

## On (Not) Climbing the Grand Teton

**T**hey rise out of the Snake River Valley like a rich dark promise. Taller than the Grand Canyon is deep, sharper than the blade of a bread knife, the Tetons stand more than seven thousand feet above the town of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. And though there are many formidable peaks in the Teton Range, there is no mistaking the Grand Teton, 13,770 feet above sea level, steely gray, deeply fissured, and bent slightly southward, as if after surviving the cataclysm that must have made it, it wanted to rest awhile, and turn its face to the sun.

"The Grand," as it is known to all who have had the pleasure to live under it, or ski beside it, or hike around it, or climb to the top of it, is more than the highest mountain in what many would call the continental United States' most spectacular range. It is a magnet, a motherlode, a home base to a breed of people who have no home. Not just people who ski and climb, but *skiers* and *climbers*, the ones who relegate real-life activities like laundry and relationships to those couple of weeks in the spring and fall when the lifts have closed but it's too slick to climb, or the snow has come but the runs aren't yet open.

The Grand calls out to those people, calls them from their lives in Wisconsin or Florida, calls them from their high-paying jobs and their reasonably happy marriages, and says, "Come see what its like to ski Corbett's when the snow's still soft, come see what it's like to have your morning coffee

after fourteen pitches up the Exum Route to the top of the Grand."

There was a time in my life when I was one of those people. When

the rivers and the mountains spoke to me and I took on any challenge they offered, however ill-suited I might have been to the task. Now I have learned to be a little more selective about which challenges I accept. I know the mediums in which my body performs best and they are the soft ones: water, snow, the back of a particularly responsive horse; and the ones in which my body stumbles: rock, pavement, and anywhere more than twenty feet off the ground.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I found myself dangling by a 150-foot length of rope on a rock face called the Open Book several thousand feet below the summit of the Grand Teton with Dick Dorworth—the fastest man on skis in 1963—holding fast to the other end.

But there I was.

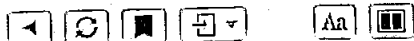
Dick Dorworth is one of the guides in the world-renowned Exum Mountaineering School, a school where a first-time climber can take an intensive three-day course in mountaineering and, if the guide judges her capable, spend the next two days climbing the Grand.

Perhaps what went wrong in my case is that we tried to do the whole three days of training in one day. Or perhaps, as Dick said, I just didn't really want to climb that mountain.

But on the morning of my training session, I thought I did. It was late September, the air as clear and fine and sharp as the big mountain that loomed above us. We passed a cow moose on the way to the practice area near Hidden Falls, and I took it as a good omen. It was early when we started, and the trail was trafficked with big slow birds Dick didn't know the name of—ruffed grouse, I found out later, they were called.

In spite of all my rock-related, height-related fears, I was excited about the climbing. Dick was both patient and supportive and I cruised through what would have been the first day's training climbs easily before we sat down for lunch in the shade of a huge overhanging wall.

When he motioned to the perfectly vertical rock face that adjoined the overhang and said, "That's what we climb after lunch," I was sure he was only kidding. "And if you make it, then we cap the day off with this—" he pointed directly overhead—"the advanced rappel."



After one short morning Dick knew me well enough to know this was the right incentive. Though I'd only done it a few times, I loved rappelling, loved the trust I had to put in the equipment, loved the moment of stepping over the edge, the last contact with the rock before it curved away in an overhang. I loved hanging there, free, for a moment, the rope in my hands controlling my descent, and I loved looking out over all that surrounded me, which in this case would be the sparkling surface of Jackson Lake and the clouds making shadows across the Teton valley floor.

I got off to a pretty good start, despite the Open Book's daunting height and sheerness, surprising myself by climbing the first seventy-five feet or so without so much as a hesitation. Then I looked down.

My knees started doing the sewing machine thing, and I felt fatigue in my joints from the morning. There was a lot more rock above than below me, I noticed, and to continue I would have to move laterally, toward the crease in the "book," and use a hand jam, a technique whose logic my stubborn brain would not quite let me believe.

As any climber will tell you, one moment of faithlessness leads in a straight plumb line to another. The hand jam wouldn't work, the toehold was much too small, even the place where I'd been resting, which just moments ago seemed so secure, was suddenly fraught with unspeakable danger. The only thing left to do was fling myself upward, sideways, and pray that by some miracle I stuck to the rock.

I didn't. Stick, that is. I fell, ten feet or so and clunked hard with my head and my knees and my elbows into the rock, every ounce of my weight hanging from my harness and Dick well above me, and I couldn't get a hand- or a toehold to save my life.

"Stand on your feet, Pam," came Dick's voice from above, and I looked down again, at the sixty-five feet of wall below me, to the ground that I would kneel down and kiss if only I could get to it, and I said to myself, "Goddammit, Pam, how did you get here again?"

"Climb this rock, Pam," Dick said. "Now."

And I tried to do just that. And I had faith in my equipment, and more faith still in Dick. And my head knew this was only a practice

run, for heaven's sake, the bunny hill of climbing, and that if I needed to I could try again and even fail again, I could hang from that rock all day without getting seriously hurt. But somewhere between my head and the rest of my body I missed a connection, and my heart pounded as hard as if I was already cut loose and falling, and my arms and my legs started shaking worse than ever, and I clawed and clawed at the wall like a bug on the inside of a water glass, with no result at all.

"Stand on your feet, Pam." Came the voice, calm, a little bored even. *You didn't know the name of that bird this morning, I thought in a completely uncalled-for moment of vindictiveness. You didn't even know the moose we saw was a cow.*

"Hey Dick," I ventured. "What would you think about letting me down?"

"I can't do that, Pam," he said.

"Is it that you *can't* put me down, Dick," I said, "or that you *won't*?"

"Oh, I *can* put you down," he said. "But if I do, then you can't do the rappel."

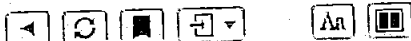
"That may be true according to the laws in your universe," I said. "In my universe I can hike around the back side of this rock and do the rappel anyway."

"We all need challenges in our lives, Pam," he said, and I thought about the top three items on my current list of challenges: a chronically unfinished novel, an impossible relationship with a difficult man, a close friend—an angel of a man, really—dying of advanced melanoma. I needed to climb the bunny slope of Exum Mountaineering School like I needed a hole in the head, but I was mad now. I dug my fingernails into the rock and started climbing.

I'm not sure what happened in the next minute or two. I imagine there was a lot of cursing, several ungraceful postures, and judging by the minor abrasions I discovered on nearly every exposed piece of my body when I got to the top, a little pain, though I didn't feel it at the time.

"There," Dick said. "Now doesn't that feel a lot better?"

But I was shaking too much to tell.



"Okay," Dick said, "one more pitch and we'll call it a day." I looked up at the rock rising another hundred feet above the ledge we sat on.

"Dick," I said, "I think we both agree that whether or not I make it the rest of the way up this rock, I'm not going to be Grand Teton material."

"I'm afraid that's true," he said.

"I don't know if you will understand this," I said, "but in my life right now, the bigger challenge is to say I'm scared, I don't like this, and I want to go down."

Dick studied my face for a moment, then the rope in his hand. "Okay," he said, and I thought that would be all, but then he said, "Is there anything I could do to make the day better?"

"Yeah," I said, smiling. "You could let me do the advanced rappel."

And he did.

And it was wonderful. But I went home sad and disconsolate anyway. The Rocky Mountains have been, since I have been old enough to think clearly, my church and my religion, and to fail in them, in whatever small or specific way, felt much too much like a failure of my soul. I needed to create another challenge, something that let me be in the mountains the way I wanted to be there, with my hands free enough to take pictures and touch tree bark, and my head free enough to take it all in.

If I couldn't get to the top of the Grand Teton, I decided, I'd learn what I could from hiking in its shadow. With the shortening September days and the unpredictable weather, a day hike of twenty miles and an elevation gain of four thousand feet—up Cascade Canyon and over Paintbrush Divide—would be just challenge enough.

I was up at first light, and it was well below freezing. I tried to ignore the signs at the trailhead about grizzly bear attacks and violent rutting moose in Paintbrush Canyon, about how I should avoid hiking alone or during the low-light, high-predation hours between dusk and dawn.

By the time I had climbed my first five hundred feet into Cascade Canyon the air was softening and I was shedding layers like crazy. The morning fog had lifted and the ground smelled leafy and loamy in the

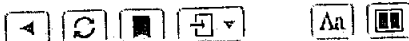
sunshine, like it was done with summer, and waiting for the snow. Cascade Canyon was flat and broad and I shared the trail with more deer than I could keep track of. Every now and then the Grand, awash in morning sun, winked out at me from above the canyon wall.

On the way to Lake Solitude the trail rose above tree line, and behind me the walls of the canyon formed a soft cradle of reds and browns and yellows that held the peak of the Grand perfectly inside it, and I could see every block and fissure, every snowfield, every steep pitch I wouldn't be climbing, backlit and magnificent against a perfect blue sky.

I put my foot in Lake Solitude's icy water. I put my hands on every rock I went by. I played with my camera, shooting patterns I saw in the surface of boulders, the occasional shock of red in the mostly brown tundra, the emerald-green siltiness of the high and tiny Mica Lake. And I shot the Grand again and again as it rose higher still out of its cradle, as its shadows lengthened and shifted as the sun tumbled over it. I reached the top of the spectacular 10,700-foot Paintbrush Divide, still three thousand feet below the Grand's summit, sufficiently reverent, sufficiently awed.

It was four o'clock, and I had four thousand feet and a lot of miles to make before nightfall. I started down the much steeper Paintbrush Canyon, making time like crazy, hoofing it down the trail at top speed, my strong legs pumping, my pack feeling light as a feather, feeling the faith of an outdoorswoman again. I was certain I was going to make it back to the truck within the envelope of visible light, when I heard a noise that made me stop dead in my tracks.

It was a huff, but *loud*, the unmistakable sound of an animal—a big animal—exhaling, a noise they make when they are threatened, or when they are mating, or in the moment just before they attack. I waited five long seconds before I heard the huff again, no louder, but this time I could pinpoint its direction. Whatever it was, it was in a stand of ponderosa pine not five feet from where I'd just passed on the trail. Whatever it was, it could smell me, and so far it wasn't showing any signs of being scared.



The musk of something huge and dark hung like a cloud in the clean evening air. I grabbed my camera from my pack and cut a wide swath around the ponderosas on my way to a glacial boulder I hoped I could climb. The rock was steep-sided and smooth as glass but I dug my toes and fingers in just like I'd practiced and made it easily to the top.

"Thanks, Dick," I said out loud, laughing, but was silenced by another huff, this one louder, a little angrier than before.

From the top of the rock I could see that my companion was a big bull moose, the biggest I'd seen this side of Alaska, and I could see the paddles of his antlers, broad and blond and almost glowing in the twilight as he thumped them again and again against the thick trunk of the tree. His dark head, his huge improbable nose, was just a suggestion in the shadows, but I thought I could make out one dark eye gleaming.

Maybe he was mad because I'd invaded his territory, or maybe it was time for his yearly drop, or maybe there was a lady other than me in the vicinity he was trying to impress. But he wasn't getting anywhere for all his passionate thumping, and I thought of myself scrabbling up there on the Open Book, all the will and rage and desire I'm capable of pumping through my body, and all of it to no avail.

"I know how you feel," I said, softly, but the moose had forgotten all about me.

Until my film rewound, that is, and the camera made a noise he'd never heard before, and he huffed again and made four steps of a mock charge towards me.

"Easy, big boy," I said, and he pawed the ground and fixed me with that gleaming eye, and I slid down the back side of the rock, grabbed my pack, and hit the trail running. I could hear him coming behind me, the heavy footfalls, not running but walking steadily, the huffing softer now, but regular, in time with his step.

He followed me as far as the next set of switchbacks, but always at a respectful distance, a little like a gentleman not sure if he wants to make a pass. When I looked back the last time he was nothing more than a dark shape against a darkening sky, but I could tell by the way

he held his head that he hadn't taken his eye off me, and he wouldn't until he knew I was gone for good.

It was well past dark when I got back to the trailhead, but the harvest moon was bright and full and I had no trouble finding my way. The woods were full of the rumbling of animals, and I could hear the elk bugling their unearthly music in the meadows, a song so full of longing it silenced even the crickets and the owls. Above it all the summit of the Grand rose to bathe itself in the moonlight: stony and radiant, as good as a million miles away.