

Ascending Faith

by Josiah Wai

When my brother went bald he bought a bandanna hat, blue with white stars, and a 2002 Harley Davidson. He wore the bandanna hat with a leather jacket every time we went to Peacock's Bar or the Platinum, or even grocery shopping. He kept the Harley in the parking lot of the Bluewood Apartments where we lived. But he didn't ride it, I know, because he never made it to the DMV to get his motorcycle license. Anyway, he didn't really have time most days. We would return home from the store and he would go up the stairs to his apartment 26, close the bathroom door, and puke in the toilet for an hour.

I asked him once about the Harley. "Jesse, you never ride that thing. Let me sell it and then you can afford a maid. It's not a big deal. Just cook some hot meals or scrub this place clean once in a while."

"Hell no," he said, and pulled out the green motorcycle DMV book. "Now quiz me."

There was no other option, so I took the book and read, "When would you operate the engine cut-off switch and pull in the clutch?" I never brought it up again, because of the way his hands shook whenever he held that green booklet, and the way his eyes locked ferociously onto the words. He would never talk about what chemotherapy was like, just lie in bed for days, clutching the booklet, and getting up to puke in the bathroom.

I remember returning to the Bluewood Apartments after one of his last sessions. "Thanks bro," he said. His eyes rolled to the side and hung there lazily as he opened the door of my sedan, lifting himself out weakly, as if his arms were butter. It was raining. He made it okay for the first dozen steps on the wet asphalt, but suddenly stopped and fell onto his parked Harley. His body draped over the seat, chest heaving slightly, eyes, oh his eyes, still rolled to the side and hanging.

"C'mon," I said. "Let me help you up to the room."

"I'm okay," he said.

"Jesse."

"I'm fine."

“Jesse!”

“Park the car,” he said.

I parked the car and waited inside for ten minutes, feeling guilty over the heater, listening to the rain bounce off the windshield. When I walked back he was sitting on the cement, his back against the exhaust pipe. The rain had soaked through his blue and white-starred bandanna hat.

“Jesse,” I said, and carried him up to his room.

Those were the days when the sickness ran him over like a train. I knew it, and I felt his hollow presence like I felt the hollowness of his locked doors, the days when I knocked and there was no answer. He had a Grade 2 Astrocytoma in his brain. The doctors all explained it as an abnormal growth of star-shaped cells in his cerebrum. They said star-shaped as if it belonged in some freakishly cute kid's book with plastic glow-in-the dark stars: good night dog, good night moon, good night star-shaped cells that fester in my brother's brain, sucking out his life like tapeworms.

Dying makes you think a lot about living. I knew that's what Jesse was doing, because he never even mentioned death. Mundane details excited him. When I earned a salesperson award he cooked a three-course meal of Spanish rice, baked halibut, and chocolate cake.

I told him, “It's just an award. It's about time after working for them five years.”

“Relax, c'mon, enjoy it. I'm proud of you.”

“Why are you so excited for me? You've only got two more months of radiation. What about that? That's worth celebrating.”

He laughed, and took a forkful of the chocolate cake. “See this? Want to know what a blind man dreams about? A warm slice of chocolate cake. And what does a drug addict dream of? Earning a master's. We all dream of things to distract ourselves, not of what we can attain.”

“So what do you dream about?”

“You mean what does a dying man dream of? Earning sales associate of the quarter.”

“Don't say that.”

“Shawn you deserve it.”

“That's not what I meant.”

“Okay. You want to know what I dream about? Climbing a mountain. Do you remember when Mom took us to the top of Bald Hill? That was, let's see, over ten years ago. Shawn, the world up there was beautiful.”

“I could you carry you up to the top of Bald Hill. It's not that hard.”

Jesse said, “Nah. I want to climb a mountain; I don't even care which one. Mount Everest, K2, Kilimanjaro. I want to climb the North Sister.”

“Ha! That's quite the range: the two tallest in the world, the tallest mountain in Africa, and the fourth tallest in Oregon.”

“Shawn, will you climb North Sister with me?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “When do you want to go?”

“Before I die.”

After that conversation, Jesse retreated back into his quiet routine. I thought about the day years ago when Mom had taken us to the top of Bald Hill. She'd been puffing on a cigarette and Jesse had half-dragged her up the hill. I spent the time climbing the apple tree at the top and jumping on the bench. But Jesse had lain down in the grass and stared over the Corvallis farmland and houses in the distance. Beauty was the draw for him, not motorcycles, as if he'd ever been an adrenaline junkie.

I started training for the 10,000 foot ascent. The North Sister isn't anything like Everest, granted, nor the fourteeners in Colorado, but it's way more than a day hike. The last hundred feet are tricky and technical. So I bought a silver membership at Oregon State University's Dixon Rec. Center and started using their sixty-foot climbing wall. I was top-roping and free climbing every day. I didn't really know what Jesse was doing while I trained, but he started going out each morning and wouldn't come back until late. He was on his own training schedule.

I came over one night for dinner. “Jesse,” I said, “let's train together.”

“You don't want to train with me.”

“What's wrong? I thought we were in this together. Train with me, c'mon.”

He shrugged and took off his boots. He untied his bandanna hat. Finally he said, “Why do you climb?”

“Training. Perfection. Toughness. You know as much as I do that we'll need the mental endurance.”

Jesse turned and looked at me with his hands stuck in his pockets. “No, Shawn. Why do you want to climb? Why do you want to summit North with me?”

“You were the one who asked me, remember? This whole project was your get-over-cancer celebration.”

“Damn, Shawn! Why did you say yes?”

I stopped at that. He was biting his cheek the same angry way he used to lying in bed, studying the Motorcycle Handbook. “I don't know. I wanna come with you.”

“Are you ready for dinner?” He took the sauce off the burner. Jesse kept his face glued to the plate all throughout dinner, moving his hand to his mouth, and twisting his butt in the seat mechanically.

Finally he said, “We'll train together. If you climb North Sister with me.”

“I said yes weeks ago.”

He twisted the spaghetti in his mouth. “That means train to climb North Shawn, really training. Show me the climbing wall tomorrow.”

We woke up the next morning and I drove over. Jesse was already there so I showed him the 5.11 route, the orange one I'd been working on for weeks. I hit the route perfect, every foot, hand, and grunt in place. I was so pure and perfect on the climbing wall that I swear if the Virgin Mary had seen me she'd have felt ashamed. Gaston under the whale hold, dino to the jug, squeezing the crimpers, and pinchers. The route finished at the top of the wall and I waved down to Jesse.

“Come on down.”

“Did you see that?” I said, down-climbing. “I've been training. I know what it's like to climb, bro.”

“Damn,” He said. “You thought that was impressive?”

“It's a 5.11 Jesse. I'm getting better at climbing.”

“It doesn't work that way,” said Jesse. “My God it doesn't work that way!” I saw a flash of skin and then knuckles were slamming into my cheekbone. I staggered and caught myself on a hold. Jesse slammed into me again. Blood and pain filled my face. His face was twitching, lips sneering.

“Any fool out there can make a pretty little move. Do it in pain. Do it when you're hurting. Go do it now—at elevation and you can't breathe and you can't think because there's a piston exploding in your head.” And then, softly, “Do it like you're me.”

“What's your problem?”

“You want mental endurance? Take it!”

“Back off!”

Smack! “Take your 5.11 home and go cry over the toilet Shawn. Did you ever see me cry? Freak, did you?”

My head scraped against the corrugated plastic. Saliva ran down my cheek. “No.”

“Climb now! I don't want to see any of this pretty stuff—just grit and muscle and pain.”

I hesitated and stumbled over the mat. The sixty foot walls were exploding with lights inside my brain. My left hand locked nervously on a green jug.

“Climb it,” he screamed, and shoved his fist into my spine.

The rec center employees started running over. “It's okay,” Jesse said, “I'm leaving.” He grabbed his climbing shoes. “Are you coming with me?”

The lights of the walls were exploding in gray and I saw the colors of all the different plastic holds. I was trying to climb the wall, grabbing onto the different holds. They were slipping in and out of vision.

“I brought my motorcycle,” Jesse said. “Do you want a ride?”

“No,” I said. My left foot slipped off of a pincher and my body weight jerked down on my arms. My chin smacked the wall. Dear God. I fell off the wall onto the mats. Then the Rec Center guys were helping me up and giving me bandages and tears were coming down my face. Jesse had left.

The drive to the Three Sisters Wilderness Area was three and half hours and we stopped in Sisters, Oregon, to use the restroom. It was a sleepy town of candy shops, cowboy novelty stores, and tourists. One of the stragglers at the \$12 Store said the mountains were icy. Really windy at the top still, but the spring glaciers were starting to melt and form crevasses. He was wearing a Faith, Hope, and Charity t-shirt. “North Sister is Faith,” he said. “It's what the first settlers called it. If you're climbing her be sure to take the southwest ridge from Middle. That'll put you up right at about nine thousand.”

“We know,” said Jesse.

“You got gear for the lil' kicker at the top? You're gonna need it.”

“Crampons, ropes, axes, we've got everything,” said Jesse.

“Relax kid,” he said. “You're tense. Drink some beer.” Jesse turned his face away, biting his cheek.

Mid-morning we pulled into the Pole Creek Trailhead and started the hike. Our packs were a little over sixty pounds each, with all the gear. The first seven or so miles we couldn't even see the mountain, and we were hiking up fairly shallow ground among the trees. By the time we broke through the pines and came into view of the Sisters, it was afternoon. Straight in front of us was the Middle-North Ridgeline.

Jesse was nearly staggering at this point. He sat down on the crumbly, volcanic rocks and pulled out a nutri-grain bar. A few yellow wildflowers were sticking out of the ground.

“How does it feel?” I asked.

“Like crap.”

“More description.”

He smiled. "Like I ate a piece of corn-on-the-cob and the cob also. Like I drank three gallons of chocolate milk."

"Ha. You're funny Jess."

"You know when I punched you at the wall?"

"How could I forget?"

"Hey I'm sorry. Just angry you know, cause you got it so easy. And now look at us here: you could wrestle a wolf and I can barely walk. You're stronger than me, I know it."

"That's not true."

Jesse dug his hand into the ground and scraped a design with the crumbly rocks. His fingers caught on one of the yellow wildflowers and he uprooted it. "How do you get through life without fighting?"

I gulped from my Nalgene and pulled out a granola bar. "I don't know."

"I am fighting just to live," he said. "Every day it's about what I can do to conquer life." He stared at the flower in his fingers. "Damn it. Damn the beautiful for being so fragile. But you know what? The flower is dead and I'm stronger than it and I'm alive. Every day, I will conquer life until I am the greatest conqueror that ever lived."

"So you're conquering the mountain."

"I am alive."

"You are a hero," I said, "for living through seizures and tumors and climbing up Faith."

"Tell me. Is that who you see?"

"Yes."

"Then you are dead wrong. I am not. I am a fighter and a hater." Jesse stared at me. "But maybe all great living is that way."

"No. You're wrong."

“Think about it Shawn. They were all murderers and fighters otherwise there's no point. Even you said you didn't know why you wanted to climb. It's all worthless.”

“Shut up Jesse! Shut up! This is a lie.”

“Why didn't you fight back when we were at the wall?”

“Because I'm not like you.”

“Really?” He threw down the flower and began to shake. “I hate you and myself.”

“Look deeper than yourself for love.”

“Whatever that means.” Jesse stood up and shouldered his pack. His legs bowed under the pressure. “Don't follow me. I'm not Jesus.”

He started hiking out. Small pieces of rock and wildflowers skidded away from beneath his feet as he walked. I watched his legs flexing and bending, his gray and blue backpack receding into the distance. Soon he was a spot heading towards the east face of North Sister. But I couldn't let him go. I started following him, stepping around stones and bushes, fording the little streams of melted snow run-off.

I could see him climbing up the glacier and rocks toward the Middle-North ridgeline. He must've been sick to his stomach with the altitude. I'd never actually seen him puke in his life, but I was sure that he was now. My heart was pounding and I was terrified for him, felt it by the way my gloves stuck to my clammy fingers. My eyes were dry with sadness. There was a hollowness in my chest, loneliness, as if the thing I needed most in the world was a warm hug. The coldness of the mountain seeped through my jacket as I kept walking in his footsteps.

For the past three years, Jesse had had seizures. They were from the Astrocytoma in his brain. He'd described it as moving without thinking, processing without knowing. He was bagging groceries at Albertson's and kept running the same item over and over. The customer had freaked out when she saw him doing that and then he'd sort of slumped to the side. That was it: scanning pickles over and over again, pickles, pickles, pickles, and then grabbing onto the cash register and sort of falling over. That was the first time they tested him for tumors.

Grade 1, they'd said, surgery. Then after two years they'd found it grade 2, and recommended surgery, then radiation. The seizures had stopped for a while. I ran everything that had

happened just then through my brain: the crazy conversation, storming away in tears, step, step, step, over and over, like he'd been scanning pickles. He was hurting. Why had I let him walk so far ahead? I'd waited about forty minutes so he was probably a mile and half ahead. If I walked four miles an hour and he walked two, maybe less in his weakness, it would only take an hour to catch up.

I redoubled my pace. Hell, I started running with my sixty pound bag, because if there's one thing that Jesse'd taught me, it's that you gotta be tough to get what you want. The straps of the pack were slicing into my shoulders. Soon I was sweating and panting uncontrollably.

He'd made it onto the ridgeline by the time I caught him. The sun was setting and I saw him by the light of his camping stove flame. The night was turning cold. I approached him, stepping through the circle of rocks he'd cleared on the ground. I could smell Mountain House beef stroganoff.

"Hey Jesse."

"Hey Shawn. I'm making the ascent tomorrow, and I want to do it alone."

"I know."

"I'm not a hero."

"Maybe."

"I'm barely alive."

"Maybe."

"No," he said. "I'll be alive when I reach the summit. I'm going to do it tomorrow, alone. I'm sick of dying."

I sat down on a rock and clasped my hands. "I know," I said. "How are you going to do it?"

"By walking, alone."

"The fighter always fights alone."

"Yes."

“No,” I said, “There's God.”

“Maybe.”

“Can I borrow some of your water, for my meal?” I ate dinner in silence, feeling the cold and darkness creep over the horizon. Stars shone overhead. We set up the tent and crawled into our bags.

Jesse woke at dawn and packed all his climbing gear, leaving some of the heavier stuff in the tent, like the stove and sleeping bag. He'd asked me to watch out for them. I woke at dawn too, dressed, and climbed out. Jesse started hiking up the ridge toward North's summit. He didn't want me to follow him. That much was clear, and so I sat down on a piece of volcanic rock. Was it really this simple? Three years at his side and now he was running away so easily. I watched him until he disappeared behind a gendarme, the rock columns swallowing him.

I would not follow him. I did not care about summiting; I only wanted Jesse to. I watched the clouds blow above, below, and through me, and realized that this was not really about me. Everything from the rock wall to the fight to training was so that I could sit here and watch him summit. It was dreadfully cold. All I could do was stare at the trail he'd taken. I could feel the chilled wind blowing through my jacket and see the rocks scattered around in the dirt and snow.

At noon I started worrying. Fear crept in with each passing minute, but still I did not follow him. He should have been at the top by now, but maybe he had just taken a rest. The worry sat on my chest like a dead cat. My mind began to shut down, lost in the swirl of emotions, until all I could do was process information mechanically. I ran through the route he would have to take in my head. He would solo-traverse several glaciers, and solo-rig a roping system for the final hundred feet. The last hundred feet were death. It was what made North Sister the most dangerous mountain in Oregon. A few months ago a climber had died, slipping on his handhold and triggering a rock avalanche. I was scared. It was 1:30 and Jesse had been gone seven hours.

Then suddenly I was moving, grabbing my crampons and food to make the ascent. My head was throbbing with fear. But there was nothing else, no feeling, no pain, like a paramedic, like a mortician, like a soldier, because when you start to think about those things it hurts too bad. If you think about it you screw up.

There were no other climbers around, none that had passed our site or were coming down. I saw the route he'd probably taken across the Hayden glacier. There was no sign of him. I

understood these things as little puzzle pieces of information that I would respond to. I could not think about it any other way. No other climbers meant I would have difficulty transporting him if he was collapsed, or dead. It meant I should leave a note and emergency sign, tent poles stuck in the ground to form an X, by our campsite in case others came while I was up the trail.

I started hiking up the trail, eyes on the alert looking for signs of avalanche or rock slides. The thought of seeing Jesse crumpled along the side of the ridge, buried in rocks terrorized my mind. And then I came to the midway point across the Hayden Glacier and I could not see anybody. I stopped. I could see all the way until the final hundred foot free-climb ascent, and there was nobody. He was past the glacier and somewhere along the last ascent, or else he had fallen and was dead. I had no gear to make the finish because Jesse had taken it all. It was over; he'd made it to the point of success or death. Success or death. The weight of the world was on me as I blinked back tears, because he should've been on his way back now.

“Jeeessssee!” I screamed. “Jesse! Goddammit Jesse where are you!”

The wind swallowed my scream. I screamed again, collapsed on the snow. Ice saturated into my skin.

“Dammit Jesse!”

Then I knew I couldn't stay there, to wait for him. I was losing time. My feet took me away, running awkwardly and slowly, crampons digging into the glacier. I ran endlessly, like a machine. I reached the campsite and ditched the crampons. It was late afternoon when I hit cell range to call 911, and the dispatcher notified the Lane County Search and Rescue, who sent out an extra team to come take me off the mountain. They reached me an hour later. I let them take my body, pump it with hot soup and carry it away, but my mind was still on the mountain.

All night I sat in the Search and Rescue office talking with this lady, Joanne. She was short and strong, and wore the SAR uniform. Her team was climbing up to the summit in the dark and I kept imagining their yellow flashlights sweeping across the snow, searching crevasses and holes in the dark. They radioed in at midnight they'd come to our campsite.

I looked at Joanne. “They're gonna have to search the summit. He's at the top, I know.”

“Okay,” she said and radioed the team to focus on the summit.

“Can't you send out a helicopter?”

“Look,” she said, “This is in our hands now. We know what we're up to.” She looked around, saw a banana on her desk, and tossed it at me. “Eat this; go into the other room and watch some TV. I know how it feels, but you'll be better off if you can sit down and rest.”

“Okay.” I sat down in the waiting room and flicked on the TV. The pixels flashed at me but I couldn't pay attention. I flipped through the channels of emptiness—football, Harry Potter, reality shows—all empty words and bright lights. I tried to pray.

Joanne stepped into the room a while later. “There's news off the mountain.”

Body to the alert. “What is it?”

“Our rescue team took him off the summit. He's in critical condition, hypothermic, weak, and bleeding from his arm.”

I nodded. Joanne sat down beside me and looked down. “It's bad. They got him off the summit to the ridgeline to where a helicopter can land. AirLink is coming in from Bend and they'll take him to the airport, and then Fire and Rescue can transport him over to the hospital. He'll be in ICU.”

“At St. Charles?”

“Yeah, but you've gotta stay here.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. My head was throbbing.

Twenty minutes passed. Joanne came into the room again and sat down again. “The EMTs with AirLink made a reassessment. They're flying him to Portland for more intensive care.” My head throbbed harder.

Joanne came in again. She was crying as she said, “Shawn, I'm sorry.”

Oh God. My heart stopped suddenly.

Time passed, I don't know how much. All I could feel was the walls of the SAR office closing in. Death could not be real. Nothing could be real. My eyes were lying to me, because they showed me an oaken door and a desk and open laptop, and these could not be real. Dear God, dear Jesse. My eyes fell into the grain pattern of the door. The wood was a circle of lines, but the lines never met though my eyes were always crossing them. How could this be? What was never supposed to be now was. Jesse's death could not be real. Helicopter pilots lie. The rule now was to lose yourself in the lines of grain and never make it out of the maze alive, until the rules could be broken. The grain lines thickened and blurred and my body followed my eyes into the haze. Everything was haze. This must be what death is my eyes said to the lines of grain, but then they couldn't say anymore because they were filling with tears.

The room did not know how to reply to the tears. My cheeks were wet and my lips tasted salty. Dear Jesus, I felt terrible because the only things I could give to Jesse were tears and not life. I was selfish because even these tears were for me, not him. The oak door disappeared and my head sank into my hands. My hands were cold and my face hard. I smelled myself, and my selfish, pitiful tears of salt. Never look back, or you will turn into a pillar of salt, but I knew from then on I would always be looking back; I would always be turning my shoulder to see behind me and up the mountain and maybe the ghost, because when I turned back I knew I would be like Lot's wife, a pillar of salty tears, frozen in that turnaround step for eternity.

The door opened slowly.

"Hello," she said. A new girl. My eyes lifted to meet hers. "They found this. It's for you." She looked into my red eyes and tear-streaked face. "If you want to see it. I mean, please take your time; there's absolutely no rush but I thought you might like to know because it's for you." She stopped. Her eyes were embarrassed and she held out a blue digital camera, Jesse's that he'd carried up the mountain.

"Please," I said.

"Here," she said, and handed me the camera. She pressed buttons: Power, Videos, Display.

"Have you seen this?" I asked.

Her lips quivered. "Yes, part. Just the first few seconds—"

"Why?"

"Please. Just watch."

“Was it his last, you know.” My hands shook with the camera. “Words.” I couldn't say anymore and twisted my head, looking down to the floor to hide my crying. She stood still for a minute.

“I'm sorry.”

“Thank you.” The crystal display screen of the camera stared up at me, as I hit play.

Clouds blow in through the background. Jesse turns his face and looks out into the sky. The back of his climbing helmet fills the screen as he looks across the rock formations and glaciers, jutting like silhouettes. The wind rushes noisily, and Jesse unclips his helmet. The corners of his blue and white-starred bandanna stick out from underneath a beanie. The camera angle is scattered—snow, sky, rock, Jesse.

“Hey,” says Jesse. The voice is haunting and comforting. “Shawn this is for you.” His face twists and he looks away. He turns back and his eyes are closed, and his chest rises as he inhales deeply. Composure regains; eyes open. “You were right man, you were right.”

He starts to snuffle a little bit. “For you Shawn. I cut my hand on a rock man; I'm not coming down anytime soon.” He takes his helmet off. Damn it must be cold. Then his beanie comes off and the camera angle scatters as he works with his hands. “Okay here we go.”

A piece of cloth, blue with white stars, floats and dances in the wind. Mountainous gusts carry it God knows where.

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