



ONE

Return to the Mountain

The beam from my headlight penetrated the blackness, illuminating the loose scree in front of me. I struggled to keep up with Anneka, our Exum guide, as we trudged up the steep rock-strewn slope from the Lower Saddle towards the decision point at the Crack of Doom. The night was cold but the air was calm, in sharp contrast to the howling west wind from Idaho on that night fifty years earlier when I was last on this mountain, an eager fifteen-year-old outfitted in Boy Scout hiking boots, thin jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and a nylon windbreaker.

Exum Guides now provides a five-page list of mandatory and suggested equipment and apparel to prepare climbers for the ever changing weather on the Grand Teton. With the remembrance of how I nearly froze on my first climb, I followed the instructions to the letter. I was ready for any weather, although the weight of my pack was a constant reminder that preparation carried a cost. Nonetheless, a heavy pack was a small price compared to being caught at 13,770 feet with the wrong clothes. While the forecast was for good weather, the Grand Teton can be fickle and unforgiving.

I have always been intrigued by mountains and views from high points that extend off into the horizon. As a child growing up on the flat sea level sands of South Florida, the horizon was always no farther than a stretch of my arm. I climbed trees for a better view. On the seemingly interminable drives north up the long spine of Florida on Route 27, and later the Sunshine State Parkway, I would strain at the crest of every hill past Apopka to spot the thin blue line on the horizon that marked the southern terminus of the Smoky Mountains. The first sightings would always be false greetings that shortly dissolved into wispy clouds separating above the horizon until we entered Georgia, where the light blue line would hold and gradually become substance instead of a fading mirage. Finally, the Smokies were in sight. It never failed to thrill me.

I first climbed the Grand Teton in July 1962, the summer after my sophomore year in high school, one of eleven climbers led by two young guides in their twenties from Exum Mountain Guide Service. I made the climb on a lark, an adventure, something to express my independence on a seven week camping trip with my parents. In retrospect perhaps it was my Vision Quest, marking a rite of passage from my youth.

I wanted to see the view from the summit but we made the entire climb and descent enveloped in cold, damp clouds with visibility limited to the granite ledges and outcroppings within our grasp. At the summit there was no panoramic view of the valley or the adjacent mountain ranges; beyond our huddled climbing group there was only grey white cold. Our stay at the summit was brief.

We hurried down the mountain to avoid any further deterioration in the weather. At the Headwall below the Lower Saddle, we passed a group of ten climbers from the Appalachian Mountain Club who were headed towards the summit. Several days later I learned that the group had been caught on the Grand Teton in a freak July snow storm. One climber died of exposure and the remainder of the party was airlifted off the mountain by helicopter in what *Sports Illustrated* in a 1965 article termed “one of most difficult mountain rescues ever attempted.”

Our guides, Jake Breitenbach and Peter Lev, brought our group safely down the mountain then immediately went back up as part of the rescue party for the stranded Appalachian Mountain Club group. Both Jake and Peter were extraordinary individuals and in the prism of my adolescent eyes were what I aspired to be—strong, independent, confident men who loved life and who life loved back. But life gives and it also takes.

Grand Teton gave me my first taste of mortality. The fact that I had shared the Headwall rope with the ill-fated Appalachian Mountain Club climbers, had looked at the face of the doomed climber, and could have suffered a like fate if the weather had turned earlier or Jake and Pete were less skillful, made me more aware of my vulnerability, although no more risk averse. The lesson was compounded the next year when I learned that Jake Breitenbach, who had seemed invincible, god-like, was killed in the Khumbu Icefall on the first American expedition to Mount Everest.

As years passed, the details of the Grand Teton climb remained vivid in my memory: the hike in darkness along the Saddle to the

rope-in point; the climb along the narrow ledge, ironically called "Wall Street;" the friction pitch where we pushed away from the refuge of the slick rock face to gain traction; the spider-like scramble up the chimney with hands and feet wedged against the sharp-edged cornice as we climbed to the summit. They were scenes I could recall in Technicolor, unfaded by the years, yet there was a gnawing sense of incompleteness. I had made the climb yet had been denied the view from the summit, the same feeling I would have had if the landing on the moon had been staged in a studio. My accomplishment seemed unreal, almost fake. I had been there, touched the Geodetic summit marker, rappelled over a rock face 100 feet into a grey void, had a certificate of ascent signed by Jake and Peter, but I had not been able to actually see the thousand foot exposure as I had inched along Wall Street, nor had I felt the adrenaline rush of the panoramic view from the Teton summit and experienced the visual affirmation of my accomplishment.

Except for some rock climbing later on the 1962 trip near the summit of Mount Lassen, and scaling the sea cliffs of Acadia National Park in the summer of 1963, the Grand Teton climb was my first and last technical rock climb. My desire to complete the experience and repeat the climb grew as I aged. I also wanted to repeat the climb as my own small personal tribute to Jake Breitenbach's memory.

Now, fifty years later, I was back on the Mountain.

I prepared for the climb by working out for six months at Planet Granite, a rock climbing gym in the San Francisco Bay Area. The outside of the gym's tall pre-fab steel building gave no hint of the incredible scene inside: towering faux granite faces pocked with artificial hand and footholds with dozens of climbing ropes dangling from the top, most attached to spider-like climbers making ascents along routes color coded by difficulty. I was awed by the sight.

Without a climbing buddy to hold one end of the rope on what climbers call a "belay" to break a fall if a climber loses footing on an ascent, my workouts were limited to the "bouldering" area, a vertical wall approximately 12 foot in height with hand and footholds, similar to the big wall but not as high and without the safety ropes. The floor around the bouldering area was a thick mat that cushioned any fall. I had my share of tumbles off the wall at the beginning but my bouldering skills improved to the point where I could easily climb the 12 foot vertical wall by

the novice routes. I thought I was ready for the challenge of the Grand Teton.

In 1962, we had summited by the Exum Ridge route. The route was pioneered by Glen Exum in 1931 when, as a young college student, he made a solo ascent of the Grand Teton wearing leather cleated football shoes, making a blind leap at the end of the Wall Street ledge to discover a new route to the summit. Owen-SpaULDing is the other most popular route, which, while still a technical climb, is somewhat derisively referred by some climbers as the “walk-up” route.

I wanted very much to repeat the climb by the Exum Ridge route, savoring the memories from my previous climb and testing age against the recollections of my youth. However, after climbing school I had been exhausted and my instructor, Peter, suggested the Owens-SpaULDing route would be the better choice.

Peter injured his knee at some point during climbing school and was unable to make the Grand Teton climb. I was fortunate that another climber, Greg, offered to share his guide. Greg had been an avid climber. He had planned on the Exum Ridge but was agreeable to any route.

That had been two days ago. The exertion of climbing school, yesterday’s eight-mile hike to the Lower Saddle, with the 5,000-foot elevation gain, my sleep in the Exum Hut at 11,500 feet cut short after two hours when one of the twelve climbers packed into the 10x10 hut started snoring, the four a.m. wakeup, all were now taking a toll on my body and psyche.

I fought to keep pace with Anneka and I tried to listen for Greg behind me to see if he was struggling, but my labored breathing was so loud I could not hear whether Greg was also winded. My muscles already ached from the rigors of the two previous days and the actual climb had not yet begun. We would soon be at the decision point for which route to take, Owen-SpaULDing or Exum Ridge. I was conflicted as to what to do. I wanted to suggest that we take the Exum Ridge route because I knew I would forever regret being the cause of holding Greg back from his goal, which was mine also, but I was tired and knew that the mountain could be unforgiving of any misstep or misjudgment. I was 65 years old, a prostate cancer survivor, and while I felt I was in excellent shape, had I deluded myself? In my quest to recapture my youth had I pushed myself too far?