

June 1948

Chapter 19

HUCKLEBERRY HERO

Delivered from evil. No longer a slave of ambition. Content with infinite riches in little room. Far from the madding crowd.

Look! In the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's SUPERHIKER!

The last weekend of June would be the first of full and final freedom, the re-declaration of independence, the start of the harvest from seeds glumly planted in dark February and gloomily cultivated through the wintry spring.

Wherefrom to pick the commencement fruit? My old Olympic home? Too far across the water, better left for later-in-summer trips of several days or more. The ring of small delicacies around Rainier? Too soon to again approach so near such hugeness. The Monte Cristo mysteries viewed last year from Silvertip? Too misted as yet by ignorance. No, mouth-watering *it was* to study the menu of future feasts but this first luncheon inevitably must be in my new Snoqualmie Pass home.

Which of the untasted 15 Pin Peaks would it be? Not one of those adjoining the pass, easily devoured in a day. I wanted a weekend banquet with appetizers of wilderness forest and streams as prelude to the high entree.

"Huckleberry should be just right," said Monie. "It's 10 miles up Gold Creek to Joe Lake."

Huckleberry! I hungered for ~~a Snoqualmie, at most~~ a Lundin. That was more of a ~~stomach-turning~~ Cruiser.

"Oh heck, you've been looking at the wrong side. From the west it's a pinnacle but on the east there's a neat ridge. It's got a couple cheap thrills but anybody who can lead the Boiler Plate and the shoulder of Guye wouldn't blink an eye."

Okay, Huckleberry was the peak. The party was Betty and me. Not since La Bohn Gap had we taken a long twosome stroll. She'd be reassured by this affirmation of husbandly affection.

All I asked was that as a preliminary she fetch her ax from where she left it in May. Dutifully on Thursday she rode the bus to Snoqualmie Pass and hiked alone up Commonwealth Basin to the site of her avalanche. And returned that night empty-handed. The ^{ice-ax} mine had been gleaned clean by Mountaineer thieves. I'd have to shell out another 12 bucks.

I'd also have to get another partner because for some reason the damn female went into one of her 3-Day Mads and refused to go hiking on the weekend. Well, Professor Monie ~~Surely~~ would be pleased to attend the graduation exercises.

"Oh gee, Huckleberry isn't the kind of peak that pampers my neurosis. Anyway I got a lot of things to do in town."

Damn females altogether.

And damn revolutionaries. I knew what she had to do in ~~the~~ town. Do battle on the barridades. Up the Revolution. Or better say down the

Counter-revolution, the Repression, the Restoration.

Last summer the legislature's Canwell Committee preached the crusade. Now the Unholy Alliance of Seattle's Downtown Gang and the Eastern Washington appleknockers and manure-spreaders was besieging the University from without while from within their trusty hounds, the Board of Regents and the Administration, were treeing the Reds. My old hiking companion, Professor Phillips, was confident they were going to chew him up and spit him out. Why was he so cheerful at the ~~prospect~~ prospect of expulsion from the ivory tower? Because the eagle-screaming of the native American fascists ^{entertained} ~~entertained~~ a Marxist.

The fellaheen flapdoodle also amused a Spenglerian. I had to smile when the rabid mongrels went yapping and slathering after not merely Reds but Pinks -- and bust out laughing when they sniffed around the garret!

Who could keep a straight face at the Bourbons' fear that the clown with the clumsy feet and butterfly brain might topple their throne? Who could stifle hysterics at the spectacle of J. Edgar Gangbuster, nemesis of Dillinger, dispatching his Funny Bunch of Idiots to grill a naif who in adolescence hadn't realized AYD was an anagram of YCL? A pity Betty was so terror-stricken, that she lacked Professor Phillips' ability to chuckle all the way to the gibbet. Personally I felt belittled that no Fatheaded Bastard Inquisitors came flashing badges at me. Hell, if I took it in mind to overthrow the government I'd be a true menace. And I might just do it sometime, too. If I ever saw any point.

In this ring, ladies and gentlemen, the University witch hunt. And ^{local} in this, the purge of the/Democratic Party, whose enthusiasm for a genuine

New Deal occasioned Postmaster General Farley's description of the nation as "the 47 states and the Soviet of Washington." And here in the center ring, the pride of our circus, the greatest show on the Northwest Earth, the Boeing strike.

A strike? In 1948? Why any need? Seattle was a solid union town. Had been for years, thanks to the whiffs of grapeshot ^{sprayed} ~~loosed~~ by Napoleon Dave Beck, benevolently ruthless general of the Teamsters Union. Let a comrade union strike, let the First Consul crook his pinky to signal the Teamsters would honor the picket lines, and the strike was won.

But that was the 1930s. In the 1940s the Emperor forsook old company of sweaty ^{proletariat} ~~workers~~ and began hobnobbing with fellow monarchs. On new cronies he bestowed sweetheart contracts. (And let the rank-and-file beware of crying "Sellout!" As Dad knew well from his days of paying dues, heavy upon them would fall brass-knuckled hands of the Praetorian Guard of goons.) From ~~them~~ ^{incongruous pals he received}, as Byzantium bribed the barbarians, ~~he received~~ golden tribute and ^{glittering} ~~pretty~~ baubles, including elevation to that Olympus of Establishment Poo-Bahs, the Board of Regents of the University.

Flanks secured by Bought-Boss Beck, coffers overflowing from war profiteering, bitterness from a decade of New Deal contumely ^{seething} ~~boiling~~, the Downtown Gang set out to reconquer Seattle.

What Belisarius would lead them? None other than the flying-machine factory, which from a prewar local curiosity, a sort of hobby shop, had through production of armadas of Flying Fortresses and A-bomb-dropping Superforts swollen to immense size and enormous wealth, had become the gaudiest ornament of the ~~now~~ one-time sawmill-fishing-seaport village and now was prepared to ^{take up arms as the} ~~become chief~~ champion of oppressed capitalists.

During the war Boeing had sullenly endured the Aero Mechanics Union -- at the insistence of the meddling government which demanded that production lines roll on despite flagrant ^{peasant} violations of divine right. Now the war was over and the government in disarray. Now the villeins would learn who was master.

In winter the union sought a pay raise. Baloney, said Boeing. Let us discuss, said the union, let us bargain, let us -- in accordance with our contract -- arbitrate. Crap, said Boeing. Left no alternative, in April the workers hit the bricks. Bully, chortled Boeing, gleeful that the master plan was being so precisely implemented.

After letting the peons starve a while to teach humility, in early June Boeing dropped the Bomb. Out of the shadows came the Janizaries a-charging -- led by whom else but Sultan Beck! Forming a new sweetheart local of the Teamsters he began ~~xxxx~~ recruiting hunger-humbled strikers and importing gypsy scabs to reopen the plant.

All spring Monie's excitement had been growing, her time increasingly spent walking picket lines and attending rallies. It was the best entertainment since the Wobblies were raising hell in the woods of Western Washington and being lynched by ^{the} American Legion, ~~deputy sheriffs~~, since Seattle's General Strike of 1919 ~~which~~ was thought to be Lenin's first beachhead in the United States. Even the last best hope of the old-time union religion, Walter Routhar, had a team of observers in town; if Aero Mechanics lost heart the United Auto Workers stood poised to send in shock troops to ^{tutor} ~~show~~ Beck-Boeing thugs ⁱⁿ ~~some~~ real big-league *free-style* head-busting.

There once was a union maid
 Who never was afraid
 Of spies and finks and company ginks
 And deputy sheriffs who made the raid.

She always got her way
 In the fight for higher pay,
 She'd show her card
 To the National Guard
 And this is what she'd say:

"Oh you can't scare me,
 I'm sticking to the Union,
 I'm sticking to the Union..."

Dandy for Monie. Nice the Old Bolshevik was getting her kicks. So far as I was concerned it was just another boring chapter in the ending story. Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Reds and Whites, hell. It was the Blues and the Greens, the Blues and the Greens.

What burned me up about the Boeing shenanigans was they robbed me of a mountain partner.

Saturday, June 26. All dressed up and no place to go. That is, nobody to go with. Betty sulking. Monie striking. Trail buddies of old long since departed to other planets. The Bagley bunch on an alpine level unattainably more exalted than mine. No Mountaineer last resort ^{available} ~~possible~~ because no Climbing Course trip was scheduled.

What to do? Wander lonely as a cloud? Not to Huckleberry -- aside from the cheap thrills, too many collapsing snowbridges and melt-swollen streams for a sane solo. Go tamely valley-pounding then? Some fucking commencement that would be.

Newly free -- and stuck in the garret with stone-faced wife.

Halfway through the morning, day and weekend going, going, soon to be gone forever, never to be regained, a desperate inspiration. Except for Monie I knew beyond nodding acquaintance only one Mountaineer. Bill, a still-surviving beginner, had been assigned to the V-8 for the ride to the Nisqually practice. Who the hell was Bill? No blabbermouth. During the drive to and from Paradise I'd learned little. He was ~~about~~ ^{roughly} my age, hadn't been in Army or college -- but hinted bitterly at some other institution he didn't care to talk about, ~~nor I to ask~~. All I knew for sure was he had no car and, as a newcomer to Seattle, no friends. He too might be stranded ~~unaidingly~~ in town.

Hiking with a stranger. Like taking a mail-order bride. Which ~~was~~ wasn't necessarily a bad move if ~~one's~~ ^{As} demands were primitive. ~~like~~ ^{were} mine today. It wasn't hiking I needed him for. Hiking I could do alone. But I craved to play with a rope. That meant a body tied to the other end.

Dial the number, pop the question. Yes, ^{he says,} What've I got myself into? Picking ~~him~~ ^{I gave him} up ~~to give~~ the stranger a more intense ^{scrutiny} ~~look~~ than there'd been any call for on the Nisqually trip. Not much of a talker. No smiler. ~~at all~~. Rather a tough-looking monkey. What sort of institution had he been in? For what? A criminal maybe. An athlete certainly, with the medium-small wiry physique typical of the best rock-climbers. Huckleberry probably would bore the hell out of him. Well dammit, it was my car. If superhiker sport was beneath his dignity he could stay home. But when I diffidently mentioned the peak he shrugged. Fine by him.

Long past noon we turned off the highway east of Snoqualmie Pass -- right smack into the middle of a logging show. Looking quizzically at fresh-butchered forest, the stranger asked, "Where's your trail?"

My trip, my car, my trail. He spread himself a lunch of sandwiches and cookies and canned apple juice. I attacked the chaos, cussing athlete-stranger, damning the tree-killing, path-obliterating loggers. A sweating, gasping hour I floundered in jackstraw of logs and tangle of slash before finding tread. At 2 o'clock, ominously late for the planned day's hike of 10 miles, I returned to the V-8 and we hoisted packs.

First the logging jumble again. Next unmolested but equally disorder^{ed} virgin forest -- brush to bull through, windfalls to crawl over ^{and} ~~at~~ squirm under; obviously the Forest Service hadn't worked the trail since ~~before~~ the war. Then Gold Creek.

Bill looked at the roaring-foaming torrent. Was that a smile of scorn or frown of disgust? Silently the stranger sat on the bank and resumed lunch. My trail, my creek.

And my peak. Lost. Just 50 feet to the far bank. Just! Fifty feet of thunder. Toss in a stick and it ~~swirled~~ swirled downstream a mile a minute. Throw in a big rock and it went horridly bounding-thudding. So would a body. A drowned and battered body.

How will the athlete-stranger enliven Mountaineer campfires? "You should've seen this Manning character! Asks me to go climbing like he knows what he's doing and an hour from the car quits because he's afraid to get his footsies wet."

What was it Chairman Cam said in the night of the Adams storm? "Wo don't cry until we're hurt."

Doff boots and socks, pants and skivvy shorts, stow them in Trapper Nelson. Shoulder pack. ^{Grasp} ~~Grasp~~ ice ax. Poke shaft in white fury, jab spike

in unseen creek bed. Now dabble the left foot. Holy icewater! ^{With} ~~Push~~
 tender bare toes ^{grip} ~~onto~~ cruel hard unseen boulders. Face upstream and ^{immerse}
~~bring in~~ the right foot. Lift-spike-and-jam-down-again-QUICK a few inches
 leftward, forward. Move left foot sideways. The right. And again
 lift-and-jam the shaft. No feeling in feet. And now none in calves, and
 now none in thighs, the flood boiling higher as I advance to the center.
 Turmoil engulfs bare ass, bludgeoning noise stuns brain, hypnotizing ~~sift~~
 close-to-eyes rush ^{of water} unsettles balance. Falter and I'm gone, bounding-thudding.
 Water too foam-thin for swimming, plenty wet for drowning. As far now to
 go back to safety as ^{ahead} ~~forward~~ to safety. Keep legs wide apart, dead feet
 firmly ^{amid} ~~in~~ boulders, lean into relentless thrust, lean on the saving ax.
 Legs numb, private parts burning, head spinning. ~~Don't think downstream~~
~~thoughts. Don't think.~~ Flood is receding! I see my knees! My ankles!
 I'm over and out! Bless the ax, the third leg that transforms hiker into/
 superhiker!

Dancing and howling in the ~~agony of the~~ rebirth of ~~dead~~ nerves,
 I didn't notice Bill's crossing. He only commented, pulling on pants and
 boots, "You could get yourself castrated that way."

Again the trail -- briefly. Scattered snowpatches merged in solid
 snowcover. Blazes led through forest gloom -- high morning overcast had
 thickened, lowered onto peaks, was sinking ~~down~~ into valley.

In premature 6 o'clock twilight, no more blazes. Or rather too many
 blazes. Blazes on every damn tree. ~~Pondering the matter,~~ I realized that
 for the last hurrying hour I'd been guided by scars on trunks made not by
 pathfinder's hatchet but by falling trees and tumbling rocks -- "lost man's
 blazes." God knew where we were. I didn't.

My trip, my route. Stranger said nothing, sat in snow eating an orange and smoking a cigarette. I studied the Snoqualmie Quad. The sketchy old sheet, surveyed in 1903, showed Gold Creek -- which matched with the roar below in woods to the right. It showed Joe Lake -- which had to be somewhere up the steep hill to the left, a thousand feet above our ~~guessed~~ ^{presumed} elevation of about 3500 feet. It showed Joe Creek flowing from the lake down to Gold Creek. There was the rub. It showed one tributary to Gold Creek in our guessed vicinity. We'd waded a dozen already and heard more ahead. Which was not a springtime snowmelt stream, was the year-around Joe? That certainly was a smirk on the stranger's face. The jailbird was rehearsing the ~~family~~ ^{ruffians.} story he'd tell other Mountaineer athlete-thugs.

Desperately I nominated a torrent to be Joe and furiously kicked steps ~~steeply~~ upward along its course. Mocking Bill followed. As we detoured around waterfalls and cliffs in the dusk I reflected that if this weren't Joe we'd pretty soon be tying ourselves to trees for a non-sleeping 6 hours of night -- 360 minutes, ~~or~~ 21,600 seconds. The stranger wouldn't share my misery. He'd keep warm on thoughts of future merriment.

But he was not to have his laugh for I had mine. At 8 o'clock steep snow rounded ~~over~~ to flat snow and we entered the cirque basin of 4500-foot Joe Lake.

My lake. My victory. Not the athlete but I had found the logger-demolished trail, proved possible the frightful ford, solved the puzzle of blazes, identified Joe Creek from countless candidates -- I had defeated 10 miles of wilderness and beaten onrushing night -- and all in the 10 hours since I dialed the stranger's number. To give him his due, he bore the disappointment graciously, indeed seemed quite cheerful.

Clouds hid 6300-foot Huckleberry, our tomorrow scramble -- assuming the clouds didn't churn up a storm. If so the trip already was a superhiker triumph, the camp itself sufficient prize. A hole in the outlet of the frozen lake supplied water, obtained by tying a cord to the wire handle of a Ten Can and casting it in the blue-cold pool. A clump of hemlocks and firs provided a flat patch of snowfree ground for sleeping under my lifefaft sail. A snag gave ~~my~~ bark for a blaze that dried clothes and warmed bones and boiled a Ten Can of noodles and chipped beef and erupted a glory of light in ghost-gray night.

On soft bough bed I ~~quickerly~~ slipped off in happy sleep. Almost I could've been at Parsons again. This was how things were supposed to be. If Bill was a stranger he was a proper partner. It is, after all, sort of sissy to go out with girls.

At 8 o'clock serene deep sleep was broken by brightness, warmth. Wake! The Sun! Quickly from bags and tarp and trees, out in the plain of blinding snow to see -- to see (oh God!) the Sultan's Turret.

A peak named for a fruit ought to be soft. If this ~~xxxxxx~~ screeching splinter was a scramble I was George Leigh Mallory. Damn Monie!

Bill was slobbering down gruel, gobbling figbars, gulping cocoa. I didn't recall ever seeing him in action amid the springtime mobs. But the obscene ^{lust} ~~enthusiasm~~ for oatmeal -- here, now -- proved him a nerveless athlete. The enemy. The enemy I thought I'd escaped. The enemy who ~~could~~ ^{would} spread the news of my humiliation throughout the club. ^{And} Eventually word ^{even} would get to Bagley, so not by leaving the club could I avoid ~~the~~ pitying ^{eyes}.

~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~

How would he react to the announcement I was quitting? Perhaps from respect for incipient comradeship, now ended, he'd be embarrassed. More likely, ~~although~~ ^{he outraged by} he'd ~~get huffy about~~ ^{he'd} my wasting his time. Maybe ~~was~~ ^{he'd} bust a gut ~~out~~ laughing.

The words were in my throat but I could no more get them out than get oatmeal in. He routinely packed rucksack, and I mine. Coiled rope slung over shoulder, he began walking. I too.

We crossed the white lake and stepkicked, switchbacked a thousand feet and more up a snow gully to the crest of the ridge. In a patch of melted-out heather at the base of the first violent ~~up~~ leap of rock we rested. From rucksack he pulled a bunch of grapes and offered me a handful; only their juice lubricated passage through salivaless mouth into constricted gullet. Busy-jawed stranger swung eyes in a circle, over shining snows and warm-brown rocks of peaks, ^{glowing} ~~then~~ green forests of valleys. The cliff above -- why didn't he look at the cliff? Of course, I ~~wasn't~~ ^{didn't} either. But we had to talk about it. I had to tell him. ^{Yet if.} ~~if~~ I tried to speak now grapes would erupt from stomach and shoot out mouth like half-masticated bullets.

He flipped away ~~a~~ cigarette, donned ~~tanishxxxxxx~~ tennis shoes, ~~and~~ uncoiled ~~the~~ rope. Decisive action. Time was running out. He tossed me a rope-end and mechanically I started tying in with a bowline-an-a-bight.

"Say," he interrupted, "You ever seen the bowline-on-a-coil? My Nisqually instructor showed it to us. He was in the Mountain Troops and said it was all they used there."

He demonstrated the new knot. I was impressed -- and tranquilized. What the hell was I worrying about? I'd follow the athlete exactly

as I'd followed Monie on Tooth and Cruiser. He'd never guess the truth.

The Hero of ~~2~~ Huckleberry walked up heather to the cliff, ~~unuly~~ coolly inspected the terrain, and said, "I can belay you from here."

WHAT?

Busy settling into his stance he didn't notice my daze. How come? The rope had two ends. How come I was stuck with the leader end? Couldn't we at least discuss? Why not?

The twitch at the corner of his mouth told why. He knew. My refusal of the oatmeal, ~~awkwardness~~ ^{gagging of} with the grapes, gave me away. The rapist or murderer or whatever was not to be deprived of his sadistic sport.

"Belay on," he declared and I lept upward as if goosed, the 60-foot cliff as blurred as the wall of Cruiser. And not here, as there, a taut rope from above holding me securely to life, nor a witch-friend who was cruel but kind. Social pressure by a bunch of crummy athletes was pushing Monie-betrayed superhiker to a climber's grave.

No climbing with the eyes, no three-point suspension, no hold-testing, no balance, no rhythm. No memory of how I got up. Bill followed slowly and smoothly, with ill-concealed irony pretending to envy my hectic rush.

We clambered along sides ~~to~~ ^{and} over tops of a series of ridge-top gendarmes. Easy enough. Nerves steadied. We ~~passed~~ crossed the top of a staircase-gully leading ~~back~~ ^{simply} back down to the heather. The 60-foot blur would not have to be descended. My line of retreat was open. Hairbreadth Harvey saved again!

^{Because} who says retreat? Close ahead was the final hands-in-pockets heap of frost-wedged boulders. I bite my thumb at you, athlete! You'll not

tattletale to Mountaineers and Bagleyites the truth about Manning's yellow streak! Where's your evidence -- a distaste for oatmeal, a lack of enthusiasm for grapes? Blithely I walked onto Huckleberry's summit.

Only it wasn't. Reeling I stared down to a ^{knife-edge} ~~narrow~~ notch and down down down the drainpipe-plummeting chimneys on ~~xx~~ either side, and up up up a hundred and more vertical feet to vintage of poison wine, the true and horrid Huckleberry.

Sardonic stranger pointed ~~down~~ to a ^{shelf} ~~block-of-rock~~ in the notch. "I can belay you from there."

The nights at Camp Marion. The days in the Graywolf. The hours on Cruiser. The minutes on the Haystack. I'd confronted and escaped Them, was done with Them. Mountaineer accomplices had sought to lure me into Their ambushes but I'd dodged free. Three hours ago in the sack I was safe. And now ^{was} ~~am~~ caught.

The Wicked Witch, these 2 years patiently plotting -- was she, on her picket line, cackling? The Rough Beast of the Tall Parka -- was he dry-washing hands with evil glee?

Agent of Old Ones-Mountaineers recruited from prison, perpetrator of such crimes that my blood would pass unnoticed on his hands, mercilessly announced, "Belay on."

The cream of the jest was that of my own free (hah!) will I must go to my doom. By all my past I was commanded to attack the redoubt of the Old Ones.

Attack alone. For what's a belayer? If above, as on Tooth and Cruiser, guardian of life and limb. If below as on Guye or Lundin, a fall

impossible, a mere observer. If below as here, bearer of bad tidings to widow and parents, guide to lead rescue party to the carrion. Peril is not shared by Number Two. Alone is Number One.

As ~~I know~~ ^{I've known} from ~~childhood~~ ^{childhood} star-scared childhood it must happen one day, walk automaton-stiff to meet the Thing of the Nightmare, no longer chasing, now ^{patiently} waiting. Up from notch over blocks of rock onto broad ledge. Up ledge to wide smooth slab. In pitiable non-athlete crouch creep up slab. Head bumps something. Look up. The cliff.

Recall the funny story Monie told about the two Mountaineers who made the first ascent. On the summit, before attempting to descend this cliff, they wrote their wills on shirtcuffs. How she cackled at the poor duffers of olden times! In the 30 years since, Huckleberry has been progressively downgraded from "impossible" to "for experts only" to "an easy day for a lady."

But I'm no lady. Above hangs a flower-pot ladderway, goat hair ^{clinging} ~~climbing~~ to plants -- a garden path for mountain goats. But I'm no goat.

Convulsively fling upward into flowers -- and ~~the~~ rope tightens around waist. Totter backward toward emptiness.

"SLACK!"

Answers assassin from notch, "Sorry!" Yes, he's sorry -- sorry I'm so slow ^{at} ~~about~~ killing myself, so sorry he's trying to help me along.

Wiggle along goat path, palsied hands clutching flowers. Lean on Earth, beautiful Earth. Do not, as suggested by the decievers, lean out on ^{awful} ~~deadly~~ Sky.

A sudden plateau. Pull body over edge. Lie face down sniffing heather bells -- red bells, white bells, yellow bells. Ah to creep into these bells as are the merry bees, drink nectar of life, and buzz off in joy!

Impatient query from below. Belay up stranger-athlete-dirty-rotten-villain. He commences lunch. An interminable hour under heavy-glaring sun he pops grapes in mouth, crunches Rye Tack, chews cheese and chocolate, exclaiming at heat-shimmering horizons and the huge delicious ice cream cone of Rainier. I'm about to faint. From sunstroke? Or Old Ones ~~are~~ ~~arriving~~, waiting? Not their hired gun do they menace. He, Number Two, will survive with a smile. It's Number One ~~who~~ who's going to get it. On the descent. Now.

Bill leaps up, eager for the denouement. Hah! He's forgotten the coward's trump! I'll outsmart him with a rappel. Search for solid anchor of rock or shrub. Naught but fragile flowers. I must climb down. And that I ^{succeeded in climbing} ~~climbed~~ up means nothing for ~~now~~ I must lead ^{down} with blind-clumsy feet, momentum of body reinforced by ever-pulling gravity. First, write will on cuff? My shirt is wool. Anyway nothing to leave widow but a couple hundred books and the V-8.

Athlete scampers down to notch. "Belay on!"

Sit on edge of flower plateau. Gorgeous blossoms. One last time sniff perfumes of Earth. Look up to Heaven -- no, I knew no rope would be dropped by angels. Look down to Hellfire void. This is the way the world ends. *Whimper.*

Lower legs over brink. Gingerly set feet in a flower pot. Vicious rope ^{jerk} ~~draw~~ taut! Spread wings to fly! Our Father, ^{which art wherever,} here I come, ready or not!

"SLACK!" ~~X~~ Wail it, sob it. "SLACK SLACK SLACK!"

"Sorry!" calls ~~hypocrite~~ hypocrite vulture.

But that was his last shot at me. Miraculously, once over the brink to the first flower pot I saw the goat path spreading highway-wide. In ^dseconds I was at the notch. In minutes we were sprawled in the heather swilling a jug of grapejuice left cooling in a snowbank. Only remaining now was to pull on boots, flash down the snow gully in standing glissade, riding boots like short skis, and break camp, hoist packs, and ramble loose-legged 10 miles down the valley, exulting in icy ford and smashing through loggers' jackstraw, and drive the V-8 to North Bend for hamburgers and milkshakes, and home to the garret. The same garret I left just 26 hours ago. But I was not the same. Nor ever would be again.

Relaxing in the heather, drinking grapejuice, I was baffled by the athlete-assassin. Tight-mouthed before, now he was giggling-gibbering. Rock-steady before, now he had trouble lighting ^acigarette with shaking hands.

~~Revelation.~~ Review the weekend. Why did he wait at the V-8 while I found the trail? Because he'd no idea where to look. Why did he hang back at the ford? Because he didn't know how to cope with the flood. Why did he leave it up to me to follow blazes and decide which creek was Joe? Because he'd been lost all day. And why did he compel me to lead? Because he didn't dare. Shit, he didn't even know how to belay ~~properly~~. He was no athlete. He was practically a Betty. I could forgive ^{Bill}him for damn near killing me. Hell, I might even learn to like him.

"Curses!" I hear ~~the Old Ones~~ Them muttering. "Foiled again!"

Where did They go? Vanished when I set foot on the goat highway.
^{on the descent}
^

Darned if I didn't ~~sort of~~ miss Them.

No, that's too much. What I missed was not Their enfolding me but the ecstasy of squirming loose. What I missed was not the terror but the release. Yet there couldn't have been the ejaculation without the foreplay.

They were gone from this peak, never again would we embrace here, only ^{once} ~~a single time~~ can one be a Huckleberry hero. Where were the Old Ones now? Across the valley, on Chimney Rock. Far south, on Rainier. All around the Cascades and Olympics on a thousand peaks.

What madness stirs? What dread lust?