

# Brothers

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ABOUT A YEAR AND A HALF after Mitch fell, he decided on a comeback climb. Understandably, his wife was less than enthusiastic about it.

Everyone agreed the fall should have killed Mitch or, worse, made a quadriplegic of him. It happened on an easy cliff in the Sandia Mountains. He had three pieces of protection placed, but they zippered out. He had broken his neck, a shoulder blade, an ankle, and a dozen ribs. He wore a halo brace with screws anchored in his skull for months. At night he couldn't sleep more than two hours before the brace woke him up.

His wife, Jan, had to bathe him and wipe his bottom when he used the toilet. Actually, Jan wasn't his wife. He'd needed a reason for being excommunicated from his church, which was Mormon, and living with Jan without the benefit of matrimony sufficed. However, they both counted on getting married sooner or later. So she gave him his baths and wiped his bottom.

He tried to assure Jan that the comeback climb wouldn't be technical. Someone had told him that you could get to the top of the highest peak in Wyoming by a scramble if you knew the route. That was what he had in mind. He wanted to get on with his ambition to climb the highest summit in each of the fifty states. The problem was that none of his Albuquerque friends were interested in driving so far for a scramble. He told Jan he would be okay going solo. In fact, he needed a solo outing of some sort. He needed to see where his life was headed, what with technical climbing being out of the question. But Jan said someone had to go with him. If nobody else went with him, she would have to, an impossible eventuality because her idea of a vigorous workout was a half hour in a gym.

Against his better judgment he let her phone his stepbrother Bernie in Salt Lake City, whom he hadn't seen in twenty years. Bernie, who was a total Mormon, was properly skeptical of getting involved in this little adventure. He said he was afraid of heights. Jan said the point of a scramble was that you didn't expose yourself to dangerous falls. Bernie then said he didn't have the stamina for it. However, his wife Carol got on the other phone while this conversation was going on and said he did too

have the stamina; he was a scoutmaster and just last summer had taken thirteen boys to King's Peak, the highest point in Utah. Bernie briefly considered raising yet another objection, which was that he was afraid of being alone, and as far as he could see, a five-day trek in the Wind River Mountains with a stepbrother from whom he had been estranged for decades wouldn't be much different from being there alone. However, he was ashamed of this phobia, which seemed not just juvenile but downright infantile, and he couldn't mention it to Carol. So her assertion that he had been to King's Peak with thirteen scouts just last summer clenched the matter, and he reluctantly agreed to go along with Mitch.

Mitch and Jan drove to Salt Lake on a Sunday. He told her she didn't need to go to the trouble. She said she didn't trust him enough to let him go alone; once on the road, he could very well change his mind and head for the Wind River Mountains without Bernie. Mitch protested her suspicion, but not with much vigor because the thought had occurred to him more than once during the preceding week.

Bernie and Carol took them in, Carol with more enthusiasm than Bernie. Obviously, Jan and Carol had already struck up a warm friendship over the phone. Jan left Mitch to unpack in the guestroom while she went to the kitchen to help Carol get dinner. During their after-dinner talk, Jan reminded Bernie over and over that he had to keep a close eye on Mitch and not let him do something foolish, given the fact that he was still so stove up from the accident that he couldn't raise his hands much higher than his head. Bernie promised to do as requested, falling into a sullen resignation because, being a total Mormon, he knew he'd have to honor his promise. As for Carol, she had been on a spiritual high for days, marveling over the prospect of Bernie being the instrumentality by which his lapsed brother might be induced to rejoin the church and marry his gentile girlfriend and of course convert her and then take her to the temple and be sealed to her for time and eternity. Glowing with good will, she had let Bernie have sex every night during the past week, a frequency unheard of since the early years of their marriage. She was worried that it might sap his strength for the climb, but he said, no, it would actually make him stronger. According to an article he had read in a chiropractor's office, a man who was emptied of his regenerative fluids had an improved ability of arms, legs, and lungs.

In bed that night in the guestroom, Mitch grumbled about how complicated a simple climb had become. Having been raised a Mormon, he could see clear as day which direction Bernie and Carol were headed. He warned Jan to be on her guard during the coming week. Carol would tow her to Temple Square and also undoubtedly to that building that used to be Hotel Utah where he had heard that a film on the history of Mormonism was pumped without cost and at high pressure to unsuspecting gentile tourists.

"You need to check yourself over pretty carefully every night," he said, "to see if you are becoming infected with her testimony. It's contagious as small pox."

"What's a testimony?" she asked.

"It's a witness that you have had a message from the other world. Mark my word. Carol has had a big one."

"They both seem like awfully decent people," Jan said. "I can't figure out why you've been hiding them from me all this time."

Well before dawn Mitch and Bernie loaded their gear into Mitch's car and headed for Wyoming. Neither of them found it comfortable to be locked in a car with the other. The last thing either wanted to talk about was their years spent together in rural Idaho. Eventually, the silence got to Bernie, and he began giving minor details about his eleven grandchildren, whose photographs Mitch was already familiar with because they covered a lot of wall and table space in Bernie's house. Mitch didn't reciprocate, though he did have a couple of kids by his first marriage, a son and a daughter, both respectful and affectionate toward Mitch, married with growing families, both doing the Mormon thing full time, thanks mostly to their mother and also to their stepfather, who had turned out to be a pretty decent fellow.

When they had got onto the high plains of Wyoming, still heading east into the early sun, they could see the Uinta Mountains off to the south just across the border in Utah. Bernie said he had been taking boy scouts to the Uintas every summer for twelve years. He admitted it was a scary business to be a scoutmaster. Boys of that age didn't think; they operated on impulse, the more unintelligent the better as far as they were concerned. You never knew when one of them might try scaling a cliff or swimming across an ice-cold lake. Some scoutmasters weren't so smart either. He knew one who had carried a dozen hymn books in his pack on a ten-mile trek so his scouts could sing at the campfire. Another allowed himself to be tied to a tree by his scouts in what was supposed to be a game; the boys then hiked into a nearby town to hang out all evening with girls at a drive-in.

East of Fort Bridger they left the freeway and took a state highway headed north. In time their road began to follow the Green River. The river was slow moving and of a brown, muddy color that made people ask why it was called the Green River. Cottonwood trees lined its banks, and grazing cattle dotted its wide grassy bottom. To the east rose the wild, rugged wall of the Wind River range. An hour later, they stopped in Pinedale and bought some freeze-dried dinners at a small sporting goods store. While they were paying, Bernie told the cashier, a young woman who looked like a granola cruncher from Yosemite or the Cascades, that they were brothers.

"That depends on what you mean by brothers," Mitch said to her.

"His dad and my mom got married. So we spent some time on the same farm. That was a long time ago."

On the way out they passed a display of rock climbing gear. Mitch pointed out a spring-loaded cam, a device with tiny cogs and looped cable. "That's the kind that pulled out and let me fall," he said.

The cashier was still watching. "My fall is the reason this fellow is with me," Mitch explained to her, jerking a thumb toward Bernie. "My wife figures somebody ought to be along to keep an eye on me even if he can't climb."

"I don't apologize for being afraid of heights," Bernie said.

They got into Mitch's car and continued driving north along the river, which paralleled the mountain range closely. Mitch pointed out that somewhere on its barren, jagged crest was an indistinguishable prominence called Gannett Peak, their ultimate destination.

They were both thinking about what Mitch had said to the cashier. Mitch was thinking he had been unnecessarily blunt. He granted it showed insecurity on his part. It had something to do with Jan and Carol warming up to each other. As for Bernie, he was feeling snubbed and angry. A backpack trip with the scouts was an ordeal. He looked forward only to its end. This trek promised to be worse—five days of brutal labor, entirely unrewarding in and of itself, to escort a man who didn't want escorting to an elevation so nondescript that you had to take the word of the geologists that it was sixty or eighty or a hundred feet higher than the elevations around it.

After a while Bernie said, "My dad adopted you. Your mom adopted me. We have two sisters in common. It seems like to me that makes us brothers."

"I never regarded your dad as my dad," Mitch said.

"Yes, I know," Bernie said. "You called him Jim."

"I went to a lawyer six or seven years ago and said, I want to repudiate an adoption. I don't want it down on the records that I am the legal son of Jim Lindmuller. The lawyer said, We can change your name easy enough. What do you want to change it to? I said, To Taylor, which is my real dad's name."

"I knew about that," Bernie said.

"So now my name is Mitch Taylor again," Mitch went on. "No disrespect meant to you."

"No, of course not."

About an hour later they got to a trailhead at the end of the road. They strapped on their packs and headed into the mountains along the wide, deep canyon of the Green River. They crossed meadows and went through stands of lodge pole pines and aspens. There were moose and elk droppings in the trail—also a good deal of horse dung. Sometimes the trail came close to the wide, rushing river, which did seem green

here, a milky greenish color probably derived from the grinding of boulder fields and glaciers. Bernie complained about his aching back. He said he knew his shoulders wouldn't stop hurting till he took off the pack. He said he had never started a backpack trip without wondering why he was doing it. Mitch for his part was trying hard to recapture the old euphoria of a climb. It ought to be turning on almost any moment, he kept telling himself. In the meantime, his shoulders were hurting so much he considered turning back. No pain, no gain, he began to tell himself, repeating the mantra of weight lifters. It stood to reason his back would hurt less on his next trip. This trip would condition him. Furthermore, you shouldn't expect to make a summit without some cost. That was what climbing was about.

Early evening they made camp on a bench above the river. They heated a couple of the freeze-dried dinners over Mitch's tiny camp stove. Mitch scowled while he ate. Camp food was all pretty much tasteless. However, you had to eat to keep up your strength. He watched while Bernie opened the pop-top lid on a small can of diced fruit. Bernie offered him half. Mitch shook his head. "You hauled it; you eat it," he said. There was an issue here. He had disapproved when he saw Bernie putting the cans in his pack on Sunday night. "Too much weight," he had said. "It isn't worth the expenditure of energy required to carry it."

They both had a miserable night, lying in a narrow tent with a half-inch of cellulite foam between their sleeping bags and the ground. Mitch groaned sometimes when he turned over. "Let me just ask you," Bernie said on one of these occasions. "What's so important about getting to the top of a mountain?"

"That's a good question," Mitch said. He admitted climbing was a strange business. If you couldn't make the top, you might just as well stay home. He talked about the first ascent of Denali, attributed to an Episcopal minister named Hudson Stuck. In 1913 Stuck and three partners arrived on the south summit of Denali, from which they could clearly see a fir pole planted on the lower north summit three years earlier by the most improbable climbers in the history of mountaineering, the so-called Mt. McKinley sourdoughs. Four miners, spurred on by a bet made in a Fairbanks saloon, had toiled across the Muldrow glacier and established a camp around 11,000 feet. From that camp, in a single epic day, three of the miners climbed more than 9,000 feet to the north summit, unfurled a flag on a fir pole they had carried, and returned. But it didn't count. They hadn't made the true summit.

The next morning, Mitch and Bernie shouldered their packs and, without the benefit of a trail, turned up a lateral canyon named Tourist Creek, which proved to be seriously misnamed. Its steep slopes consisted of gigantic boulders fallen from sheer granite cliffs. Angular and multifaceted, the boulders overlay one another in utter confusion, leaving no

shred of soil anywhere visible. Many were as large as a car. Some were as big as a dump truck. Weighted by their full packs, Mitch and Bernie levered themselves upward over the boulders with aching muscles and gasping breath. Footing was at best precarious, on sharp edges or tiny projections that accommodated only the toe of a boot. Mitch, mumbling "No pain, no gain," moaned every time he stretched for a hold above his head. Bernie was panting hoarsely. This was, he saw, no hike but an exhausting climb only a little short of technical. Certainly it gave a new meaning to the word *scramble*. He found it helpful to watch Mitch's foot and hand moves. Every few minutes he was faced by a wide gap between boulders, requiring either that he consume five or ten laborious minutes climbing off one boulder and onto another or that he accept the exposure—the empty space between himself and the rocks fifteen or twenty or thirty feet below—and leap heedlessly across the gap. It gave him no pleasure to realize that more and more he was resorting to this last measure. It seemed a gesture of desperation, a serious compromise of good sense.

Noon found them perhaps two-thirds the way up the canyon. They sat with their feet dangling over a small boulder and ate a lunch consisting of cheese, crackers, and lemonade made from powder.

"Going back to this thing about us not being brothers," Bernie said, "Jan seems to think we are."

"Yes, and she thinks scoutmasters are mountaineers, which they aren't. So she just might be mistaken on this other matter too. No disrespect meant."

"No, of course not."

"On this thing about your dad," Mitch said. "I was nine when Mom married Jim. I already had a dad, and he had walked out on me. I had very complicated feelings. On the one hand, I needed a dad; on the other hand, I felt like Mom had given up on my dad too soon. I kept hoping he would come back. He'd been a nice guy. I can remember a lot of nice things he did for me. He took me places, did things with me. So when Mom said Jim was going to adopt me, I protested. Then Mom took out her twelve-gauge shotgun, so to speak, and fired both barrels. She said my dad had signed off on Jim adopting me in return for being free of child support. I was young, but I wasn't stupid. I knew I had been sold. I'm not claiming I have been a good daddy myself. But at least I paid child support, and my kids saw me at vacation time."

They got up, shouldered their packs, and began clambering over the boulders again.

"I think my dad actually did love you," Bernie said.

Mitch turned to face Bernie. "Get real!" he said. "Do you remember that year you and I were supposed to stay on the homestead all summer and not come into town except on Sunday? I was fourteen and you were ten or eleven."

"I remember."

"Jim said, 'Mitch is in charge. Bernie, you mind him.' About the third or fourth day we were out there, we went into the pasture to catch the work horses so I could hitch them up and mow alfalfa. I asked you to carry one of the bridles. Just on principle. You refused. I thrust one of the bridles into your hands. You dropped it. I picked it up and hung it over your shoulder. You pushed it off. I tied the reins to your wrists. You collapsed and lay on the ground. I dragged you a few yards. You were howling and cursing. So I gave up and took the bridles and somehow cornered the horses without your help and went to work, mowing hay. When I got back to the shack at noon, you were gone. You had walked into town even though Jim had said we weren't to do that. Nobody showed up to tell me anything about it till Sunday morning when Jim drove out to take me into town for church. I said, 'Is Bernie coming back out with me tonight?' Jim said, 'No, and by the way, it isn't your privilege to discipline Bernie. That's my job.' And I was out there the whole summer by myself."

"I was in the wrong," Bernie said.

"I don't blame you," Mitch said. "Jim is the one who was in the wrong for putting us out there in the first place. And my mother, for letting him do it."

"No," Bernie insisted, "from start to finish, my behavior was inexcusable."

Inexcusable yet inevitable, Bernie admitted to himself. He remembered all too clearly the aloneness of the homestead. During his waking hours he'd had a strange impulse to run. There was something terrifying, something imminently lethal, about isolation. He hadn't walked back into town the day he'd abandoned Mitch. He had run. But it wasn't something he could tell Mitch about, or anyone else for that matter. It seemed too shameful, too infantile.

Late in the afternoon they turned southeastward out of Tourist Creek, taking a side gorge that was a little less steep and offered stretches where grass alternated with boulders. Toward evening they arrived at a crescent-shaped lake perhaps an eighth of a mile wide and a half mile long, which stood, according to Mitch's altimeter, at 11,000 feet. They made camp with difficulty, there being only sparse spots of grass in a terrain composed mostly of rock. As they heated water for supper, the clouds that had covered the sky most of the day parted and a late sun came out. To the southeast stood high final peaks on the Continental Divide with snowfields and glaciers, Gannett itself being still out of sight. For supper they shared an unpalatable freeze-dried meal of potatoes, beef, and gravy. Bernie opened another can of diced fruit and offered half of it to Mitch.

"No way," said Mitch. "What are you trying to do? Break down

my morals? You don't bring canned goods on a climb. It's a matter of principle."

"You have a strange sense of principle," Bernie said. "Considering that you got yourself excommunicated from the church."

"That was a matter of principle too," Mitch said. "As you know, I was sealed to Jim and my mother for time and eternity when they got married in the temple. So after I changed my name back to Taylor, I began inquiring how you go about getting unsealed from someone. It turned out the easiest way was to get excommunicated from the church. That undoes all your ordinances and sealings. So I did it. I began shacking up with Jan, and my bishop obliged by holding a church court which I didn't show up at."

"I would think you'd at least want to be sealed to your kids," said Bernie.

"I never was sealed to them. I don't belong to anybody. That's the way I feel. I'm out there all alone."

By the time they had finished supper, Mitch was starting to feel good. He was pleased with the hard scramble up Tourist Creek. If your body hurt as much as his did, it had to be good for you. This wasn't a trek for couch potatoes. He could see he wasn't finished, not by a long shot. He wasn't sixty yet, way too young to give up real climbing. He was starting to feel that Bernie's presence was irrelevant. If he couldn't add anything to the climb, at least he couldn't detract much from it either.

Mitch looked out on the lake, a purple mirror beneath a darkening sky. A single planet burned in the cloudless west. Talus slopes of jumbled boulders, fallen from looming cliffs, edged the lake on either side. Sparse patches of grass showed here and there. The only sign of animal life was a few flies—no birds, no mosquitoes, no fish circles spreading on the breathless lake. You couldn't be depressed in a place like this. Things were uncomplicated here. Simple gestures, clear and unambiguous, kept you alive.

Unlike Mitch, Bernie hadn't cheered up. The stark, unadorned landscape depressed him. He longed for Carol. About now he should have been helping clear the dinner table, carrying the dishes to her while she loaded the dishwasher. He was feeling little twinges of the old hysteria over being alone. It didn't help much to be in the presence of a morose, uncommunicative fugitive from righteous living like Mitch. It struck Bernie that this must be a foretaste of the Telestial Kingdom, that unhappy place where the unvaliant among the Mormons and the wicked among the gentiles will dwell throughout all eternity. He saw clearly now how it would be there: barren, unfurnished, sterile, populated by souls who took no comfort in one another's presence, who lived, that is, in effectual isolation forever and ever.



"I don't understand why you would deliberately get yourself unsealed from your family," Bernie said while they were preparing to get into their sleeping bags. "Especially from your mother and our sisters. You share their blood."

"If I didn't feel like part of the family on earth, why should I feel like part of it in eternity?" Mitch said.

"Well, what about Jan?" Bernie insisted. "Don't you want to be with her in eternity?"

"You bet. I plan on it. I lucked out when I ran into Jan. I'm whopped on her. She's whopped on me. We've agreed after we die we'll look each other up."

"You can't just look each other up."

"What do you mean we can't?" Mitch said. "What's to stop us?"

"Because you're not married in the temple. You're not sealed for time and eternity."

Mitch rustled about in his bag, turning this way and that, groaning a little as he sought a comfortable position. "I hope you don't know what you're talking about," he muttered. "Because if you do, the Big Fellow upstairs is a whole lot meaner than I had any idea."

Somewhere late in the night they both got out of the tent to urinate. There had been spatters of rain on the tent earlier. Now the sky was broken, with vast patches of luminous, star-studded sky showing.

While they were settling into their bags again, Mitch said, "I looked up my dad—my real dad—a couple of times before he died, which was about fifteen years ago. I knew his name of course, but I didn't have an address. I didn't even know what state he lived in. So any time I traveled, I'd check the local phone book, in airports, gas stations, motels. One night in a Motel 6 in Rapid City, South Dakota, I looked in the phone book and there he was. I phoned him right then. It was eleven o'clock. 'It's you!' he said. 'Well, come on over.' So I went. Didn't get to bed till two or three in the morning. He wasn't living with anybody. He'd run through four or five wives. Last time I saw him, he was dying of kidney failure from diabetes. A nurse phoned me from the hospital, and I flew in from Albuquerque. He held my hand and cried, and when I said, 'I'll look you up on the other side,' he said, 'I'd like that.' 'Yeah,' I said, 'we'll get to know each other.' 'Let's do it,' he said. 'I'll count on it.' " Mitch was weighing the odds. Could God be so mean, so punctilious and worried about protocol, that he wouldn't let people associate with each other in eternity even if they wanted to unless they had knuckled under to the church and gone through all the ceremonies and made all the vows and kept all the commandments, all four or five thousand of them?

After a while he said, "I guess I don't believe you on that business of being sealed for time and eternity. It's a bunch of hocus-pocus. God wouldn't be that malicious."

Bernie squirmed about, trying unsuccessfully to fit his body around a couple of rocks located in just the wrong places. Mitch was the one who was in the wrong, of course. It wasn't a matter of God being unforgiving; it was a matter of God giving some simple rules. Obey and you get the blessings; disobey and you don't. Nonetheless, things did seem unreal to Bernie just at this moment—the dark tent, Mitch's occasional moaning, the vast rocky wilderness outside, indifferent to human plans and human desires. Sometimes Bernie believed God's emanations filled the entire universe. You couldn't go anywhere God wasn't. But this place made him wonder. Maybe God let the universe tend itself, ruled by natural law, and when it was time to save you, he'd send out a search and find you and bring you home.

About an hour later they got up and fixed breakfast in the dark. Soon after dawn they left camp with emergency gear in their packs in case they had to bivouac. They trudged past the lake and up another narrow, winding valley filled with jumbled rock and an occasional patch of grass. From the end of that valley they could at last see Gannett. They went on, laboring over a half-dozen old moraines and across tundra littered by boulders from a long departed glacier. Midmorning, they started up the final crest, traversing a snowfield, which differed from a glacier, as Mitch informed Bernie, in that it didn't migrate and therefore presumably harbored no crevasses. Beyond the snowfield, they angled across a talus slope toward a cliff towering just under the final peak. Mitch was convinced he could see an easy way up the cliff.

"Right over there to the left," he kept saying. "Not bad at all. A pretty good scramble, actually. Thirty, forty yards of touchy stuff, and then we're free for the top."

Bernie eyed it over—a kind of fractured, rocky staircase that deepened while it rose through the cliff. "That doesn't look like a scramble to me," he said. "That looks dangerous."

He sat on a big rock while Mitch looked for a better route. When he came back, Mitch said there wasn't a better one. "It's this or nothing," he said. "I admit it's tricky. However, no mountaineer would rope up for this chimney. It's just a scramble. Just do exactly what I do and you'll be okay."

He started up the staircase, placing his hands and feet carefully. There were plenty of good holds, but of course if you happened to slip, you'd tumble all the way to the bottom of the staircase.

"I can't do it," Bernie called up to him. "I told you I was afraid of heights."

Mitch backed down and sat on a rock beside Bernie. "Guess it's turn-around time," he said morosely. "It's pretty painful anyhow, reaching up for those handholds. Though I was doing it as you just saw."

They sat for maybe fifteen minutes, eating lunch. The sun was very hot and they both slathered on another layer of sunblock.

"What if I went on alone?" Mitch said. "You'd wait here. I could do it up and back in about two hours."

Bernie didn't answer. He thought about the homestead in Idaho. It had been six miles from town. He didn't know how many miles this place was from a town. He did know it wasn't a place for breaking into a mindless run, which was what he felt like doing just now.

"So what about it?" Mitch repeated. "Are you okay with me making a go for it alone?"

"That'd worry me," Bernie said.

"Nothing to it," Mitch said. "I keep telling you, it's just a scramble."

"What'll I tell Jan?"

"No need to tell her. What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"It'd really worry me," Bernie said.

They sat another ten minutes or so. Mitch was again inclined to concede. It wasn't just a matter of pain when he had to stretch his arms for a handhold. His muscles were only about half as strong as formerly. He wasn't sure he could rely on them in a pinch. But then he began thinking about how close the summit was and how he would go on for the rest of his life wanting to kick himself in the butt for not having the grit to give it a real try. He got up and shouldered his pack. "I'm going to do it," he said. "Sorry, Bernie. You wait right here. Have yourself a nice nap."

He started up the staircase, whistling cheerfully. About a hundred feet up, he shouted, "See you in a couple of hours." Then he disappeared.

Bernie sat in the shade at the base of the cliff, wondering whether climbers climb because they want to escape their social obligations. Mitch had got what he wanted, which was to be alone. As for himself, he had wasted three days and was fated to waste two more just to find out the fellow he had always thought of as a brother was as distant and alien from him as a man who had been picked out at random from the general population.

Below him stretched a jumbled slope of boulders and beyond that a vast gleaming snowfield and beyond that a narrow, rocky valley with a couple of small lakes and barren cliffs on either side, topped by a skyline of jagged, irregular rock. No trees, no shrubs, no meadows. No butterflies, no bees, no birds. Just lichens. It was true, he now noticed for the first time. On all hands, the rock, close and distant, was covered by a grey-green scale of lichens. A strange despair came over him. How could you identify with lichens? How could you take any comfort, find any shred of fellow feeling, in such a dry, thin veneer of textured color upon otherwise bare rock? He noted, with a touch of curiosity, that the old fear was accelerating inside him, like a vehicle getting up to speed. Solitude exerted a pressure like an atmosphere. He could feel it on his skin. He wanted to run. Just where was unclear.

It occurred to Bernie that, if he hurried, he still had time to catch up with Mitch. He got to his feet and shouldered his pack. He studied the staircase a moment. He decided he could manage it. The trick would be to place his hands and feet on those convenient ledges without looking down, because if he looked down, he would be finished. He'd do something like go rigid or have spasms.

Once he was at it, the climbing seemed easy. He went up and up. Euphoria came over him. But pretty soon he realized that holds for his hands and feet were becoming harder to find because the stairway was fusing with a band of vertical rock. He had apparently got past the point where Mitch had left the staircase. He decided to retreat. Looking down, he was dizzyed by the empty air. He kept climbing, reasoning that he would top the cliff at any moment and there would be Mitch heading toward Gannett.

After four or five advances, he saw that the granite was bulging into an overhang. He could see he was done for. He clung in a stupor of terror, the toes of his boots resting on a four-inch lip, his left hand cupping a doughnut-shaped knob, the fingers of his right hand bending into an inch wide crack. Warmth spread around his crotch and he realized he had lost bladder control.

About an hour later Mitch made the summit. The summit itself wasn't much to look at, something of a round table of rock rising above the jagged, serrated ridge that stretched away in either direction. The full circle view was spectacular: rugged mountain ranges and vast shimmering plains rimmed by a horizon mysteriously vague in its indication of where earth ended and sky began. On the summit was a gallon can covered by a flat rock, inside of which were a pencil and a register of persons who had recently been here. Mitch added his name to the list. He wasn't ecstatic. He was too tired, too full of aches and pains, for that. But he was satisfied. The old man wasn't down and out yet. He just might make it back to technical climbing. He'd try for it; that was for sure.

He sat on an edge, dangling his feet over empty space and mulling possibilities while he ate an energy bar and took a drink of water. There was a saying: if you keep climbing long enough, you die on the mountain. If only it were guaranteed, he wouldn't give the matter a second thought. You couldn't ask for a better way to die. But what if it put you in a wheelchair? What if it sentenced you to ten years in a quadriplegic's bed?

All of which got him to thinking how Jan had so patiently given him baths and wiped his butt for three months, and that brought him around to thinking about the next life and the possibility that God would say the following to him on Judgment Day: *You had plenty of warning; you knew you had to get sealed to Jan in the temple in order to have her here; as it is, you have to go off with that bunch of strangers over there and spend eternity milling*

*around among them, and don't try anything funny like trying to form some new friendships and love relationships, because if I get word you're up to that, I'll send in the immigration officers and transfer you to a new location.*

The climb down proved slower and more risky than the ascent. Mitch dropped off the main ridge through the rubble of a declivity. At the bottom of that, he got onto a precarious, foot-wide ledge, along which he sidestepped, gratefully seizing handholds if they were available. There was about a hundred-foot drop here. The trickiest part was the transition off the ledge into the staircase. He had to admit it was a technical situation. No question of it, he'd have welcomed a belay here. It was lucky Bernie hadn't come along. But, sure enough, he made it safe and sound into the staircase, which left him feeling much more euphoric than he had on top. It was true; the old fellow still had some grit in him.

About then he happened to look upward and was stunned by what he saw. In fact, he had to ask himself whether he was hallucinating. It was Bernie, maybe forty feet above, hung on sheer rock.

"What are you doing up there?" he shouted.

Bernie tried to answer. The sound wasn't much more than a whimper. He longed to let go and get it over with. His hands seemed to be of another mind. They gripped ferociously. They seemed frozen into position. They had long since turned numb. He heard Mitch say, "I'm coming up. Hang on." What seemed a complete thought broke the blank paralysis of his mind. It was that he had to tell Mitch about the file marked *Important* in his desk at work. It would inform Carol about the insurance and retirement. Mitch was saying something more but Bernie couldn't focus on what it signified. He was being enticed, seduced, by that longing to let go and get it over with. It seemed a sensible, peaceful solution to his dilemma. He marveled that his hands couldn't grasp that fact. It was as if someone else controlled them.

He could hear Mitch again, clearly now, saying, "I can see a good hold for your left foot. Get your weight onto your right leg and let your left foot down easy. I'll tell you when to plant it. Then I'll tell you where to place your hands."

"It's no good," Bernie said. "I'm finished. There's a file in my desk at work. Bottom drawer, way to the back. Tell Carol about it. It'll tell her about the insurance and retirement."

"Don't be stupid," Mitch said. "Get your weight on your right leg, then lower that left foot. Just take it easy. Keep your toe in contact with the rock."

Bernie didn't move, and Mitch repeated the directions. He still didn't move. "Can't you get into motion?" Mitch said. "It's only a couple of hours till dark."

"I keep wanting to," Bernie said. "But my body won't cooperate."

Mitch began to rethink this attempt at a rescue. He wasn't sure how

long he himself could cling to his present hold, which wasn't as secure as Bernie's position. His upper back was a throbbing mass of pain. They were on epic rock, the kind only zealots and suicidal heroes attempt without protection—and climbers of that sort, having made it up, would rappel down or find a safer route elsewhere, there being few things more certain to produce disaster in the entire sport of mountaineering than downclimbing sheer rock.

He considered the ethics of the situation. No one could fault him now for climbing down. He had made an honest—and highly risky—effort to save Bernie. The longer he waited the more likely Bernie was to fall and take Mitch down with him. It didn't make sense for both of them to die.

Strangely, Mitch himself now seemed in a kind of paralysis. Instead of starting down, he studied the granite about four inches from his eyes. If you looked close, you saw that granite was composed of crystal-like particles tending toward a hue of bluish grey. Some climbers spoke of intimacy with the rock, as if rock loved to be climbed. They talked that way at parties and in bars. Thinking about that kind of vain, pretentious, and unknowing talk emptied Mitch of emotion. He wondered what some of those armchair mountaineers would recommend in the present crisis. How would they feel about abandoning a brother who had gone catatonic on a cliff? How would they feel about waiting in the dark near the base of the staircase for the inevitable rattle of rock announcing that Bernie had at last lost his hold, followed by the sickening thump of his body at the bottom?

It seemed that, as a bare minimum, he should say some kind of formal goodbye to Bernie before he started down—tell him, for example, that, yes, he would convey his message to Carol and also that—and this was a surprising sentiment on Mitch's part, something he had had no premonition of before this instant—he did appreciate those years they had lived together in the same house and actually did regard him as a brother despite his hostile talk in that sporting goods store in Pinedale.

"Where I went wrong," Mitch said, abstractly and to no purpose, since he assumed Bernie had shut off his hearing, "was by splitting up our party when I decided to make a try for the peak. The rule is you don't split up a party in the mountains."

"Things went wrong," Bernie said, "because I didn't know we weren't brothers. I should have stayed home. I thought maybe we would get to know each other again."

"It's too late now for this to do any good," Mitch said. "But I've changed my mind, if you'll let me say so. Of course you are my brother. I'm never going to forgive myself for bringing you out here just to get you killed."

He could hear a strange sound. He realized it was Bernie sobbing.

"Do you want to try lowering that left foot?" Mitch asked. "Get your weight on your right leg. Keep your toe in contact with the rock. I'll tell you when it's reached the new hold. Then I'll tell you where to place your hands and your other foot."

It took ten minutes to talk Bernie into completing the move.

"You wouldn't be able to speed things up a little, would you?" Mitch asked after he had given directions for the next move.

"Maybe I can," Bernie said. "I'll try."