

18 April 1974

1950

Chapter <sup>16</sup> ~~17~~

NORDGIPFEL

We hadn't taken Sloan seriously and had been punished. We were late getting up, late to the summit, late to the road, and late getting home. I was half-asleep in the stockroom Monday and right after dinner flopped on the couch.

Betty shook me from deep sleep. The ritual <sup>post-weekend</sup> call-around had begun and Pete was on the phone to find out how my climb had gone and to tell about his. He and Fearless Fred had made the first traverse of the three peaks of Index, including a first ascent of the Middle Peak, where they'd bivouacked Saturday night. They'd had some rough work. He was amused, though, by the North Peak.

"What a joke!" he laughed. "They talk about how tough it is but you hardly take your hands out of your pockets. We didn't even rope up! You're in trees practically the whole way and couldn't go anyplace if you did fall. You ought to climb it sometime."

I laughed. Even discounting the fact Pete was a pistol, and certain to gain a big reputation before long, he knew my abilities and if he recommended North Peak for me it must really be a fraud. Conversation

ended, I conked out again.

Not for long. Deep sleep. Phone. Vic on the line. As Climbing Chairman he'd felt compelled to help out on an experience climb of minor interest. The Sloan fiasco was quickly wrapped up. So, little knowing what I was doing, I passed along news of Pete's triumph, and his scorn for the reputation of the North Peak, and his suggestion I should climb it sometime. I laughed. Vic didn't.

"I've been trying to get up a North Peak party for 3 years," he said earnestly. "Why don't we do it?"

"Great," I said, yearning for the couch. "Something to keep in mind."

"How about this weekend?"

"Can't — we're leaving for the Selkirks Saturday. Maybe after we get back."

Vic knew our plans and said, "But you won't be back until Labor Day and September days are too short. You need all the daylight you can get on North Peak. It's either this weekend or next year."

"Well, next year then." I'd found my out.

"Couldn't you wait until Monday to leave?"

"Well, Tom is all set to go Saturday."

"If he's willing, are you?"

"Well, I don't know. Guess so." The hell I was, but anything to get off the phone and on the couch.

Not for long. Vic again. Tom was willing — nay, Tom was eager, hot, ~~and~~ fanatical. I'd forgotten he'd started up North Peak last year with

Lardy Bob and Idiot Richard and been wounded by a falling rock and forced to retreat to Lake Serene while they made the climb — the sixth ascent.

Back to the couch. But my nap was troubled and I walked up the street to the Blue Moon and stared at bubbles rising in amber beer and traced the sequence of freakish events which got me into such an awful fix.

Never, not for one instant, had I ever had the slightest twinge of interest in ~~the~~ North Peak. Granted, it rises terrible and tall nearly a vertical mile above the Skykomish River and is a majestic chunk of scenery and much admired by tourists and famous from millions of postcards. But it doesn't have a glacier and ~~in this case at least~~ I supported Kermit's Law: "Nein gletscher, nein gipfel."

From neutrality my attitude had shifted to hostility during the past spring. Every time we headed ~~our~~ <sup>toward</sup> Stevens Pass <sup>bound</sup> for Tumwater Canyon, and came in view of North Peak, Lardy Bob and Idiot Richard insisted I stop the Jeep. They ~~then~~ left out, fell to their knees, and salaamed, gibbering.

Tom always seemed to share my distaste for these disgusting displays and I thought I was safe leaving the decision to him. Dammit, he wasn't disdainful of Lardy and Idiot, he was jealous.

A lot of climbers were making noises about North Peak, gathering nerve to give it a try. I'd discussed the mountain with Limber Jim, who'd followed its lurid history for a dozen years and once had scouted the cliffs searching for a respectable rock route.

"It's a hoax," he said. "Mass hysteria. There isn't any honest climbing. A Forest Service crew could swamp out a horse trail to the summit

if there was any call for it. Guys go up there and get lost in the brush and come back raving and the fever spreads. All you can say for North Peak is it's the tallest, steepest pile of crap in the Cascades. Strictly for sick people."

Nothing <sup>I'd</sup> ~~had~~ seen, nothing <sup>I'd</sup> ~~had~~ heard gave me the slightest inclination to climb North Peak. Why was the damn thing pursuing me like the Hound of Heaven? Perhaps my hubris deserved punishment<sup>λ</sup> but the gods had chosen a most illogical instrument. This was no proper Greek tragedy, this was getting run over by a truck.

Vic and Tom agreed we couldn't go without a <sup>u</sup>forth man, for the sake of two-man teams, but were stumped for a possible victim — until somebody thought of Ted. Tuesday morning, hungover, I looked him up in his lab, confidently expecting ~~my~~ salvation ~~from him~~ because his taste in mountains ran to yawkers and anyway Optimum Frequency doubtless would dictate that he stay in Bagley and do research.

"How you feel about the North Peak of Index?" I laughed.

"Well," he chuckled, "I've always sort of wanted to get it out of the way. Sounds like a yawker."

I couldn't believe it. I was betrayed by every trusted friend. In ~~two~~ <sup>two-and-a-half</sup> seasons as a Mountaineer I'd conquered ~~some~~ 70 summits and become captain of my soul, master of my fate, and there were thousands of peaks I wanted to climb — and yet because of the Sloan fiasco and the evil web of Monday-night calls I was doomed to attempt the one mountain in all the world I specifically wanted nothing to do with.

All week the clock spun in double-time, racing toward the wicked Sabbath, and I couldn't forget, not with Vic and Tom calling nightly to thrill me with new bits of data gathered about intricacies of the route.

I stayed longer than I should have at the Blue Moon Friday night, trying to explain to fellow Avenue Creeps what a stupid thing was happening, how I was battle-weary from 17 summits and 5 defeats and 56 mountaineering days in 7 months, how the Selkirk adventure had been planned since winter as the climax of my ~~climbing~~ season, the supreme effort of my career to date, and how this stupid North Peak was fouling me up. They agreed it was stupid, I was stupid, climbing <sup>was</sup> stupid, so shut up and drink your beer. Lost between two worlds, I did.

Saturday morning, August 19, offered no hope of bad weather. The North Pacific Summertime High was sitting on the Northwest heavy and solid and the forecast was for a heat wave and the probability of fractured temperature records.

We drove north in the Jeep, stopping for lunch in Monroe. A milkshake settled my stomach and cleared my eyes but couldn't touch the central problem. My sometime friends bounced around like high school kids going to a football game. They decided we needed a summit flag and ran to a dry goods shop and bought polka dot calico and a box of crayons. Ted inscribed upon the banner the legend: "NORTH TOWER. Longest Mung Climb in the State." I could never be a member of this party.

We turned off the highway and jounced along a logging-mining road

to the end, close under the object of our various dreams and dreads. ~~At~~ At  
 1 o'clock <sup>we</sup> hoisted packs and <sup>set forth on</sup> ~~the~~ the boot-built  
 path, a ladderway of rocks and tree roots <sup>ascending a forested cliff</sup> to the cirque of Lake Serene,  
 2500 feet, a cool jewel at the foot of the evil leap of the east face of North  
 Peak. The afternoon air scorched our throats and we drank deep.

A comfortable, delightful camp <sup>was available</sup> amid flowers and square-cut boulders  
 beside the luscious lake ~~was available~~; the fanatics, however, said it was  
 essential to save every possible minute of daylight for tomorrow so we  
 continued up talus to a ~~scrambled~~ miserable ridge of scrub alder and biting  
 flies and dumped packs 3200 feet above Puget Sound and almost half a  
 vertical mile beneath the 5357-foot summit of North Peak, whose walls rose  
 so abruptly we could see nothing except the nearest thicket of cedar.

It was necessary, <sup>Tom</sup> ~~they~~ said, to scout the lower portion of the route,  
 so we floundered upward in steep, stifling-hot brush. Maybe Tom was  
 enlightened; I was brutalized.

A strange encounter. Three lads appeared in the cedar, swinging  
 through the jungle like wild-eyed, beaten-up, raving Tarzans. They paused  
 to tell us they'd been to the top, <sup>inspired</sup> ~~inspired~~ by the newspaper article  
 announcing the feat of Pete and Fred. The shocking thing was they weren't  
 climbers <sup>at all, just</sup> ~~but~~ simple-minded ~~hikers~~ hikers. An odd chapter in  
 the history of ~~the~~ an odd peak.

Returned from the scouting trip, we dropped down the talus a few  
 yards from camp to a remnant of snow, filled cups and ~~Ten~~ ~~Cans~~ cans from drips,  
 and cooked supper on primus stoves. The lunatics were bubbling yawkers

and I pretended to laugh, wondering what my chances were of acute appendicitis.

Our ascent would be the 10th and would bring the total summit visitors to some two dozen. If we made it. Rather diluted heroism but sufficient to turn three good friends into strangers, almost enemies.

From snowpatch drips we filled canteens for tomorrow; no water could be expected on the peak and thirst is a major problem of the climb and in the heat wave would be that much worse. I had two canteens, a big quart and a little pint.

At 9 o'clock I retreated gladly into security of the bag, <sup>expecting an interlude of total escape.</sup> But my inner clock ticked off the minutes of the night, <sup>one by one</sup> and I never really slept, only counted down, heartbeat by heartbeat, toward the beginning of what was sure to be the worst day of my life.

Why couldn't I just say no? Why hadn't I laughed off Vic's proposition last Monday? The jolly boys at the Blue Moon would never understand. Nor would I.

Too soon the night was boisterous and I was out of my bag, sitting on the ground mourning the death of kings, <sup>lacing tennis shoes,</sup> listening to Vic crunch breakfast. ~~Eastward~~ <sup>ed eastward</sup> the sky ~~was~~ shaded from star-speckled black of the ~~zenith, into~~ <sup>zenith, into</sup> dark blue, <sup>in</sup> to pale blue, <sup>in</sup> to a band of yellow edging the rim of Earth. Around us darkness still obscured trees and rocks. The three bustled. I sat, smoking a cigarette. Vic flashed a light in my face.

"You look terrible."

"I am terrible." This was the first time I'd ever had two hangovers

from a single night at the Blue Moon.

"Better eat something. Make you feel better," he said, crunching. I never knew anybody to crunch like Vic. He could crunch bananas.

"Not hungry."

Precisely at 5:37  the night thinned enough for trees to take individual shapes and we shouldered rucksacks and ropes. And began.

The ascent started with no hiking preliminaries to loosen muscles, circulate blood, focus mind. From camp we scrambled up cedar thickets, following ledges, seeking gaps in cliffs and greenery to attain higher ledges. There was no artistry, simply crude brush-bulling. Even in half-night the sweat ran free, thirst grew.

In full daylight we emerged onto bare rock. Tom tied to Ted and immediately proceeded upward. With night only just gone we were in a race against the coming night. Lardy  and Idiot  had descended helter skelter by flashlight, risking their necks, and <sup>most</sup> other parties had been forced to bivouac.

I took a swallow from my canteen, wishing for a gulp. Vic peered intently at my face and inquired after my health, then started up the scabby rock, <sup>↓</sup> not steep but utterly lacking good holds, all rough edges eaten away by organic acids - dirty rock, rotten, weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable rock.

An awkward jumble of boulders, more brush, more hideous rock. Sometimes we moved simultaneously, sometimes Vic belayed me. Tom and Ted were far ahead. I was dragging, legs rubbery. Vic tried to be patient

some sort  
of  
misbegotten  
metamorphic  
garbage,



but in his nervousness constantly strained on the rope, tugging at my waist. I had no idea where we were or where we were going. I numbly followed up blurred nastiness.

We came to the foot of a cliff, 50 feet straight up and no rock in sight, only a tangle of cedar trees. Like a deranged ape Vic leapt upward and vanished, his progress through the vertical jungle marked by a furious thrashing. Now, my turn.

Reach up, grab a horizontal cedar the thickness of an arm, pull up, chin, shoulder other cedars aside, throw an arm over, hang by armpits, swing a leg over, straddle. Reach for another cedar above, stand up, bouncing on the limber tree, and repeat. Grunt and wheeze and spit cedar needles from teeth and blink cedar bark from eyes. Sweat and gasp and climb a 50-foot cliff never closer than 5 feet to the rock. Where, here, is the classic ballet of alpinism?

At the top I sagged in a heap. The cedar wall had exhausted my reserves. Another pitch like it and I was done. I drank, and noted my big canteen was alarmingly light. But Vic was cheerful.

"Almost in the Bowl," he said, crunching. "Making good time."

We walked (Lord, how lovely to walk!) a broad, almost-alpine ledge of grassy plants, traversing the toe of a rock-and-cedar rib, and entered the Bowl, excavated during the Pleistocene by a hanging glacier and prominent from the highway because it usually retains a snowpatch until ~~the~~ July. For the first time since the sleeping bag I knew where I was.

The snow was long gone, the entire mountain fire-dry, and the

my now being  
here rather  
than in  
Canada.

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sun high and the air stagnant, the hottest day in the world since Hiroshima. I could ~~have~~<sup>ve</sup> finished off both canteens in a single swill. Instead, take a mouthful of warm liquid, swirl around tongue, gargle over palate, then swallow, closing eyes in the brief ecstasy of the moist wash through gullet. Cap the canteen and begin anticipating the next mouthful.

Now we had views — north to Gunn and Baring and the Monte Cristo peaks — including Sloan (Green!), responsible for ~~the~~<sup>tracks</sup> More interesting was the straight-down look to the Stevens Pass highway, the Great Northern Railway<sup>tracks</sup> — and the Skykomish River, a 3500-foot swandive below. Music sweeter than a Vivaldi concerto, that delightful wet roar — how marvelous it would be by the river, drinking water, dabbling feet in water, dousing head in water, sitting in damp-cool shade of a maple watching water tumble through dripping boulders.

The Bowl was steep but brushless, mainly grassy ledges with a few bits of simple rock, generally a walk — except that to stumble was to tumble and roll down and down, over bottom cliffs into cedars and ultimately, so it seemed, the river — and in no condition to enjoy the water. The worst pitches were the ticklish clamberings over ancient logs. Peculiar it was to belay below timberline, to be amid such exposure in grass and logs. Limber Jim was right, but personally I wouldn't care to ride a horse on that Forest Service summit trail.

The higher and hotter the sun, the lower my strength. Vic charged onward trying to catch Tom and Ted. The rope dragged me. In a rock cup shadowed from blazing sun I found a treasure — half a mouthful of dew, the drippings from leaves of a small plant. I sucked it up greedily

and spit out sand and bugs.

A last scramble and suddenly we were with Tom and Ted, ~~there~~  
~~where they were resting~~ sprawled in dirt atop a little buttress, the first  
spacious flatness since Lake Serene. Pitiful ashes of twig fires spoke of  
bad nights spent here.

Tom was ecstatic: "We're 2 hours ahead of Lardy and Idiot!"

So we could afford the luxury of a sackout, being now more than  
halfway up the peak and above most of the problems. I took a long drink,  
feeling I might live.

Tom led off the buttress to the left, up a steep, nondescript slope  
of rotten rock and pockets of soil and clumps of grass and sprigs of  
huckleberry. Crumbling off a dust cloud, he disappeared over a bulge.  
The rope moved slow. We heard mumbles and curses and vile denunciations  
of the terrain. Every depression that would be a bucket on an honest peak  
was stuffed up with fertile soil busy growing weeds. No good holds.  
And no piton cracks — all full of dirt. The rope ran out. Tom was a hundred  
feet up and could find no possible belay. Ted would have to abandon his  
stance and both would be on the mess at once, trusting their joint life to  
huckleberry sprigs and blades of grass. Tom had a message for Vic and me.

"This is shitty. Not sure it'll go. Why don't you try something else?  
Might be easier to the right."

I began coiling the rope, preparing to belay.

"Look!" long-suffering Vic exploded. "I've made ~~some~~<sup>every</sup> lead. How  
about you doing one?"

I dropped the rope, shocked. I was a sick man and it was his fault I was here. But his voice was so edged with bitterness I couldn't argue.

From <sup>the</sup> ~~a~~ buttress a chimney led upward in the angle between the wall and a slender pillar. Quickly I was atop the pillar — and suddenly wasn't tired, felt strong and nimble, happy and eager, a member of the party. After hours of being tugged at and protected, of dumbly obeying decisions made above, I was an equal partner. Smugly I noted that Tom and Ted, off to the left, were yelling back and forth, stirring up a dust storm. Maybe they'd ~~be~~ have to retreat and follow me.

What a splendid chimney! And what a magnificent pillar! About 2 feet square, the outer edge tastefully embellished with a pretty little cedar that screened the awesome exposure into the Bowl, the Skykomish. I loved the pillar and the tree — the first pieces of North Peak that were truly mine.

Now, upward from the pillar, A dozen feet above was a fringe of cedar branches drooping from a ledge, ~~the end of difficulties~~. The rock was steep but well-broken, a kindergarten of buckets ~~and doorknobs~~.

Confidently, smoothly I <sup>ascended half the pitch</sup> ~~moved up from the pillar one sequence of~~ ~~steps~~ — and was stuck. The buckets all were upside down. The branches were beyond my outstretched hand. I tried this, tried that. No way, no how, could I get higher.

"What you doing up there?" cried critical Vic.

The son of a bitch! Down there on the buttress, what did he know?

"Well, dammit, come up and see."

In seconds he arrived, saw welcoming cedars above, snapped, "Well,

that's not much!" and rapidly ascended <sup>half the pitch</sup> ~~one sequence of holds~~ — and was stuck. He tried this, tried that.

"Not as easy as it looks," he giggled, apologizing. Then, cheerily, "Well, this is what shoulder stands are for!"

I ~~came out of~~ <sup>dropped my</sup> belay and braced feet on the pillar and hands on the wall. Vic stepped off the rock onto my shoulders, boots against my ears, and tottered. My legs trembled and I realized my charming little cedar was pure decoration and if Vic fell he'd backflip over the spindly shrub and we'd plunge together into the river.

Vic grunted ~~higher~~, tried to step from me to the rock. "Old piton here," he said. "Real antique. Somebody's been here, long time ago."

What did that prove? We'd been tripping over old pitons the whole way up. North Peak was so full of iron some company should start a mine.

He strained toward the cedars, fingers touching the tips. "Can't get a handful. Need another few inches."

Well, I didn't have them and he couldn't find them and retreated down my body to the pillar. The three of us — Vic, me, and the cedar — crowded ~~intimately~~ together.

Two choices. We could pound ~~some~~ <sup>attach</sup> pitons, ~~rig some~~ slings, and reach the trees by direct aid. But that would take the best part of an hour and erode the lead we'd built over Lardy and Idiot, making a partial night descent probable, a bivouac possible. Meanwhile, as we deduced from croaked yodels, Tom and Ted had escaped their dust storm into easy grass. The time-saving choice was to call for help.

We yelled and were answered; somebody was coming with a rope. We waited, cramped between rock wall and companion cedar. Vic and I were good friends but never had spent this much time in such intimacy. I smoked, and Vic didn't approve. He dug food from his rucksack and crunched, and I couldn't stand his crunching.

We yelled again and were answered by a very close yell. Not long now. We were sick of the pillar. An hour we'd been standing. My exhilaration from leading the chimney was submerging in the overall sickness of the Blue Moon and Sloan and being where I never wanted to be. My knees were starting to do the sewing machine.

We yelled and were answered by a distant yell. Distant! What about that close yell? We hollered, we screamed, we shrieked, cursing Tom and Ted and their unborn children and all their generations to the end of time, amen.

A smile materialized in cedar branches.

"What's keeping you guys?" asked jocular Ted.

The smile froze as he learned of our devout wish that devils might eternally gnaw his entrails.

The explanation was no comfort. He'd started down at our first yell and been near us at our second yell — which he interpreted as saying we didn't need help. Thus he'd returned to the Notch and waited — until our final outburst.

He dropped a line and the pull from above brought us quickly into the trees. I staggered the few yards up a gully of grass and scree to the

Notch, a prominent break in the northwest ridge, and with space for a lay-down sackout.

Tom was twitching. On the bivouac buttress we'd been 2 hours ahead of Lardy and Idiot. Now it was past noon and we'd fallen behind their pace. Tom and Ted vanished up the ridge, a dinosaur spine cleaving the sky. I drowsed in heavy sun, killed my big canteen, and considered what lay above — and what below. I gave Vic the bad news.

"I got to save strength to get down. Got to stay here and rest."

He'd seen it coming — since 5:37 a.m. But the confirmation was shattering. His hand, fumbling in foodsack, momentarily went dead still. "Well, okay," he said, recovering magnificently, stuffing food in mouth and crunching. "You're right. Only safe thing to do."

I relaxed. No disgrace to be whipped by a peak I never wanted anyway, not on the hottest day since Lucifer fell into the fiery pit. From within the wreckage of my flesh I gazed into immense sky -- not pure blue, a milky blue, skimmed milk. Vic stood up and paced back and forth, crunching.

"Great views! Almost as good as from the top." Pacing, crunching. "Not many people ever been even this far. Next time we'll make the top."

Like hell. I'd never be trapped twice.

I dozed. Vic paced, crunched.

"How you feel now?" he asked, wistfully. The quaver in his voice broke my heart.

"Okay," I lied. "Much better. Great."

In a way I really did. To go on was to accept disaster but I was doing the noble thing, giving Vic the mountain he desperately wanted even if it killed me, and I wouldn't be surprised.

Comfortable as in a good dream I flowed up the dinosaur spine to a knife/blade, observing with detachment the pleasure hands and feet found on superb rock, the only virtuous rock on the mountain, <sup>↓</sup> For the second time I was fond of North Peak, ~~the~~ small but solid holds, neatly spaced.

An enormous amount of air surrounded the knife/blade — down the east face to sun-glinting Lake Serene, down the west face to Anderson Creek forests. With muscles weary beyond pain I moved easily, artistically, along the crest, swimming in air.

. . . . Sky to the right, sky to the left, sky above, sky below. I am entirely in sky but for feet and fingers touching the razor edge of sky-washed rock. The sides of the blade dive left and right down into sky, and these two great lower skies arch upward into the vaulting upper sky, all the skies joined in the one sky that remains while the many change and pass. I stand erect on the edge of the blade and my destroyed body is connected to Earth only by boot soles. I am ready, now, to leap away from mountain and body into sky and fly unafraid into miracles . . . .

~~But~~ The nearly, nearly mystic experience <sup>was cut off</sup> ~~was over~~ before climax and we <sup>trudged</sup> ~~walked~~ wearily up ledges and rolls of baking heather and firs and hemlocks, heat swelling my brain. At 1:45 we reached the summit.

Ted exuberantly greeted us, waving the damn flag. We joined in the ritual photographs featuring the banner, then cached it for the delight



of future heroes. As the three aliens danced and giggled, I fell down. What I knew, they soon would learn — we were in trouble. I just about drained my little canteen, too greedy to gargle, taking the shot directly down the throat. And shook the canteen, sadly hearing the meager swish of one last swallow and feeling the blast of sun desiccating my blood.

Tom was twitching. We'd stayed too long on top — my fault. At 2:45 the rope untimely ripped me from the womb. The ordeal had begun, the race against night. We'd left camp 9 hours before and only 6 hours of daylight remained.

We paused briefly at the Notch, watching the sun sink<sub>X</sub> lower, valleys slip into shadow. I gulped my final mouthful of water and was still parched.

Now, out of sun into darkening Bowl. Rig a rappel from cedars and slide past pillar and <sup>Friend</sup>shrub (no time for lingering farewells) to Bivouac Buttress. Hastily rig a rappel from a tiny rock horn and walk down the line ever so carefully not to flip the rope loose.

My throat was closing, breath coming in painful gasps. Vic handed me his canteen, the taste of liquid drove me mad, he snatched it away: "That's all there is! Got to make it last!" Thereafter when my breathing grew raspy he gave me a sip to keep my throat open. There wasn't enough for two so he quit drinking. *Despite his crunching he really was a nice guy.*

Another rappel, a nasty one requiring a crabwise traverse to the endpoint. And another concluding in a free drop, sliding down the rope out there in the middle of the air.

From a vertical mile below came the tantalizing roar of the Skykomish

River rushing to dump water in Puget Sound, which was already full of water. The injustice! Water, water everywhere down there and nary a drop up here. Don't talk to me of a wise and merciful God.

Down the Bowl in twilight, clambering over logs, delicately descending grassy ledges. Lights of cars on the highway, of a passenger train gliding beside the river. There in the club car, sitting in plush seats, smoking big cigars, cool drinks in hand, do they know there is in the world such a thing as True Danger? Danger, Despair, and Death?

At 8 o'clock we approached the lower lip of the Bowl. Night was complete on the river and thickening around us. I sat on a <sup>6</sup>-inch ledge for a short rest — and jolted awake sagging into space. <sup>I'd been asleep!</sup> The instant I stopped moving <sup>I'd gone</sup> ~~to~~ to sleep! Slurring words around thick tongue I warned Vic to belay me even during rests.

We traversed rightward out of the Bowl and at 8:30 were only an hour of daylight travel from camp — but darkness was now absolute and the intricate route a hopeless confusion.

I drifted in and out of sleep while Tom pounded a piton for a rappel and descended, followed by Ted. Vic inspected the anchor and was dissatisfied. ~~Saying~~ "Pitons are cheap!" <sup>he said, driving</sup> ~~he drove~~ two more, contributing our share to the North Peak iron mine. <sup>He</sup> ~~He~~ woke me and I slid down the line. It was incredible how competent I was when I had something to do. At the bottom I greeted Ted and fell asleep.

<sup>And awoke to see a</sup> ~~A~~ flashlight beam on cliffs below, probing here, there, <sup>amid a storm</sup> ~~amid a storm~~ ~~of~~ of obscenities. Terrible-tempered, ~~with~~ Tom was

~~looking~~ <sup>searching</sup> for the way. Ted was ~~belaying his~~ ~~and simultaneously~~ climbing beside me, pointing out holds with flashlight, ~~and~~ <sup>As</sup> on the epic drive home from Shuksan, ~~providing running commentary~~ <sup>we discussed</sup> the passing scene. ("What's that?" I'd ask. He'd answer, "That's two dogs.") This, and the mind-tightening effort of placing feet and hands, kept me awake. But whenever we ~~stopped~~ <sup>paused</sup> ~~belayed~~ <sup>belayed.</sup> I instantly slept. Above, lonesome Vic ~~held~~

~~was constantly belayed.~~

On a little shelf we assembled for the first long rest since the summit. ~~As helpless victim being rescued I belonged to the party,~~ ~~completely than I had as~~ ~~our~~ ~~baggage being hauled up the mountain,~~ ~~we~~ ~~had~~ ~~been~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~end~~ ~~because~~ ~~we~~ ~~'d~~ ~~lost~~ ~~the~~ ~~race~~ ~~and~~ ~~haste~~ ~~was~~ ~~pointless.~~ We were in no danger. Camp was close and the remainder of the route was easy — if Tom could find it. If not, the night was so calm and warm we could bivouac anywhere with no misery except thirst.

Stars sparkled in Lake Serene. One jump and I could fill my mouth, my throat, my belly, and bathe scalp and eyes, and moisten dusty blood scratching through arteries and veins. (All day I've faced the barren waste without the taste of water — cool, clear water.)

I mingled in star-sparkle of the lake. And suddenly came full awake in excitement of a revelation.

Reading tales of alpine and Arctic tragedies, of explorers lying down in storm or cold to die, I'd been puzzled that strong men could accept death without complaint. Now I knew, because I was near, how it is when to move arms and legs, focus eyes, demands such ~~effort~~ <sup>exertions</sup> of willpower that the will

As helpless victim being rescued I belonged to the party more completely than I had as baggage being hauled up the mountain and felt I should share my discovery, ~~with my party~~ Clearing glue from throat, ~~organizing floppy tongue~~ I

becomes weary. One doesn't think of it as dying, one expects to awake from the sleep, as always before in life one has. ~~I think speech I announced my discovery,~~ ~~made my announcement.~~

"It would be easy to die here."

Vic had a convulsion: "Don't talk like that!"

Inside, I ~~chuckled~~ <sup>smiled. Good old</sup> Vic misunderstood. He thought I was planning

to die. Hell no. Nobody plans it. ~~Too~~ Too hard to explain, obstructed by swollen tongue. Sometimes it's easier to die than live. To live is to work, to die is simply to sleep. Nothing bad happens to you in sleep, snuggled in your crib, hugging your teddy bear.

spend the rest of his life burning

I roused to follow no teddy bear, but Ted. He wasn't belying anymore because Tom had unroped, enraged at the night and blaspheming and <sup>and was</sup> ~~unhelpful~~ stars, thrashing around in cedar, vowing to return with a torch and ~~North~~ North Peak to naked rock. At midnight he found the camp we'd left 18 1/2 hours earlier.

Tom and Vic packed up and descended to the lake <sup>to</sup> ~~—~~ drink their fill, sleep a bit, then hike to the Jeep and drive to Index and call home to keep the rescue party from leaving Seattle.

Ted shambled down to the dwindling remnant of our supper snowpatch and far into the night rehydrated from drips. I drank the last dregs from a spare canteen left in camp and slept.

At 6 o'clock I awoke, amazed to feel so well-rested after the exhaustion of midnight. Mind and muscles were languid but filled with dreadful new power. Ted and I dropped to the lake and for 3 hours drank

cool, clear water and basked in morning sun on dewy green grass and looked up and up the horrid east face.

Ted remarked that never in his life had he seen so gaudy a display of Northern Lights, the entire sky flaring columns and sheets of wondrous green and red and blue, *a very rare show for our latitude.*

Northern Lights? News to me. I hadn't seen them.

From the night descent Ted remembered the miraculous sky. I remembered the club car gliding by the wet river and the star-sparkle in the lake and the ease of death.