

PLAYING ICARUS ON MT. WASHINGTON

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Tuesday night, June 27th, five of us gathered at the Barley Mill Pub in Portland to finish planning our climbing trip to Smith Rock. Everyone was eager for it. Something made me think that this trip would be one of the times I'd look back on with nostalgia in thirty years; like, the "Good Old Days" when I was climbing with Kurt, Rodney, Caroline, and Brad.

Kurt and I had wanted to climb on Mt. Washington for a year, so we decided to climb the mountain Wednesday afternoon, then meet the others at the Smith Rock bivouac Wednesday night. We told them of what we wanted to do, casually. We did not say, "So, if we don't make it back, call the Deschutes Sheriff right away."

Wednesday morning, we got lost getting to the freeway, and the drive to the trailhead at Big Lake Campground took much longer than we thought. Even though this was a week after the solstice and it wouldn't be dark until 10, we did not have enough time to do the climb and return to the car. So Kurt said, "Let's take the sleeping bags." This was a deviation from what we had told our friends, but that had not been a written-in-stone itinerary, and we didn't expect them to worry too much about us.

We followed the climber's trail until it disappeared under the snowpack. The pine forest was thick enough to block any view of the mountain or any other landmarks, but we were moving uphill, and uphill only goes to one place. After a while, the trees thinned and grew shorter, and looking through them, we found ourselves on the lower slopes of the North Ridge. This is a gentle slope of consolidated pumice that brings you to the steep, "solid," summit pinnacle. Here we took our first break, as we had left Big Lake's mosquitoes behind and were feeling the thinner air.

The sky was perfectly clear, and the temperature was a pleasant surprise. In Portland it had been hot, but at this elevation it felt 75° and perfect, with a mild breeze moving across the ridge from the west. This was my third trip to Mt. Washington, and the first to have such good weather. On a Mazama climb two summers ago, it had been sunny and breezy on the trail, but when we reached the ridge we saw thin clouds moving over the top at gale speeds. It was a beautiful sight, the clouds spilling and swirling over the top, but to be in winds so strong in steep terrain is dangerous. My second trip was with Kurt, but it rained at Big Lake, and we had bailed for sunny Smith Rock.

The plan from the car was doing a harder route to the summit that evening and returning to our sleeping bags, which we could leave at the base of the pinnacle. However, the altitude slowed us down while climbing the ridge, and we found a flat area to camp on at the base of the pinnacle. The view at this camp was truly eye-popping. The mountain fell away from us to the east and west. To our north lay Three-Fingered Jack and Mt. Jefferson, both of whose pointed summits from this new angle looked impossibly sharp. To the east, we looked down at the chasm separating us from Little Mt. Washington, and out over Black Crater, Black Butte, and out to Smith Rock, just visible on the plain. To the south, of course, lay our summit, exciting us for tomorrow's adventure. Lined up to the west lay a span of lava fields, the Western Cascades, the Willamette Valley, the Coast Range, and the setting sun.

We really should have had a camera, but I won't forget how it looked. While we ate our dinner, the sun threw long, creeping, reaching shadows off the backs of the peaks and across the plain. The snows of Mt. Jefferson became a deep pink, and the sun settled into some

clouds out on the ocean, turning them into molten glass. Such a magical moment! We settled into our sleeping bags behind the windbreak of rocks we'd built, and slept well beneath the ceiling of stars.

Thursday, I awoke about an hour before sunrise and saw a super-thin crescent moon sliding up from the horizon into the red of the sky. But, either through atmospheric effects or Relativity, the moon was a lop-sided curve. I said, "The moon looks like a Swoosh!" Kurt informed me on how Nike was sponsoring the man in the moon.

When the sun came up, we crawled out of our sleeping bags, had breakfast, and sorted what we'd need for the day. We took his 9 mm rope (carried in the pack), my 10.5 mm rope, our helmets, and a mixture of protection gear. I wore my usual Cool-Max long sleeve, stretch fleece shorts, and my bright-orange cycling jacket. The matching pants went into the pack with a 2-liter of water, some breakfast bars, and my first aid pack (tape, bandages, blister cushions, lighter). Kurt's water and supplies also went in the pack. I gave myself a coat of sunscreen, hoping it would be enough for the whole day. The sleeping bags, my compass with its sighting mirror, my headlamp and extra batteries, the extra sunscreen, Kurt's bivy sack, and his pack were left behind on the ridge.

Our guidebook, *Oregon High*, described several routes for the West Face, from 5.6 to 5.10d in difficulty. The route *Central Pillar* is described as "steep, exposed, and a joy to climb." Its given rating was 5.8+. I had been leading Traditional 5.9+ at Broughton's Bluff, which might be 5.10- other places, so I thought this route would be the right difficulty—well within my capabilities, yet enough to make me think. It would be a rock climb instead of a scramble.

We traversed rightward around the base of the pinnacle to the start of the route. The West Face rose up out of the moderately-angled scree slope which ran all the way down to the plain. Here we had another look at the book and were puzzled. In a photo in our book, the higher part of the route was drawn as a continuous diagonal to the left, but in the text it was written as following a crack up and left, but then moving straight up. We craned our necks and thought that the rock towards the left looked more solid, further above. We put in a piece to protect Kurt from falling down the slope, and he put me on belay.

At last, I was again climbing Alpine Rock. Not only would I have the mental and physical challenges of rock climbing, but I would be in an incredible setting. Climbing a 25-foot crag is fun, but you don't gain a view as you go. I had been looking forward to this for a long time, practicing the last two years with the protection devices and learning how to climb cracks. I knew this was going to be an awesome day—good climbing, good company, and great scenery (from the summit we would have the terrific view of North Sister).

I climbed the first 90-foot pitch, which was blocky and straightforward. About halfway, a left-behind hex was stuck in a crack, and I was able to work it free. A prize, my lucky day! At the start of the left-diagonal crack, I arrived at someone's rappel slings, stretched horizontally between a piton and a large block. Not wanting to use the old webbing, I looped a Spectra sling around the block and over to the piton, equalized that to a good nut placement, and clipped myself to this anchor. Kurt put his rock shoes on and climbed up. The ledge I was on was big enough for just me, so I clove-hitched his end of the rope into my anchor when he was standing below me. He put in two more nuts, angled downward, and clipped them separately to his harness.

When Kurt put me back on belay, for a first protection point, I reached over and clipped the climbing rope to the sling between the block and the piton. I announced, "Climbing," and moved up the diagonal crack. The crack was like an undercling, and my feet were below on footholds on the face. I set a small nut, a small cam, and one or two other pieces in the crack as I went up. I came to a spot where the crack turned upwards. Irritatingly, water dripped over

my holds from somewhere above, making the holds slippery. There was a large flake on the face to my left, and I started moving towards it, planning to continue leftward on the face.

Suddenly, I slipped from the holds. I fell past the protection pieces. Instead of catching me, they burst from the brittle rock. Rock shards slashed at Kurt's face. I fell past him. I felt a short tug on the rope. The anchor-pieces pulled out. Kurt was yanked off the cliff. I was in free-fall, feeling myself accelerating towards the ground. Two thoughts were all I had time for: "This is how people die," followed quickly by, "This could be how I die." Kurt tumbled and bounced off the rock, thinking, "I don't want to die. I'm too young to die."

With a crash, I found myself on snow on the ground. Another crash, and Kurt was beside me, the rope piled on top of him. I was in a sitting position with my lower right leg bent sideways, telling me it was broken even before the pain told me. I was really surprised to be alive. Our snowfield was a 20-foot-wide skirt across the top of the scree slope. We had hit it to break a 100-foot fall. After a minute of catching our breaths, Kurt told me that both of his legs felt broken, and I told him about my break.

I was really shaken. I shouted at myself, "That was so stupid!" over and over. This was just referring to climbing on brittle rock, for my other mistakes I figured out later. Kurt was trying to get the rope off of himself. Frustrated, he said, "I can't untie this—I'm going to cut it." Just by reflex, I wanted to save my rope, but then I figured I shouldn't sweat it at this point and said okay. We were in trouble, and whatever could make it easier was okay.

I got the bandages and tape out of the pack and covered a deep gash in my left thigh. Then I saw a two-inch cut in my shin at the place of the break. I didn't see any protruding bone with my quick glance, but it seemed I could see to the center of my leg. The wound was smeared with grit and gravel. Dread swept through me. We were in big trouble. I covered it with a bandage and tape then put another bandage over abrasions on my lower shin.

Years ago in first aid training, I had learned how to make splints out of available materials like tree branches, ski poles, backpack frames, etc. But here, there was nothing long enough to use. Our available materials were dirt, snow, and rocks, and everything in the pack was soft. I wrapped the rope bag, a tarp with straps and buckles, tight around my shin with a rock about nine inches long. This provided no real support and the rock would always slide down anyway. Onto my good foot, I put my sock and hiking shoe, but I didn't want to bother my bad foot with a change—besides, these were my not-so-tight rock shoes.

Kurt's heavy pants were uncut, and no blood was seeping through, so he set to tying his legs together with slings for stability. He was wearing his hiking shoes when he fell. He put his lightweight black sweater on over his T-shirt. These were all the clothes he'd brought.

I had believed that rock climbing was as safe as you wanted to make it. I had always said that I could do it safely. Here, I hadn't. We had fallen. Decker. We had broken legs and possible internal injuries, I was looking at deep infection, and our survival at 7000 feet was not guaranteed. The responsibility for safety in climbing is shared among a party, but here the fault was mine. The ache in my heart equaled that in my body.

Quickly, I came down with "get-home-itis." We needed help, I thought, and since I had a good leg, I should try and crawl out. So with some big drinks of water and several breakfast bars in my pocket, I set out across the scree slope. This was not an easy process—I moved like a very slow spider, one leg at a time: First, scoot the butt over several inches. Rest. Next, move the good foot. Find a place to put my right hand. Rest. Then, left hand grabs the laces of the right shoe and lifts the foot while my thigh moves above it over to a new place on the ground about six to ten inches from where it was before. Rest again. Plant the left hand back on the rock. Repeat. I had to concentrate hard on sending the correct signal to each leg, because my bad leg still wanted to help move me. With every motion, either the muscles in my broken leg would get too stretched out ("AAAAAAHHHH!"), the bones would bump against each other

("YAAAAAAAAAHHHH!"), or, a couple times, the bad foot would slip after I set it down ("YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"). The problem-solving part of my brain was telling me to cut my foot off.

This was easy terrain that I could have trotted across before. For as far back as I could remember, I had never felt this helpless. It was a shock to be now so handicapped, to have such tight constraints on what I could do.

I made my way out onto a rock outcrop, just out of sight of Kurt. Though my open wound was covered, it was losing blood with every move. My rope bag was coated in it, and it was a pool in my rock shoe. I was weakening, and when I started seeing stars, I called a halt, telling Kurt I couldn't go on. I moved some rocks together and built a narrow platform I could lie on. At least I was in a more visible position, and with my brightly-colored jacket I should have been able to hail an airplane or someone at Big Lake, down below us.

I had the emergency whistle which is always on my harness, and every ten minutes or so, I would blow long blasts or SOS in Morse Code. We hoped that someone would be down at Big Lake, hiking the PCT, or (even better) climbing our mountain and would hear us.

The sunshine reached me about twelve o'clock, re-warming me. I had my jacket, but I was still wearing shorts, and the morning hours had been cold. Both of us had been shivering, which was a new agony. As our bodies shook, the broken bones would bump each other, sending bolts of pain through us.

Throughout the day, a hum would be heard somewhere in the distance, and I would start waving my arms and looking for the airplane. Most of the time, it was a jet high in the sky. Other times, it was a small plane far out in the distance. Often, it would sound close, but wouldn't come around our side of the mountain. Once that day, a small plane buzzed right over the summit, unable to see us directly beneath them.

Kurt was within earshot, though, and we could talk about who would notice us missing and when, what our first helicopter ride would be like, whether we could share a hospital room, the legendary self-rescue of Joe Simpson, the fact that the signal mirror on my compass was back with the sleeping bags, that my cell phone was in the car because its signal was so weak, or that this airplane would surely be the one.

"Hey, Kurt?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

Kurt had hallucinations this day, including me walking over to help him, a man leading a horse up the scree slope to him, and voices up on the summit. He quickly finished the remaining water because we had not brought enough for an emergency. With his legs tied together, he dragged himself backwards around the slope to collect the climbing ropes, shouting with pain as he went, and he cleared a spot free of stones so he could lie down.

I was nodding off and having various dreams involving water, food, and Kurt walking over to me. The dream that was funniest was three guys in an office milling around a water cooler with cups in hand. My thirst was terrific as I was at altitude, low on blood, and getting sunburned, but I didn't have much of an appetite. My mouth was so dry that when I tried to eat one of the breakfast bars, it was like chewing sawdust. I would chew and chew, but the pieces would never become mushy and swallowable. Somehow I forced it down.

I looked at my watch. The date read 6-29. "So," I thought, "the rest of my life, I'll look back on June 29th as the day my life changed." I wondered how well my leg would heal. Would I be able to hike or climb anymore? Would I sell my beloved bicycles? Was I going to bleed to death here on the mountain? Why haven't I heard anything from Kurt in the last half-hour?

"Hey, Kurt?"

“Yeah?”

“Oh. Never mind.”

What helped our dreams and hallucinations was the wind. Blowing hard through the rocks up above, it sounded like a waterfall falling from the summit. Other times, we swore we heard two men conversing on the summit. That started us shouting and blowing the whistle quite a few times before we figured out the wind was fooling us.

The sun moved lower and the air grew cooler again. The shivering returned, with the occasional shouts or screams. I stayed out on the rock outcrop until sunset, for a last chance at being spotted. Then, I sat up and started moving back to Kurt. We would be much colder during the night if we were separated.

I repeated my painful inch by inch crawl back across the outcrop, but this time there was a steeper section of rock, four feet high, that I had to descend. I couldn't go around it, and I had to get to Kurt. It was dark by this time, and I had to use my night vision and move my head back and forth to tell where the rock's features were. Kurt told me the next day that he couldn't watch as I crawled down. I was pretty worried, myself, but there were hand-holds and foot placements all the way down, and I reached the scree slope again.

After more inching, inching, inching, I made it back to Kurt. It was 12:30 a.m., and it had taken three hours to move less than 40 feet. My abdominal muscles ached from holding the crouched-over position. Kurt was shivering badly from being exposed to the wind. He was lying with his head up slope. Ideally, an injured person should be horizontal with elevated feet, I couldn't ask him to change. Moving was too painful for him. His level of pain was always much greater than mine. At the hospital, we would be told that my shin bones were both fractured, which we knew, and that Kurt had a broken left-foot bone and had multiple breaks in his right femur. A break at the top of his femur was sending pain throughout his pelvic region, so he felt he had more bones fractured.

Kurt had woven the ropes into a loose mat that we lay on with part wrapped over us. We snuggled together and put the tarp over us. That reached from our feet only to mid-chest with halfway coverage for the sides, but it was protection from the wind. We slept off and on that night. I had to continually shift the kinks of rope under me, “No wonder I'm sore, there's a carabiner digging into my butt!”

Human beings must have a greater capacity to endure suffering than I had imagined. My teeth were chattering nonstop, and I tried to keep them going. When they would stop, my need to shake would transfer down my body. Kurt's teeth were unable to chatter for some reason, and his body would jolt and twitch and he would holler with pain. At some point, I made a statement John Wayne would have been proud of, “The only way we'll get through this is courage.” That was for my own fortification as much as Kurt's. Before this trip, I had recognized him as having a very cool head. I told him I was glad he was here with me. He answered that he wished I had brought somebody else, and we laughed. He told me some crude jokes involving polar bears.

Friday, we woke before dawn to a still-clear sky, still shivering, still alive, and hoping for a speedy sunrise. We found that dawn was windless, and we blew and blew on the whistle, hoping to be heard down at Big Lake. My teeth continued to chatter violently, and Kurt rubbed my chest and back to warm me.

After the air warmed a little, I inched my way up to the snowfield, about six feet away, and filled Kurt's two water bottles with snow. They melted little before the sun came around the mountain, so our thirst continued gnawing at us. I came back to Kurt's location and got back under the tarp.

This day, we could see jet skis and motor boats down on Big Lake. The engine of a motorboat turned out to sound exactly like an airplane. So now, when we would hear a hum, we had to sit up and check on the lake for spray behind a boat. But the boats gave us something new to wave and whistle to. The whistle was loud enough to ring my ears with every blow. I reckoned its volume was even louder than the engines of the motorboats. It was probably because the wind was blowing from

them to us that they never heard us.

At last, about one o'clock, the sun hit us, warming our bodies and melting our water. With Kurt's handkerchief to filter the dirt, we drank the bottles dry, our first water in 24+ hours. Kurt volunteered to drag himself back to the snowfield and refill them. I asked if he was okay with staying there and passing out refills, and he said, "What else have I got to do?"

Lying on the slope, we could see the anchor point from which we had fallen. The Spectra sling was still hanging broken around the block. All the other gear but the piton had fallen to the slope with us. The question haunted me of how our anchor with five different attachment points had failed. Much later, I realized the mistakes. When I got to the rappel slings, my thoughts were on substituting new slings of mine for the old ones of someone else. What I should have done was examine the existing system, see that the tight, horizontal sling could fail, and hang my slings downwards instead. Also, when Kurt wanted to place two more pieces down by him, they should have been tied-in in a way that would have spread a possible load among all the placements simultaneously. As it happened, when I fell and my on-lead placements had pulled out, the climbing rope broke the horizontal sling, then the three nuts holding Kurt to the rock were loaded one by one and burst out one by one. If I had assembled the anchor right, it might have held my fall, and my story would only have been about taking a very long swing. Kurt considers his mistake to be his silence. He felt we should try an easier route for safety (the West Face also had a 5.6 crack to the top) but did not say so. He had thought the rock looked bad but didn't say so. He was not able to see my anchor, standing below me, and he did not insist on checking it.

Meanwhile, Kurt discovered an activity that passed time and was quite diverting. He still had his nut-retrieval tool, and we tied this to some rope and tossed it towards out-of-reach gear that we wanted. Kurt retrieved a hiking shoe (notice that I had spent the night in shorts, and he with a bare foot sticking out from under the tarp). Then, I hooked my windpants and the jar of peanut butter. Kurt said if we could snag the guidebook and the lighter, we could burn the Mt. Washington chapter for warmth.

I agreed, "I'm never coming back to this mountain."

"There's no reason to."

Kurt was as glad as I was for me to have my pants: he was tired of looking at my blood-encrusted leg. It was swollen between the bands of tape and looked like link-sausage. I wasn't crazy about the sight, either.

I decided to build a new platform for us to lie on. I stacked up all the large rocks within reach to start a wind-break. Then I tossed a loop of rope down and around farther rocks, dragged them up, and added them on. I dug out the ground up-slope from me so Kurt would have a more level place beside me. This night, at least we would be lying horizontal, providing we weren't picked up first.

Our nearest miss with an airplane happened this evening. A private jet buzzed by the mountain, at our altitude, seeming close enough to hit with a rock. Waving, shouting, whistling, our hopes rose. In several seconds, it was around the West Ridge, out of sight.

"COME BACK!"

"They had to have seen us."

"Yeah."

"COME BACK!"

"HELP US! Wouldn't they make another pass if they saw us?"

"Well, maybe they're going for help now."

Our hopes faded again.

The late-evening wind had blown clouds towards us from the west. The bank of clouds rolled up and over the mountain, enclosing us in fog. This was not a good turn. If it rained, hypothermia was guaranteed, and no one would come climbing the next day, Saturday. I couldn't imagine surviving for the next dry day.

We had talked about our worries of infection, lockjaw, whether they'd be able to put us back together right, whether the time elapsed would make the healing harder, and other things. But never did

we talk about not surviving. This second day had gone better, having water to drink and knowing that nights were survivable. We had made a home on the mountain, and I figured that we could make it several more days—if the weather held.

But to do so meant we had to eat the peanut butter. That afternoon, I had chewed a knife-blade-full for what seemed like minutes before getting it dissolved and swallowed. Though we were drinking again, our mouths were still dried out. Preparing for the night, I prodded Kurt to have some more with me. “Food keeps you warm,” I reminded him. When I ate my blade-full, it tried to come back up twice. I don’t know if this happened from dehydration or because my stomach had forgotten how to handle food. Kurt said he had no appetite, and neither had I. I had seen him eat just one breakfast bar this day, and I had eaten only one or two. But, to please me, he tried some. “Mmmmmm, fats!”

So we entered our second long night in the cold. I felt a bit warmer with pants on and snuggled between Kurt and my pile of rocks. But it was still cold enough for my teeth to chatter again, nonstop. Kurt lay curled against me, and I had my arm around his shoulders. He was afraid of having those torturous shivers again. They came, but were fewer than before.

Once, we heard a “*CRACK*” and a rumble somewhere above in the darkness. Our mountain was continuing to fall apart. We were still wearing our helmets, but there was no way to protect our bodies if rocks were to fall our way. The mountain sure had a knack for making us feel helpless.

Saturday we awoke to clouds and wind but no rain! The clouds did not cover the mountain now, but they were still pretty thick to our west. Airplanes would not be visible. We ate the last two breakfast bars, banana-flavored for Kurt and apple-flavored for me, saying, “This will be the day. It has got to be the day.”

We resumed blowing on the whistle or shouting “HELP US!” every five to fifteen minutes. I thought of how the clouds would absorb the sound, and that no one at Big Lake or hiking the PCT would hear. We needed someone to climb the mountain today.

The wind kept playing its tricks on us, sounding like people conversing up above. We spent the dawn arguing about which sounds were illusions, when suddenly from the north, a genuine woman’s voice responded, “Hello! Do you need help?”

“YES! There are two of us! We have broken legs! We are at the West Face!”

Kurt held out his hand and I took it. Tears filled my eyes and ran down my face. They would be running off and on all day.

A few minutes later, guided by our voices, a skinny good-looking fellow wearing shorts and a down jacket scrambled over the outcrop. His eyes were like saucers. We found out his name was Benjamin and that his partner had a radio and was calling for help. We told him our story and that we were thirsty, hungry, and cold, but our conditions were stable. We told him of our sleeping bags back along the North Ridge. He had seen these, and after leaving us his water, some food, and spreading his coat over us, he set off for our sleeping bags.

Then they both were with us, covering us with the bags. Laura was talking by radio to people at their camp and to someone else who was hiking up to the mountain. She was about 19 and pretty with blond hair, and this was her first time climbing a mountain. What an initiation! Someone at their camp called the Sheriff’s office. They stayed with us, asking us questions and more questions: “Where did you fall from?” “You fell from there?!” “How far is that?” “How did you fall?” “What have you had to eat?” “Were the nights real cold?” “Where are you from?” “Do you guys work together?” “How do you know each other?” “You guys seem to be really okay, in spite of all this.”

“You have to understand how happy we are to see you.”

Their friend coming up would radio in, telling how close he was getting, and we could hear him breathing hard while he talked. Benjamin went back to the North Ridge to wait for him. But soon, we heard him shouting back and forth with someone else, talking about us.

Shortly, four new people wearing helmets and climbing packs came over the rock outcrop. The leader was Steve, who said he was a wilderness medical technician and that they were part of Eugene Mountain Rescue. They had come to climb the mountain for their own fun but immediately got into rescue mode.

For the next couple of hours there were examinations, sips of water and Gatorade, small bites of food, and Ibuprofen. “You’ve been wearing a rock shoe for two days?!” “Is this blood all over the place just yours?” “Can you wiggle your toes?” “You fell from there?! That must be a hundred feet!”

We did not feel lucky. But we were. Many miracles had come together to keep us alive and to have only broken legs.

Melissa of the rescue team took over direct patient care, giving us the food and water, keeping my platform from crumbling, and chatting with us. She confided, “I always volunteer for this job to get out of the heavy lifting.”

Tim, another rescuer, had a working cell phone, and was coordinating with the Deschutes County Sheriff. He passed along my father’s phone number, then Kurt used the phone to call his mother.

“Hi Mom. How’s it going? ... Yeah, that’s good. ... Yeah, well, I’ve had a rock-climbing fall. ... Yes, my legs were broken ... This happened Thursday. I’m just being rescued today. ... We’re up on the mountain now. They’re sending a helicopter, and a rescue team is here with us.”

The rest of us could hear the tone of her voice from the earpiece, and she sounded amazingly calm. Steve talked with her a minute, giving her more assurances. We were glad that she was staying cool.

Around noon, we heard an incredible roar, and a large green Air Force helicopter came around the mountain. Dirt and gravel were blowing everywhere. Two men and their equipment were lowered by cable down-slope from us, and it rose away again. The helicopter had been requested, I was told, because carrying us out would have taken two additional days. My high risk of infection and the extensiveness of Kurt’s injuries had called for quicker action.

By this time, other people from Deschutes County Search and Rescue had arrived and were setting up ropes to help lower us part-way down the scree slope. We were lying too close to the cliff for the helicopter to pick us up where we were. Kurt was lying up-slope from me, so it was going to be easier to move him first. He had been begging for morphine, and an Air Force paramedic gave him a dose. They said “We’ve seen you move around, but we’re going to put this neck brace on anyway.” After that, they said, “We’re going to put you in a splint now, which is going to hurt at first.” Under the sleeping bags, I reached for his hand and squeezed it. They lifted him and he hollered again, but this was the last time. I listened as they put him onto a backboard, then into a litter connected to the ropes. They carried him down the slope, but he never cried out anymore. This told me what I could expect.

The helicopter roared back. I was lying on my back and could not see it while it hovered down-slope, but when I heard it throttle up and fly off, the tears fell down my face stronger than ever. I was so happy that Kurt was out of here. It had been so hard, we had waited so long, but now his misery was over. This had been the kind of ordeal that makes occasional climbing partners into lifelong friends.

The rescue teams came back up the slope to me. A brace was put around my neck. They lifted my leg (“AAAAAAAHHHH!”) and put it in a splint, and from here on, there was no more pain. I was lifted onto a backboard and strapped down. The backboard was placed in the litter, with a plastic shield covering my head and chest. I remarked, “I’m glad we could provide you guys with some entertainment today,” and said lots of thank-you’s. Six rescuers lifted me and started to walk down-slope. Once, the litter tipped slightly, and my being unable to move

(jump off, wave an arm and correct the balance, raise my arms to catch myself, etc.) was very unnerving. But we made it to the rendezvous point, and I waited there with the paramedic.

The big green helicopter returned with a roar and hovered over me, getting closer and closer. All I could think was, "Please, don't let this thing fall on me." A cable came down, weaving in the air from the propeller wash. The paramedic grabbed it and clipped it to a bag containing our climbing gear, sleeping bags, and packs. It rose away, swirling in the air. The cable came back down, and he clipped it to the four cables on my litter. With a jump, I was rising towards the bottom of the helicopter. I was pulled inside and secured on its floor. Men, inside, put an oxygen mask on my face and a monitoring device on my finger. The paramedic was hauled inside. Then the throttle rose, and we left the mountain behind.