

September 1947

Chapter 14

A TRICK TO CATCH THE OLD ONE

I was running, pursued. I didn't dare look over my shoulder to see what it was. The house was close. The door. I stumbled on the steps and fell. I screamed. There wouldn't be time for them to open the door.

Mother was shaking me. I couldn't hear what she was saying. It was out there in the night, pressing against the window. Mother turned on all the lights and we sat in the living room. She got the cards and dealt. I picked up my hand and tried to focus. Ocean-heavy blackness was crushing roof and walls, threatening to extinguish our little flicker of electricity. We played casino an hour. Gradually it ebbed. ^{the shuddering ceased and} Finally I could go back to bed.

The first time I was 11½. That morning I'd had my tonsils out. The nurse and doctor weren't the sort of alien-cruel men and women in masks who strapped me down and slapped the metal cone on my face when I was 7. They were kind and I trusted them and lay on my back, eyes closed, breathing the gas.

I was in a cylinder with smoke-fuzzy walls. The walls began spinning. Faster. At the far end of the cylinder it was moving toward me. The

faster the walls spun the faster it came. I struggled to escape. I was held. I fought loose and broke through the spinning gray walls -- into another spinning cylinder -- not gray -- flaming red and yellow -- a cauldron of color boiling my brain. I died. I trusted them and they killed me, just like when I was 7.

I thought the dream was an echo of the cylinders caused by blood-lingering residues of gas. But weeks later it came again. And months later again. I woke screaming at 12, at 13, at 14 and 15 and 16. All through high school Mother and I played middle-of-blackness casino. Less and less often, ~~however~~. Nights were safe for months, then a whole year.

I was screaming. Not night pressed against windows but day. I was nearly 18 and now not even day was safe. I threw on clothes and ran out in the spring dawn along campus paths. It was in the trees, the flowers, the air, everywhere. People appeared on paths. They stared at the running boy and laughed. They didn't know it was there, didn't feel it permeating the entire world and them too.

That was 4½ years ago and the dream hadn't returned. Any night it might. Any day.

What was it? Infinity-eternity (death)? Devil-God (sin)? Why was it? Probably a phenomenon of puberty-adolescence, symptom of a simple chemical imbalance or a normal dread of developing sexuality. Probably I'd grown out

of it. Yet before this dream there'd been the other -- the Red Devil jumping from the furnace and chasing me up the basement stairs. That dream began the first time they killed me, when I was 7.

However, they'd killed me again when I was 19 and no dream followed. In fact I'd enjoyed dying. I heard the clock ticking off the final seconds and my mind raced, seeking before the end to solve every philosophical problem ~~was~~ baffling me and mankind. The clock ran out, I died -- and I saw the Solution and approached the very foot of the Throne. I woke screaming for the dentist to give me more gas.

Why no dream from that death? Perhaps because at 19 I was -- or thought I was -- cleansed of childhood sins by wisdom and reborn innocent. I wasn't sure anymore. I doubted there was wisdom or innocence in anyone, anywhere. Though I'd not had the dream since the spring of 1943, wide awake I'd often felt it close.

As on the August day of 1945, walking the Avenue, seeing the newspaper headline: "ATOM BOMB." Everybody in Seattle knew about the secret factory in Eastern Washington making explosives. I hadn't suspected it was a dreadful new explosive powerful enough to blow up the building blocks of the universe.

The Sunday after our flight from La Bohn Gap the 3-day blow had blown itself out, sun had dispelled premature winter, and Betty and I went tourist-^{savttering}strolling with Arild and his girl friend on Rainier paths ^{blinding}dazzling near the brilliant Emmons Glacier, largast in the United States. A soft day, fit close to a soft summer.

Summer was ending. Now the shortening days, the darkening days. Soon the glooming of November and December.

Something had been left undone.

Whatever it was I'd never do it with Betty. With her I could know the Green Woman exceeding well. Not the other. To know that a hiker must be permitted by circumstances to run 20 or 25 miles in a day, to blithely skip across a footlog, to hop a rockslide without somebody getting their damn boot stuck.

Summer was ending. Yet the sense of incompleteness would've passed, I'd have stoically subsided into winter, hoping that since she couldn't possibly go slower maybe next year Betty would hike a bit faster. Except for Monie.

She dropped in the garret almost nightly, flitting restlessly in and out or staying for hours, talking listlessly, falling into silences. This wasn't the cackling freak of the Tetons and The Tooth. Summer was ending.

Wednesday evening, September 25. Three in the garret, oppressed by winter thoughts. But summer was hanging on and promised to remain through the weekend. Action was demanded. Strenuous, desperate action. Not another tourist ^{savunter.} ~~stroll~~. Not a whimper but a bang.

Said I, "Sort of wish we were heading for the South Face again."

Suddenly lively (fondly recalling old plots?), Monie cackled, "There's always Cruiser!"

"Sure!" I laughed. "And ~~hallelujah~~ damnation and hellfire too."

"Those are also good peaks," cackled she, "But I haven't climbed them. The Bruiser is guaranteed thrills."

"I've got a better idea. Let's get crocked and play Russian roulette."

Cackle cackle. Laugh laugh.

Thursday Monie was back. No cackling this evening. No laughing.

"Well, why don't we climb Cruiser?" she asked.

"Why not?"

Who said that?

"You got to understand it's no South Face."

Betty, goggle-eyed, lip-jittering, looked from Monie to me, me to Monie. I was equally astounded, stared at myself from a distant place. From that place came Monie's voice.

The South Face had been a joke. Holds were big and plentiful, pitches short, exposure brief.

Cruiser was no joke. The final pitch was a hundred feet on small holds over ^{chilling} ~~awesome~~ exposure. No jutting rocks to wrap the rope around, no cracks to pound pitons in. And no ledges to break a fall. If the leader slipped, wave goodbye. Further, though Monie had climbed Cruiser four times she'd never led that pitch, always had had a belay from above.

Christ, this conversation is getting morbid. Let's settle for a blueberry meadow.

She continued as if I'd not interrupted. On her most recent ascent, 2 years ago, the party had left a fixed rope on the bad pitch to safeguard the last man down. If the rope was still there she wouldn't be stark naked.

I was insane.

Cruiser was not a Rainier or Constance, not a great and famous peak I'd long humbly admired. I'd never heard of it -- except from Monie. I'd

never seen it -- except as some indistinguishable portion of the Sawtooth jumble above Gladys Pass. I'd never even seen a photo of it. All I knew about it was that the roof below the false summit had scared me shitless, that the sight of the true summit had petrified Bob, that now she was seriously proposing climbing it. Monie was not cackling, not ~~smiling~~ ^{grinning}.

Insane.

The South Face was a once-in-a-lifetime stunt. On the summit of The Tooth I'd raved because I'd never have to do that again. Yet in the exalted delirium was something else.

I'd read poetry and philosophy, thinking to mingle with the universal soul -- and merely come to the last lines of the texts. I'd listened to orchestras, thinking to swing in rhythms of the stars -- and concluded by merely clapping. I'd drunk gin, thinking the next ~~beat~~ ^{wallop} would justify God's ways to man -- and merely passed out. I'd clasped woman, thinking to penetrate the secret of life -- and merely ejaculated.

I still loved poetry and philosophy, loved music, loved getting swacked, loved my bride. But last year I'd found beauty and truth insufficient, this summer had found nut-brown maid-Green Woman insufficient.

Folk of ancient times, close to the Old Ones, knew. The Eleusinian Mysteries, the Egyptian, commenced not in beauty but terror, the Pan Terror, and moved from terror to ecstasy, the ecstasy in and of terror, the ecstasy of the illumination impossible in beauty, impossible in truth, impossible in reason, impossible in sanity.

Yes, insane. Insane on the South Face, insane now.

I'd been wrong about climbing. It's not a more intense expression of the desire to embrace the Green Woman, has nothing to do with the ecstasy of love. It's terror for the sake of a greater ecstasy.

Helplessly insane.

Betty saved me. She refused to climb Cruiser, refused to scramble to the false summit, refused to hike to Gladys Pass.

"Well, that's it then," said Monie. "We can't go without three in the party."

She mumbled about the "climbing code" of the Mountaineers. A two-man party isn't acceptable. You need a third person so if one gets hurt there's one to stay with the victim and one to go for rescuers.

"Or the undertaker?" I laughed. I'd ~~been~~ been willing. I'd faced Cruiser. Not my fault Betty was yellow.

Monie left. Winter could be endured. The phone rang. Monie calling from home. Her brother Al had agreed to come -- not to climb, ~~rather~~ to fish in Flapjack Lakes and ~~ask~~ sack out in the meadows. But he'd make our venture legal. We were going.

Friday morning. Friday afternoon. Friday evening. I listened to the clock tick off the final seconds.

Saturday morning, September 28. I drove Betty to the train station. She didn't want to be alone in Seattle, wanted to be with her folks in Portland.

We held each other ~~tight~~, kissed long. To risk losing this? Insane.

"Take care of yourself," she said, eyes tear-bright.

"You too."

She boarded the train.

I picked up Monie and Al and we caught the ferry to Bremerton. Off the ferry, grinding up a hill, the V-8 ~~stuttered~~ stuttered, stopped. I wasn't surprised. Everybody said trailing a cloud of landscape-obliterating blue smoke was normal and healthy for a V-8, that you simply bought oil by the 5-gallon can and paused every hour to fill the crankcase, but from the start I'd suspected a terminal disease. Where Betty had failed the junker had succeeded.

No. Al was ~~an~~ expert ^{at} fixing V-8 gas pumps with chewing gum. Onward around Hood Canal to the Olympic Peninsula, up the Skokomish River road, climber and misplaced hiker quiet, fisherman Al gabbling.

"I don't get you, Harvey," he said. "You seem pretty straight, except for this. And don't say a fisherman doesn't know what it's all about. I've got two sick sisters and a sick brother, I'm the only one who didn't catch the family plague, I've seen it in every stage from first rash to tertiary degeneration. It doesn't matter about our family, we're all crazy anyway. What bugs me is how the hell did you get it?"

"Damned if I know. Anyhow, I'm not making a career of it. This one last time and I'm through."

"Yeah, that's what they all say. They start with ~~the Tooth~~ The Tooth, then decide they'll do a volcano or two, then they just have to have Rainier. Before they know it they're as bad off as Monie."

"There are worse things," jeered Monie. "You can go around molesting fish and turn into a degenerate."

"Now sister, leave my private life out of this. At least I don't pretend to be something I'm not. Harvey, I suppose you've gone the standard route -- reading about Mallory on Everest and Whymper on the Matterhorn and swallowing all those English public-schoolboy cover-ups for ~~what~~ what they were really doing. You should watch a gang of Monie's friends fondling their pitons and snapping their carabiners -- it's enough to make ~~even~~ a dirty old man blush."

"Anyway we're open about it," said Monie. "We don't hide in closets."

"That's right," said Al. "A bunch of children who haven't learned to be ashamed of their games. Ashamed, hell! You flaunt it! You rig it out with baubles and gewgaws and call it a 'blood sport' -- as if that was an excuse! You people are emotional cripples -- as far gone as those fancy-dressing spicks with a fetish about the horns of the bull, or the greasy Neanderthals who razz the bricks at Indianapolis. Hell, you're ~~worse~~ ^{dumber} -- you don't get paid for it."

The trailhead. Familiar routine of lacing boots. Familiar ^{soothing} exercise of hauling pack 4 miles up ~~the trail~~ ^{familiar forest} to Flapjack Lakes. Placid waters. The Mouse, upthrusting basalt nose anticipating the soon-to-come full moon. All normal, all as it was a year ago. Only then Bob and I had just abandoned the plan to hitchhike America. Only then Betty was ~~was~~ the idiot kid sister.

Al stopped to fish. Monie and I continued the 2 miles to Gladys Pass, made camp in a tiny grass-and-moss flat amid tumbled boulders, water supplied by a cold trickle from a remnant of snow.

Atop a block of pillow lava was a litter of decayed logs and shingles, rusty pots and pans. Some 30 or 50 years ago a prospector busted his butt hereabouts summer after summer, swinging pick at pockets of reddish rock, low-grade manganese ore, scattered through gray-green basalt. He probably never lifted eyes to ~~the maze of~~ Sawtooth pinnacles. Nor did climbers until shortly before the war, when the first party reached the summit of Cruiser. Since then, said Monie, perhaps a half-dozen or so ascents had been ~~made~~ made.

Monie rigged her tarp, a 7- by 11-foot war-surplus liferaft sail, orange on one side ~~(for evaporating sea water)~~ and blue on the other, weighing barely 3 pounds and the nylon coated to be absolutely waterproof. This was what we'd needed at La Bohn Gap. I asked if I could get one at the Co-op. Not a chance, she said, at \$2 apiece they'd all been snatched up, Mountaineer camps had blossomed in gaudy ~~orange~~ orange and blue enlivening the general khaki monotony of ~~other~~ war gear. However, I could try the surplus stores, somebody might still have a few in stock.

"I'm just putting it up now to keep out the stars," said Monie.

"Stars are cold."

Yes, there'd be stars tonight and sun tomorrow. High pressure blanketed the entire eastern Pacific, the nearest clouds were over Okinawa. No more than Betty, no more than the V-8, would the weather intervene.

In dusk Al arrived, fishless and soaking wet, having been stranded on an island when his raft drifted away. He didn't ^{mind} ~~care~~. The summer-mild twilight was perfect for a swim, the blaze of decades-seasoned, white-bleached wood quickly dried his clothes.

They'd brought the food and for supper I glumly expected one of Monie's revolting messes of dehydrated swill. Al, however, had planned the menu -- tossed green salad, steak, and fried potatoes.

Said he, "The condemned man deserves a decent last meal."

We sprawled by the fire eating cookies and drinking tea. Al was happy. Tomorrow would be as ~~carefree~~ ^{blithe} as today. So it could be for me.

"I wonder what went wrong in your childhood, Harvey. I know what went wrong in our childhoods and don't blame Monie for being a neurotic because I am too. I just keep trying to convince her there are better therapies than climbing."

Monie cackled, "Let's not go into your therapy, brother! Not in mixed company. Think of Harvey's tender ~~age~~ ^{years} and delicate feelings!"

"Well, okay, I'll take the boy in hand after he's learned his lesson tomorrow. It's just that he looks so damn normal I keep wishing I could save him from you."

So did I.

"Time for the sack," said Monie. "Got to get hoofing early."

"That's another damn thing about climbers," said Al. "A pretty meadow, a starry night, a cozy fire, and just when the conversation is rolling they go to bed. Then in the middle of the night ~~the~~ ^{the} when/sleep is best they get up. They've got everything turned around."

Hardly had I sunk into soft grass and closed my eyes than it was 6:30. I'd slept too deep to savor what delicious sleep it was, felt cheated. I'd been too far away to maintain the steely core of resolve, was a bowl of jello inside.

Al grumbled, "Hikers don't get up at dawn, hikers know enough to stay in the sack until the sun bakes them out." However, ^{not to miss the fun he} ~~he was having too much~~ ^{sleep in} ~~fun to~~ and accompanied us the few yards to the pass.

"Last chance, Harvey," he said. "Now I ask you -- look at Mt. Gladys there, all those dandy meadows, and look at those bloody cliffs my demented sister is nuts about -- I ask you, which is the path of reason?"

"You pamper your neurosis your way," said Monie. "I'll pamper mine my way."

Al sat down for a smoke. He was in no hurry. His summit was a loitering hour above and he had ^{all} ~~the whole~~ day. Monie and I started up the talus toward the gully.

"I'll tell you, Harvey," Al called after us, "You're in for a big disappointment. You're ^{looking} ~~hoping~~ for the ^{ultimate} ~~great~~ orgasm but you'll be lucky if you don't come back impotent."

Concentrate on the step-in-progress, repel thoughts of steps to come -- steps which don't have to come. Betty, V#8, weather, Al failed. Yet saving possibilities remain. Appendicitis. (Is that a twinge?) Earthquake. (Is that a tremor? A year ago spring a jolt from a fault someplace near here ^{gave} ~~rattled~~ the Olympics and Seattle ^{its best shaking in history.} ~~too~~.)

The notch. So soon? Without Betty the gully was a no-rope walk. Betty. Now I think of it, here at the notch we fell in love. Where is she now? Eating breakfast at her folks' house. Maybe they'll drive to Cannon Beach this afternoon and watch the breakers explode and the foam whiten the sand. Wish I were there, or she here. I miss the sobbing incompetence that makes

me seem brave and skillful -- or in time of dire need, permits honorable
 escapes. Any crying today will have to be done by me.

But we don't have to go to the top. If it was too much for agile-daring
 Bob my defeat will have no sting. I don't pretend to be a freak. See Al,
~~hardly about the pass and~~ sitting down again. Wherever he is, there's where
 he wants to be. Al is my kind, not Monie.

The dreaded roof, the scene of shame, that must be done. Wipe the
 blot from the slate. Then quit. *Clutch teeth, breathe deep.*

↪ Surprise! The roof is a no-hands stroll. I pass my last-year
 chicken-out point laughing. No wind today, that's one reason. The South
 Face is the other. The false summit is a cinch. Therefore the true summit
 will be sufferable. Naturally Bob was ^{stunned} petrified to see it. He'd not
 climbed the South Face.

A final step to the false summit.

I see Cruiser. I recognize it.

A year ago Bob's haunted eyes, horror-hushed words. Now Monie not so
 much as looking at it, proceeding without a pause along the crest of the
 ridge. *Her fifth time here, her recurring nightmare.*

Now I realized that under Al's bantering had been a ^{genuine} ~~deep~~ brotherly
 concern. Now I remembered Betty had hinted she was worried about her old
 friend, doubted the approach of winter was the ~~whole~~ problem. Now I
 understood that in the garret Monie herself had all but ^{confessed.} ~~said it outright.~~
 She was going to confront it. Not caring what happened. Dammit, I cared.

A yell from lower space. Al calling attention to a mountain goat on the cliffs. One more fine day in the hills for Al, for the goat. It could be for me. Just say the word. Why did the "NO!" stick in my throat?

I wasn't a hero. I'd been a cowardly football player because I hated the collision of body ~~with~~ ^{and} body, I'd been cowardly in the Graywolf because I hated the collision of body ~~with~~ ^{and} rock.

Why was it still standing? Flagpole-tall, reed-thin, tenuously rooted in Earth -- the wind should blow it over. Why hadn't it toppled at first touch of a climber's foot?

Closer, closer, larger, larger, ~~overwhelming~~. Soon I'd scream. But there'd be no Mother to play casino. There'd be naught to awake to but the long silence.

Numbly I followed Monie along the ridge, scrambling up and down the crest. Closer, larger. To bypass a ~~tower~~ ^{erog "gendarme"} we traversed a narrow ledge, frightfully exposed, airier than the step around the corner on the South Face. But Monie didn't suggest we rope and my voice was gone.

Another ledge traverse into a wide chimney filled by an enormous chockstone, huge as a house, actually a false summit split from the crest, blown off by the wind. We climbed beneath, entering the mountain interior, dank and chill as a tomb, then crawled from gloom to daylight and the base of the summit tower.

An urgent yell from the far-below meadow. What did he say? ~~Scramble~~ ~~He~~, "WAKE UP!" I couldn't. A stranger had got control of my body, was throwing it away, ~~like~~ a piece of garbage.

Thus far nothing ~~had~~ we'd done was beyond the South Face in difficulty. The next step would be beyond. I couldn't see the ~~front~~ wall, mercifully 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 sweet flavor of Earth's atmosphere. My heart beat hard and fast -- what a delight to feel blood pumping through arteries. Sweat poured from forehead and palms and armpits -- God it's fun to sweat.

No! No! But no "NO!"

10 o'clock. Tick, tick, tick.

Monie showed me where to sit and where to plant my feet, tied a bowline around my waist. On The Tooth I hadn't belayed ^{the} a leader, only follower Betty; Monie now explained a crucial difference in technique -- leave a bit of slack in the line, ~~for God's sake~~ ^{ever} never pull on the rope/dangling from above.

"You're bombproof here," she said. Pity in her voice? Did I look as ^{dazed} terrified as I was? "Nothing could drag you off."

Nothing? "What if you fall?"

"Don't worry about it!" she cackled.

Dear Lord, why not? Why was the cackle so forlorn?

Rapidly she climbed the dozen vertical feet above my stance, swung a leg over the corner, ~~and~~ vanished. I was alone. Utterly ~~alone~~, forever alone.

The rope payed out, slowly.

The rope stopped. I gripped it tight. Heart pounded. Ears roared. Sweat spouted.

Faint voice. "Fixed rope off route -- on ridge -- can't reach."

Would she, when overwhelmed, scream? Then, the rope suddenly leaping like a crazy snake, would I scream? Or just ^{faint into death} ~~pass out cold~~?

The rope did not move.

For 15 minutes by the clock the rope did not move. No ^{word of} explanation.
 No voice. It just did not move, ^{was dead.} With free hand I fumbled cigarette and
 matches from shirt pocket. ^{Last} ~~was~~ request before the sword falls.

"Trying traverse to rope -- bad spot -- hang on."

My rope trembled alive. I payed out slack. Smelled a sickening odor.
 Saw cigarette burning flesh of arm. Felt no pain.

"GOT IT!"

That was loud and clear.

"TIED IN!"

That was a ~~genuine~~ merry cackle. The rope flowed out steadily, smoothly.

"Belay on! Climb!"

I stand, blink flashing stars from eyes. I yell, "Up rope!" The
 slack is pulled up, the rope draws tight around ~~my~~ waist. "Climbing!"
 The hell I am. Legs rubbery, arms limp, hands awkward as boxing gloves.

The stranger won't let me cry out, "NO!" The stranger has accepted
 the judgment, the sentence. Up the rope I go, up I go.

I saw Molly in the crowd, in the crowd,
 I saw Molly in the crowd, in the crowd,
 And I hollered right out loud,
 "Oh Molly, ain't you proud,
 Yes Molly, ain't you proud."

Robot stranger clambers to the corner. Pokes my head over edge. I
 spin away in vertigo. A glass-smooth slab rising so sheer I can't see the
 top without falling over backward, dropping so swooningly the valley is a
 green blur. Worse, far worse, unimaginably worse than the corner on the

South Face. No staircase of buckets and doorknobs here. A roller rink tilted vertical.

Shut eyes. Try to stop the spin.

A yodel from a faraway scarcely-remembered world. Damn you Al for agreeing to come along. Damn you for not warning me your damn sister doesn't care if she lives or dies.

"You're okay! I've got you!" yells unseen Monie. Yes you damn witch you've finally got me. You didn't die but you'll be the death of me.

I should've stayed home with Betty, should've stayed in the meadows with Al, should've quit at the false summit. Now I've no choice. If I retreat to Al, sane Al, to Betty, beloved Betty, I'll nevermore know peace. This is how they do it in wars, this is how they get guys to jump out of ~~the~~ trenches and charge machine guns.

~~Throw~~^{Tremble} a leg over the edge -- tennis shoes find nothing, ~~slip~~^{skid} off in thin air. Press ~~against~~^{jello} guts against the edge, extend a palsied arm -- fingers slip off round greasy bumps.

Hanging from the rope, slither onto the face. Don't look down! I know well enough what's there -- birds flying under me, tiny shrubs that actually are forest giants. Knees quiver, and wrists, and ~~(Betty-~~was~~)~~ lower lip.

Not toes and fingers but merely this slender thread of vegetable fiber next to mine eyes holds me to the slab, to life. I wiggle up evil green pillows of slick lava. Am I climbing or being reeled in like a fish?

Abruptly the rock turns reddish and feet find buckets and fingers doorknobs and the rope droops because Monie can't ~~take~~^{haul} in slack fast enough. I pull myself over the knife-edge of the summit ridge and fall onto her belay ledge, babbling about admirable Red Rock, hateful Green Rock.

A yell from below. Al crapped out on his 5600-foot meadow summit. Insolent Al, pitiful Al. How languid and relaxed is the hiker. How ignorant, how insulated, how dead. We climbers are naked to reality, we live.

We ~~went~~^{teetered} up the blade of the knife to our 6104-foot ~~rock~~ summit. Barely space for two. This way, that way, cliffs plummeted. ^{Don't look down.} Nothing to lean against but sky. To lean was to fly. Sit erect, rigid.

I recalled ~~from last year~~ Monie's cackling tale of ~~one of her~~^{an} ascent with a party of nine in three teams. The first team up had to go beyond the summit to make room for the others, then spend ³ hours straddling the ridge awaiting their turn to descend. When the route was clear one girl/had to be lowered like a cadaver, said not a word on hike out or drive home,

~~she~~^{again} never was seen on a mountain.

Three ^{of flagpole-sitting} hours! Poor girl. Ten minutes were plenty for me. Nerves were not recuperating, were deteriorating. This reality was too real, I wanted insulation.

Monie saw the symptoms. "Better get off this."

The descent! Eyes are near the top of the body, ideally positioned for climbing up. To climb down one must face outward to see where to place blind feet, one must ^{stand as if poised on the high platform for a dive into the valley.} ~~confront empty sky.~~ But the rope was tight on my waist and quickly I was down, 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 stout as your father's mustache.} And on

the treacherous Green Rock at the bottom she lacked even that meager consolation, ^{Through the slow and hesitating rope I shared her fear.} ~~In my belay, stoned I felt her slowness, her hesitation, again I gripped the rope tight.~~ Yet soon she too was around the corner, down, safe.

was guarded only by my belay from below, which at best would limit her fall to 50 feet — assuming I wasn't yanked from my stance to join her swan dive.

Giggling, hysterical, I wanted to hug and kiss the cackling witch. But that would've been anticlimactic. Linked solely by ~~the~~ rope we'd been closer than lovers.

Noon. Merely 2 hours since Monie ^{disappeared} ~~came~~ over the edge. ~~She~~
All my nightmares, the Red Devil and the Pursuer together, probably didn't add up to that many ticks of the clock. By the holy, whatever else happened in my life~~x~~ for 2 solid hours I'd looked over my shoulder.