and onward.

At the ~~trailhead~~ trailhead the familiar routine of pulling on boots, stowing gear in pack, gave a comforting, deceptive feel of normality. In 4 miles we reached Flapjack Lakes, placid tree-ringed waters under crags of the same ~~basalt~~ basalt we'd be climbing on Cruiser. Al stopped to fish while Monie and I continued 2 miles, nearly to Gladys Pass, to make camp in a small grass-and-moss flat, water supplied by a cold trickle from a lingering snowpatch.

Beside the flat rose a block of pillow ~~lava~~ lava, the top littered with decayed logs and shingles, rusty pots and pans, and broken bottles -- remains of a collapsed cabin, a dead home. Some 30 or 50 years ago a prospector busted his butt hereabouts summer after summer, swinging pick at ~~the~~ pockets of reddish rock -- low-grade ~~ore~~ manganese ore -- scattered through gray-green basalt. He probably never raised aspiring eyes to the maze of pinnacles. Who was the true idiot, that ~~some~~ dumb ~~bastard~~ bastard or me?

~~Which pinnacle was Cruiser? From here we couldn't tell. They all looked alike, awful.~~

In dusk Al arrived, ^{fishless} ~~fish~~ and soaking wet, ^{having stranded} ~~held~~ been on an island ^{when} ~~and~~ his raft drifted away, ~~and he had to swim to shore.~~ He didn't mind.

The mild fall twilight was ideal for a ^{swim} ~~trip~~ and the blaze of bone-dry, time-bleached wood soon dried his clothes.

Monie and Al spread a fantastic supper of green salad, steak, and fried potatoes; a condemned man could ask no better last meal. We sprawled around the fire for a ^{tea-stimulated} ~~evening-long~~ psychiatric seminar, Al discussing aspects of Monie's childhood that caused her neurotic compulsion, speculating why such a seemingly sensible fellow as I should abandon ^{sweet reason} ~~the hiker's~~ ~~of reason~~ for the climber's ^{dark} ~~tangled~~ sickness.

-even for this one last time, as I insisted -

He could laugh. Not me. This was among my prettiest camps and loveliest mountain nights and would be one of my most ^{memorable} ~~delightful~~ hikes if, tomorrow, I roamed meadowlands with Al. Instead I'd be creeping up evil basalt with his demented sister.

Monie's tarp, a 7- by 11-foot war-surplus liferaft sail, orange on one side and blue on the other, kept out star chill. The grass bed was soft. I crawled into my bag and closed my eyes and just like that it was 6:30, time to get up. I felt cheated, having slept too deep to savor what delicious sleep it was. And it should have given me strength but instead dissolved the steely core of resolution. When I stood under the dawn sky and saw the ^{cold} ~~somber~~ walls my guts were jello.

Together we walked to Gladys Pass. Al sacked out for a smoke before heading up dream-inviting benches and draws of Gladys Peak. He was in no hurry. His summit was a half-hour away and he had all day. Comments

on our neuroses followed us up the talus.

I focused^y on each step as it came and pushed away thoughts of coming events — events which didn't have to come. There was still time for an attack of appendicitis. Or an earthquake.

The couloir was a snap ^{without Betty} ~~after the tooth~~ — no need for the rope. From the notch we spotted Al, sitting more than walking. Wherever he was, that's where he wanted to be.

Where was Betty? Having breakfast with her folks. Maybe they'd drive to Cannon Beach this afternoon and walk sands beside the breakers. I missed the sobbing incompetence that ^{made} me look brave and skillful. Any crying on this trip would have to be done by me.

Now, the dreaded roof, the scene of shame. Clench jaw, breathe deep. But in calm air it was a no-hands stroll — I passed the chicken-out point and grew a foot taller. I'd worried too much. Now we scrambled onto the false summit. And for the first time I saw Cruiser Peak

One day in the stockroom I accidentally spilled a powdery white chemical and inhaled a bit of dust. Abruptly hands and feet retreated infinitely far from head, consciousness imploded into a white-hot star burning behind eyes, time froze around me and I raced alone through eternity a million years a second. I didn't want to die in Bagley Hall and started home, stalking mechanically across ~~the~~ ^{walking} campus, [^] so tall that when I toppled I'd crush hundreds of students and professors, the roar of the star so loud I wondered they did not press hands to ears. In ~~our apartment~~ ^{the garret} I fell on ~~the~~ ^{our} bed and stared at the ceiling until the star diffused and cooled.

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On the false summit I felt the star ignite. And it would burn bright so long as that fang of basalt was poised to rend me, that sea of space awaited to drown my dying howl. Bob hadn't told the half.

Monie was too preoccupied to try to laugh me out of jaw-drooping, bug-eyed silence. What was scaring her? I didn't know. What was scaring me was the Thing of nightmares when I was a kid terrified by God and Hell, the Thing now symbolized in broad daylight by that horrid thrust of lava.

Cruiser was a doomed remnant of ~~an~~ undersea volcanic eruptions millions of years ago, had mere hundreds of thousands of years left before frost wedged its unified menace into separate blocks, gravity dragged them down to the valley, streams and organic acids turned hard fragments into little sands and soft soils. The proud spire would be humbled, was dying, as all mountains are.

Why should I pity damn Cruiser! I was going to be humbled, was going to die, a lot faster.

A yell from ^{lower space.} ~~the void.~~ Al calling attention to a mountain goat under us on the cliffs. One more fine day in the hills for Al and the goat.

We scrambled up and down the ridge crest. The tower loomed larger, ^{larger. That was the way of / relentlessly} ~~in the usual habit of~~ the Thing, closing in until at the last moment before being overwhelmed I awoke screaming. Today there might be screaming but naught to awake to — except the long silence.

We traversed a narrow ledge, frightfully exposed. In the middle my ^{Bergan} ~~shoulder~~ hit the wall and the rebound nearly shoved me off. I'd have fallen alone; we hadn't thought to rope.

A wide chimney was almost filled by an enormous chockstone, actually a former false summit split off the crest; we climbed beneath, entering the interior of the mountain, ~~cold~~^{dank} and dark as a tomb.

Nothing so far was beyond preparation given by the South Face. At 10 o'clock we crawled from inner gloom to the base of the summit tower. Now we were beyond.

For a mercy I couldn't see the final wall, hidden around the corner. But I had seen it.

I gulped air — what a pleasure to breathe, we do it so often we grow oblivious to the ~~savory~~ flavor of Earth's atmosphere. My heart beat hard and fast — what a delight to feel blood being pumped through a vibrant body. Sweat flowed from forehead and palms and armpits — God it's fun to sweat.

A taunting yodel from distant gardens reminded of the alternative still open.

Monie — serious, formal — showed me where to sit, where to brace feet, how to hold the rope. Keep a solid grip but don't pull, please leave slack. In case of a fall, wrap rope around waist and stiffen knees. The stance was bombproof, nothing could pull me out. I forgot to ask what to do after the fall. In parting she said, "Don't worry."

Dear God, why not?

She rapidly climbed the dozen vertical feet above me, swung a leg over the corner, and vanished. I was alone.

The rope payed out, slowly. She was moving, slowly.

The rope stopped. I gripped hard. Heart pounded. Ears roared.

Sweat spouted.

Monie called, voice faint. "Fixed rope — off route — on ridge — can't reach."

Would she scream, then the rope leap like a crazy snake? Then would I scream? Or just pass out cold?

The rope did not move.

For 15 minutes by the clock the rope did not move. And no word came. Monie was stuck.

Does the condemned man have a final request before the blindfold? With free hand I fumbled cigarette and matches from shirt pocket.

"Try traverse — rope not far — bad spot — hang on."

My rope trembled alive. I payed out slack. Smelled a sickening odor. Saw cigarette ~~burning~~ burning ~~into~~ flesh of arm, But felt no pain.

"GOT IT!"

That came loud and clear.

"TIED IN!"

Almost she was cackling. The rope payed out steadily, smoothly.

"Belay on! Climb!"

I stood up, yelled "Climbing!" The hell I was. Legs were rubbery, arms limp, hands awkward as boxing gloves.

Robot-like I moved up to the corner. And peeked over the edge. And spun. The final face was a glass-smooth slab rising so abruptly I couldn't see the top without falling over backward, dropping so swooningly the valley was a green blur.

I clutched the edge and closed my eyes. I'd gone through this on the first pitch of the South Face, it was simply a matter of concentrating.

Another peek. This was no South Face! Tilt the slab to the horizontal and it would make a great roller rink.

A happy yip from another world. Al, please shut up!

"I've got you!" yelled unseen Monie. That was my very kind friend speaking, reassuring me her belay was solid — yet it was a fact the wicked witch finally had got me.

But the witch was my only salvation. If I retreated to sane Al nevermore would I know peace.

Throw a leg over — tennis shoes find nothing. Move shaking guts onto the edge, extend a palsied arm — fingers slip off round bumps of pillow lava.

Slither onto the face, fully committed in body and (if any) soul. Chest pressed against green basalt gains no comfort from the embrace. Don't look down! But out of morbid curiosity I did — down to far-below forest of tiny trees. Knees began to quiver, and wrists, and lower lip.

Not toes and fingers but only this thin line of vegetable fiber next to mine eyes held me to the slab, to life. I wiggled up rounded greenish pillows of slick lava. Did I climb or did Monie ~~pull~~^{reel} me in like a fish?

Suddenly the rock turned reddish and feet found buckets and fingers doorknobs and the rope drooped because Monie couldn't take in slack fast enough. I pulled myself over the knife-edge of the summit ridge and fell

onto her small belay ledge. I babbled about admirable Red Rock, hateful Green Rock.

A yell from below. Insolent Al on his 5600-foot meadow summit.

We ran up the blade of the knife to our 6104-foot rock summit. There was barely room for two to sit, none to relax.

I recalled Monie's harrowing tale of an ascent by nine climbers in three teams. Since the route is strictly one climber wide, no room to pass, the first team spent ^{two}~~2~~ hours straddling the ridge, waiting. When their turn came to descend one member had to be lowered like a cadaver and said not a word on the rest of the trip and never again was seen on a mountain.

Ten minutes were plenty for me. Nerves didn't recuperate, were ~~progressively~~ deteriorating.

The descent was worse, facing outward, unavoidably confronting the vast emptiness, lowering feet onto holds below which was nothing but dizzy air. But the rope was tight on my waist and soon I was safe. Now began Monie's ordeal, guarded only by the fixed rope weathered by winter ice and wind and summer sun and rain, frayed and bleached, as sturdy as your father's mustache. And on the trickiest section of the slab, at the bottom, she lacked even that thin consolation. But soon she too was safe.

At noon we both were off the face. Merely ^{two}~~2~~ hours since Monie began her suicide lead. Two hours! All my childhood nightmares together probably didn't add up to this much elapsed time.

I wanted to hug and kiss Monie but that would have complicated our

relationship and anyway would have been anticlimax to the hours we were linked purely by rope yet were closer than husband and wife.

On the return to the false summit I snapped many pictures. Most came out fuzzy — the damn camera wouldn't stop trembling. At 2:30 we ~~two~~ ^{three} assembled in camp. Al contrasted his happy relaxation to our delirium and wondered what good this day had done our neuroses.

I raved about the Bad Fifteen Minutes when Monie did not move and I burned my flesh and felt no pain, ~~pondering her folly and mine.~~

She cackled, "You had nothing to worry about. If I'd fallen the rope would have broken and you'd have been sitting with a loose line in your hands. I wasn't worrying about you!"

~~I guess she wasn't.~~ While Al and I luxuriated in fall-colored meadows and smoked last cigarettes before hoisting packs, ^{Monie} ~~she~~ took off like a shot from ~~the glorious~~ camp and when we got to the V-8 ~~down in the woods~~ ^{had} ~~she'd~~ drunk practically all the beer — and she didn't even like beer. I'd never seen her ~~so giggling~~ smashed. In the car she immediately passed out.

I didn't need booze. I'd never climb Cruiser again, that was for sure. But by the holy, once in my life I'd stood up to the Thing of nightmares.

Back in Seattle I sent Betty a telegram:

"BRUISER CRUISER SUBDUED."

A pardonable exaggeration.