



Don't Let Me Go

What My Daughter Taught
Me About the Journey
Every Parent Must Make

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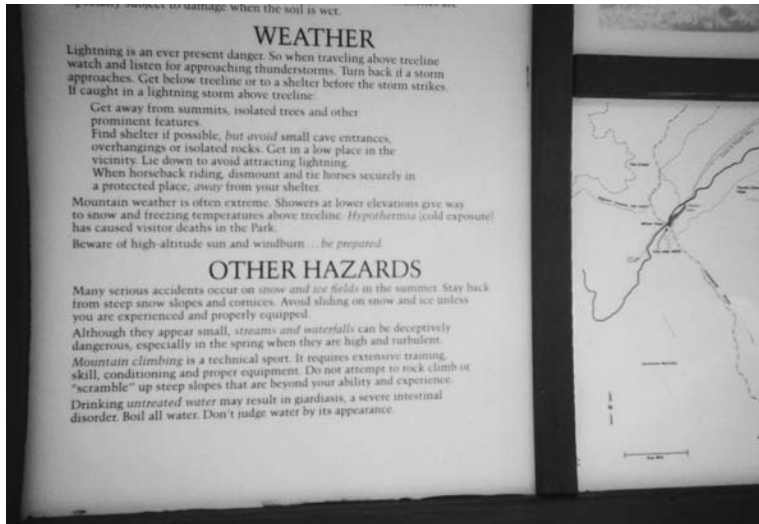
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Ascending



Mountain climbing is dangerous—
and that's not just me talking.

It was all Chera's idea. I just went along to keep an eye on her. After all, she was only fifteen and could get hurt out there, barely ninety pounds and so high up on a mountain like that. Since we had no special mountain climbing skills, we chose Pikes Peak in Colorado. We read there was a nice trail to hike and a souvenir shop at the top that served ice cream.

For some reason that sounded safer.

The sign at the base of the mountain where people parked their cars and where the taxi dropped my daughter and me off told us that it was about an eight-hour "brisk" hike to the summit. It took us three days there and back. During that time, we bruised some things and twisted other things. We ate stuff we shouldn't have and didn't eat other stuff because it was crunchy and wasn't supposed to be. Our fingers and faces swelled up so much that we hardly recognized each other. We came off that mountain beaten up, limping, and thirsty. We never expected the climb to be easy, but we had no idea how a mountain can wear you down. No idea. And that's how our adventure began.

Yes, *began*. Because for the next three years we would climb four more mountains. And in between those mountain peaks, we would run a couple of marathons—twenty-six-point-two miles. And we would see God, again and again and again.

We saw him on Blanca Peak, in a sunset that mottled the whole Colorado sky in a blazing orange. We saw him in a mountain lake, where trout rose and dimpled the surface. We saw him in the blowing mist of Mount Rainier, in the sanctuary of snow and ice that stretched out beneath a full moon from a point called Cathedral Gap. We saw him in a man who simply gave Chera his sunglasses to keep her from going blind and in a cook who made the best chicken noodle soup I've ever tasted in my life.

We also learned about hiking back down into the valleys, where blue lights of police cars glare and people die and hearts break and you can see no silver lining in the clouds, not this far down.

So this is a book about what happened on all those mountains and in all those valleys. Peaks and valleys that taught me about life. I climbed these mountains with my teenage daughter, learning about patience and fortitude and gimpy knees and the love of my daughter, who cares about such things. I learned about altitude and what it can do to your sinuses and that even on the grassy tundra of Mount Audubon that teenagers don't know the words to *The Sound of Music*. I learned about preparing and training, and the painful consequences you pay when you don't do those things.

And as Chera and I climbed and ran together, I couldn't help but reflect on my own climb up a different sort of mountain, one that took place long before she was born. I was about nine when I somehow lost God; just misplaced him, it seems. That was the same time that things around me began to go wrong, breaking in ways I was sure God could fix, if only I could have found him again. And I remembered how I figured he must have gone some place higher up where I couldn't reach—maybe to a mountaintop or something, since he was God.

So I set out to look for God, figuring if he was out there, I would find him. I would climb as high and for as long as it might take, having no idea how long and how grueling that journey would become.

What I found was a trail that wended through disappointment and loneliness. I made wrong turns and met a few people who tried to discourage me. But I was driven on by the memory of his being there—back before things broke—and encouraged by those who helped me climb higher. I learned many things about myself, some good, some not so good. But I did find God, in the end—right where I had left him.

And in the end, I believe these memories are worth writing about—what I've learned from disappointment and victory, from finding my footing on slippery scree and sliding down glaciers, navigating switchbacks, and trusting my ice ax.

This is a book about all these things that I learned about me. But, mostly, it's what I learned about my daughter, up there on the mountain. How I was able to hang on to her. And how I'm able to let go.

1

The Paperback Book



This is how we hiked up five mountains: like mules!

Our adventure starts one day not long after eight people die on Mount Everest. We weren't there, and we didn't know any of the people. We didn't even know there'd been trouble until my daughter read the book. And, truth be known, I couldn't even tell you where Mount Everest was.

Chera is fifteen and skinny with long, thin hair the color of weathered straw, with more energy than you would think possible from looking at her tiny frame. She walks into my office with a big paperback book tucked under one arm. Right away I notice there's no marker stuck in the pages, which means she's probably finished, and by the look on her face, I figure very recently finished—still floating in that happy-yet-sad state that always comes with finishing a good book. I tilt my head sideways to read the title: *Into Thin Air*. I've heard of that. People in airports carry it under their arms just like that.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Wow! What a story,” she says, wagging the book in the air.

I smile. Yes, yes, that’s my daughter—the book lover.

Then her face takes on a more serious countenance as she asks, “Do you think maybe *we* could climb a mountain?” She clutches the book to her heart.

Now I remember. This is a story about a group of men who climbed Mount Everest, and something went wrong—people died. I want to tell her that’s why we read books: so we don’t have to do what we just read about; we live vicariously through the characters on the pages.

“You mean, climb Everest?” I say.

She shakes her head and I’m relieved. “Oh no. That’s too big, too far away. But I read about Pikes Peak on the Internet. It’s a famous mountain in Colorado. It’s over fourteen thousand feet, but not like Everest. So we wouldn’t need a passport—or oxygen. There’s even a live camera shot of the mountain, twenty-four hours a day, on the Internet.”

“Oh yes, I’ve seen Pikes Peak,” I say, reconsidering the obvious dangers awaiting young people on the Internet.

“Really?” She seems encouraged by that, prodded by that.

“Let me get this straight.” I lean forward in my chair, where I’ve been minding my own business. “In that book you just read about mountain climbing,” I say, pointing to the one under her arm, “doesn’t somebody *die*?”

“Eight people actually, but that was Everest. I’m talking about Pikes Peak. There’s even a souvenir shop at the top...with ice cream.”

“How’s a souvenir shop going to keep us from dying?”

“Come on, Dad. I read that there’s a trail you can hike all the way to the top, so we won’t need ropes or ice axes or crampons or a Sherpa or anything like that.”

I do a quick search of my memory, trying to recall if I’d ever heard of

a CNN crew at Pikes Peak reporting about missing hikers, but I come up with nothing. And what in the world is a Sherpa?

I'm not an outdoor adventurer. That's what I'm thinking as I'm sitting there in my office chair minding my own business. I don't run. I don't lift weights. Sometimes, when I'm going out for an ice-cream cone and the car keys are upstairs, I'll sit at the bottom of the stairs and think long and hard about how badly I want that ice-cream cone before I climb the sixteen steps to the top. (I almost always go after the keys—that is, if it truly means getting an ice-cream cone.) I've camped out in the woods a few times, but I can't sleep without a pillow or a mattress or if the smallest pebble (or pea) is beneath me. I don't like walking in the morning dew because it soaks through my shoes and makes my toes wrinkle. And when I brush my teeth, I can't stand it if the water's too cold. Oh, and I hate dirty hands.

But she seems so much older and bigger standing there in the doorway. Big and grown-up. She looks a lot like her mother, and I wonder where my little girl has gone. We've stopped marking her height on the door casing, but that's because we moved a few years ago. The new owners have probably painted over all that by now. With every yard sale, more little-girl toys go away for as little as a dime apiece. Last week she had her first manicure. Time is taking her away bit by bit. Time is sneaky that way.

And there are boys. They call. They sit next to her in church and at school. When she has a party, she invites them. And there's always a boy's name scrawled on her notebook. Trey. Ronnie. Adam. Ryan. Sometimes I see where she's scratched through a name, blackened it out with some permanency, but before long a new one appears. She'll draw it out in great detail with block letters and shading and depth, probably missing out on valuable lessons in geometry and world history.

When she was younger we'd play *The Pierce Family Show*, using a big mirror in the living room as our television set. Chera was maybe four or

five, so I could hold her on my hip and she could see herself. The show would start with some music: *badadadadadadumdumda*. Chera would hang on to me as we'd burst onto the screen, waving and smiling.

Me: Hello, everyone. And welcome to *The Pierce Family Show*. I'm David.

Chera: And I'm Chera.

Me: And together we are—

Both: The Pierce family!

More waving and smiling.

Me: We have a great show for you today. Don't we, Chera?

Chera: That's right.

Me: Today we'll be talking with a man...a man who... [I think up something fast] lives at the top of a volcano! Isn't that right, Chera?

Chera: That's right.

After we'd introduced our guest, we'd take a commercial break, mainly so I could set Chera down and stretch my back. I'd coif her hair with my fingers and pretend to touch up her button nose. And then I'd hoist her back on my hip and we'd count down from five.

Me: So here we are at the top of the volcano!

Chera: So what's it like living at the top of a volcano? [Chera would do all the interviewing because she held the wooden-spoon microphone, and I would play the guest.]

Me: Oh, hot. Very hot.

Chera: What do you eat?

Me: Hot beans.

Chera: What do you drink?

Me: Hot chocolate.

And so on and so on. We'd go until the next commercial break. When we'd come back live after this second break, it'd be time to wrap up and put out a teaser for next week's show. And each week Chera would bring back

the man who lives at the top of the volcano. We totally exhausted the poor man; we questioned him to death. Once we did an interview of a man who lives in a hot-air balloon, but Chera asked him if he'd ever seen the man who lives at the top of the volcano.

I stand there thinking about how to answer my grown-up daughter and realize how long it's been since we'd played that game.

The little man who lives between my ears (no relation to the man who lives at the top of the volcano) suddenly pipes in: *It's just one mountain, David. And there's a trail all the way to the top—and a souvenir shop! She's your only daughter, for crying out loud! Your firstborn. She'll be grown and out of the house one day. She'll be a missionary in Mauritania and will write home to say how much she wishes she had a bed and some food. She'll write cryptic notes because the bad guys will be reading all the incoming and outgoing mail, looking for infidels, and she'll use code to say how much she misses the hills of Tennessee and that she sure wishes she'd climbed that mountain we'd talked about all those years ago, back when she was an innocent child of fifteen. But now she has too much to do in Mauritania before she moves on to Timbuktu. And "the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon..."*

The little man can be cruel sometimes.

She stands in the doorway, leaning in, her eyebrows raised in hopeful anticipation. I suddenly think I should mark her height on the door casing; I could forever keep this moment. Instead I do my best to be assertive: "I...er...well, I...ah...if there is some way to...ah...I guess we could always...you know... You're sure there's a trail?"

She nods, but her eyebrows stay put.

"If you really feel like this is something...you know...I mean, it must be a pretty good souvenir shop and all—"

"Are you saying *yes*?" Chera interrupts.

I blow out my response, like a hiss, almost in protest to what I'm consenting to. "Sure, why not. It'll be fun." *Oh boy. Did I really say fun?*

Chera squeals and runs down the hallway. "I'll make a list of everything we need," she calls back over her shoulder.

She runs like she always runs, hands tight to her chest and elbows flying out to the side, feet shuffling along the floor in small steps, barely coming off the rug. She used to run like that from my truck to her kindergarten class.

Like I said, I'm not an outdoor adventurer. The closest I've ever come to thinking about climbing a mountain before is thinking that I would *never* climb one. But I'm a dad who's going to walk his daughter down the aisle one day, and maybe walking her to the top of a mountain will help me with that.

But then I start to wonder again. *What sort of things will we pack? Is something like this very dangerous? And does that souvenir shop really have ice cream?*

We'll climb on Labor Day, which makes sense to me. September 6, 1999. That means we've got two months to get ready.

I have a good friend in Colorado Springs, and I'm going to call him so I can ask him a few questions—like, where do we start? And, is it legal to just take off up a mountain in America? But first, Chera wants to take me shopping because I don't have a thing to wear. She has a backpack and a sleeping bag and lots of "survival" equipment like waterproof matches and a whistle to call for help. I have nothing. So she takes me straight to the hiking section in the JumboSports store and pulls one backpack after another from the display so we can check the linings and the pockets and the zippers.

"We're looking for one with an internal frame," she says, "and not one with big metal bars on the outside. The internal's a lot better."

"Says who?" I want to know.

"Says Larry and Lori." Larry and Lori run the adventure camp called

New Frontiers where Chera has been a junior counselor for the last two summers. I know them pretty well. We go to church together. They're about my age, and from what I've heard, they've climbed everything (with and without ropes), biked everywhere (always with bikes), and hiked in every sort of element—rain, snow, sunshine. So if Larry and Lori say something about the great outdoors, it's probably true.

“Okay. An internal frame it is,” I say. “What color?”

“What color do you like?”

I think before I answer, “I'd like a blue one like yours. That way we look like a backpacking expedition—you know, a team.”

Chera seems to like that idea too, so she picks out a nice blue one—big. “It needs to be a lot bigger than mine,” she says, “since you're a bigger person.” Again, that makes sense. We stuff the big blue backpack into the shopping cart, and it takes up nearly the entire thing, but there's still room for the smaller stuff, like cookware and an emergency candle and some Band-Aids and some freeze-dried chicken teriyaki. “This doesn't sound too bad,” I tell her, as I read the label on the gourmet freeze-dried dinner. “We'll probably eat better than we do at home!”

We pick out a sleeping bag, and I grab a couple of those self-inflating pads to lie on, for both of us. “I can't sleep on the hard ground,” I tell Chera. She just shrugs, and I can tell she doesn't understand. I start to say, “Wait until you're older,” but decide not to. I figure I'll have opportunity enough for that line over the next few years.



I meant to call my friend from Colorado Springs sooner, but it's two days before we leave when I finally do. Chera's been training by running, mostly with her school track team. I've been doing some serious gardening—digging holes, moving dirt, pruning.

“Tim, how are you?” I say when he answers.

“Good.”

“Hey, the reason I’m calling is to tell you that Chera and I are flying out there for the weekend to go to the top of Pikes Peak.”

“Sounds good,” Tim says, “There’s a train that goes all the way to the top. Or you could drive up in your car.”

“But there’s a hiking trail all the way to the top too, right?” I have my fingers crossed.

“The Barr Trail, yes.” *Great! That’s the one.* “You can hike that...or take the train or just drive up in the car, like I said,” he continues. I get the feeling he thinks the car or train would be the best thing for *us* (the inexperienced) to do.

“Well, we’re just going to hike,” I say.

“Hmm. Not a good idea.”

Oh, of course, I think. It’s Labor Day weekend. The crowds will be awful. I should have known. “Why’s that?” I ask anyway.

Tim is pretty blunt today, which I can appreciate, since this is a long-distance call at peak-pricing time. “Mainly because you’ll be traveling from about seven hundred feet of elevation to sixty-five hundred and then hiking up to over fourteen thousand.”

“So?”

“So you’re not going to have time to acclimate. You’ll probably get altitude sickness—headaches, nausea, dizziness, maybe even edema.”*

“Edema? What’s that?”

“That’s when your lungs don’t get enough oxygen and they fill up with fluid and you can literally drown on the mountain.”

“Drown?”

“Drown.” (*Blunt.*)

* The exact term is *high altitude pulmonary edema*.

I think about this for a moment. Chera is down the hallway stuffing my new sleeping bag into the big zippered pouch at the bottom of my new blue backpack (internal frame). “But, Tim, we’ve already got the plane tickets.” This sounds to me like an odd response to someone who has just told me that I—*we*, my daughter and I—could drown.

“I’m just telling you what I know,” he says.

“Well, thanks,” I respond. “And if you’re not having too much fun grilling burgers this weekend, turn on the news and see if they have to send in a helicopter for us.”

He knows I’m joking. “Be careful.”

I don’t tell Chera about my phone conversation with Tim because I don’t want her to worry. And I certainly don’t tell her mother. Instead, I rehearse the basic CPR routine in my head (five compressions, one breath, or is that ten compressions and then two breaths?*) and decide that if either of us looks the least bit woozy, changes color, or spits up *anything*, then we’ll come straight back off that mountain. *But will that be too late?* Maybe we should cancel. This isn’t sounding so safe anymore.

But I see Chera and she’s dragging my backpack down the hallway, grinning. “Well, most of it’s all in there,” she announces between deep breaths and points to my fat backpack. “Do you have any aspirin?” she asks.

“Why?”

“Larry and Lori say that if we start taking aspirin now, we may not have bad headaches on the mountain. Keeps our blood thin too, so there’s less chance of edema.”

“You know about edema?”

She balances the backpack on its end and stands with her hands on her hips, her arms akimbo. “I know it can kill you,” she says, quoting Larry and Lori.

* The current recommended ratio is thirty chest compressions to two breaths.

I glance down the hallway and then back at Chera. “Listen,” I say, whispering, “maybe we should just keep that to ourselves.”

She shrugs like it’s no big deal and then goes back for more stuff, like aspirin.

People climb mountains all the time, don't they? We'll be safe. After all, it'll be Labor Day weekend and there'll be lots of people out there. People who can help with the stretcher.



Chera and I wrestle our backpacks off the conveyor belt at the Colorado Springs Airport. It’s 11 a.m. the Saturday before Labor Day. We weighed them at the airport in Nashville. Mine is thirty-eight pounds, but I’ve got a lot of good stuff in there—valuable stuff, I think. There’s a pocketknife that’ll do about a hundred different things, like open wine bottles and punch leather and magnify stuff. I’ve also packed a collapsible shovel, a shiny bar made of magnesium that I can start fires with if I shave off tiny slivers and then set a spark to them, a two-person tent, some water bottles, assorted pieces of cookware, a Bible, a flashlight, a cookstove, some extra clothes, a pillow you could crush to the size of a bar of soap, a bar of soap the size of a pillow, and a blanket that looks like a small square of tinfoil. Chera’s pack weighs twenty-eight pounds, which includes the chicken teriyaki.

We’re both hungry. So we hoist the packs onto our backs and make our way to the taxi lane with our best lean-forward-so-this-heavy-thing-doesn’t-pull-us-down-to-our-rear-ends strides. Chera’s wearing a pair of blue sweat-pants, the swishy kind, and a lighter blue T-shirt. Her hair lightly brushes the top of her shoulders as she walks, and she’s tied a green bandanna around her forehead. We exchange embarrassed grins as we walk through the busy airport. We’ve never done anything even close to this before.

Already we've had an adventure. I'm pulling and tugging on a dozen different straps of the backpack, just hoping I'm wearing this thing right. We could be off to broadcast a new episode of *The Pierce Family Show*.

Out on the curb the cabdriver guesses we're headed for Barr Trail, and we feel good because we've found someone who knows where we're going. I ask him if there's a sandwich shop between here and there, and he grins and tells us to hop in. In the semi-clean little sandwich shop, with handwritten menus taped to the walls, I order a roast beef with warm swiss cheese, and Chera gets her usual pepperoni sub with mayonnaise and jalapeños. We bag them up and take them with us because we know we have a long way to go.

"There it is, Chera," I say while pointing to Pikes Peak from the cab. I think it's Pikes Peak, anyway. It's been a while since I'd been to Colorado Springs, but I feel sure this is it, since it's twice as big as anything around. Plus, I remember that when I was here before, the mountain reminded me of my eighth-grade history teacher, Mr. Jones. He was the first bald person I'd ever known. From a distance the mountain looks as slick as an egg on top, but is decorated with a fringe of green that loops about the mountain, about midway down. Those are trees, but from a distance it looks like tufts of hair framing a bald head, like Mr. Jones. Yep, that's Pikes Peak all right.

Chera's Internet sources told us that a man named Fred Barr started a trail in 1914 and completed it in 1918. During those four years, he'd work in the coal mines in the winter and save his money to buy dynamite so in the summers he could blast away big boulders to make his trail. Chera found out that the trail is almost thirteen miles long and climbs over seven thousand feet in altitude. There's a camp at ten thousand feet, about seven miles up: Barr Camp (of course), where Fred and his wife lived while he worked on the trail, blowing up rocks. That's where we're headed for the first night. We want to set up camp there and then go for the summit after a good night's sleep and some hot ramen noodles. But the map she'd

printed from the Internet doesn't show us exactly *where* the trail starts—or rather the *trailhead*, I learned it's called.

The cabbie drops us off at the train depot and says, “Here you go! The trailhead is right up there,” and leaves with his fare and (I think) a generous tip. Only, I'm not sure what a trailhead's supposed to look like.

We'll ask someone. There are lots of people here buying tickets for a train ride to the top. I lead the way into the train depot, but I'm still not used to the backpack, so when I turn sideways to let someone pass, I whack a display rack filled with key chains and train whistles and train caps. Everything shakes and rattles, and a high-school kid working behind the counter grabs hold of the wire rack to steady it. “Sorry,” I say. I can feel myself turning red. From the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Chera as she backs out the door, away from all breakables. “I'll take a couple bottles of water,” I say, hoping this makes up for the scare I gave the kid. “And do you have a map of the trail?” I ask.

“We have this,” he says, sliding a single sheet of paper across the counter toward me. It's a hand drawing of the train route that passes along such neat places as Son-of-a-Gun Hill, Ghost Corner, Lion's Den, and Hell's Gate.

“You hiking or taking the train?” the high-school kid asks.

“Hiking,” I say, patting one of the straps that holds the backpack that nearly wiped out his little souvenir shop.

“Here's Barr Trail,” he says, tracing a finger along a squiggly line on the map.

The map isn't the greatest, but it's better than what we got off the Internet. “How much for the map?” I ask.

“Twenty-five cents.”

It's a chore to dig my wallet out of my pocket. But I finally do, and I pay him for the water and our new map, then slowly back out of the shop, waving good-bye with my water bottles. Chera's waiting on me out front

with the sandwiches. I can tell she's been laughing. We walk over to a quiet spot where we believe the trailhead to be (according to my new map) and eat like hungry dogs while hard, tanned, skinny people with backpacks walk by us—eating raisins and trail mix. We have trail mix too, but I'm waiting to pull it out later, for when we're actually on the trail. And even though we eat while sitting on the ground and use our shirtsleeves instead of napkins, somehow I don't think the guys climbing Everest had ever squatted at their trailhead to eat a roast beef and cheese—but then again, as I think about the tragedy of it all, I wonder if maybe they should have.

When we finish our sandwiches, we stare at the map for some time, right side up, upside down, sideways. Finally, I ask someone passing by for directions. He points us to a footpath that leads from a gravel parking lot and up a grassy knoll.

We head that way. "Shouldn't there be a sign or something?" Chera asks me.

"Maybe they're trying to keep it like it looked in 1918," I tell her. *Yeah, that sounds right.* Chera leads the way. I can't believe we're in Colorado with heavy backpacks strapped on, map in hand, looking for a trailhead. This is getting sort of exciting!

Before Chera can climb too far up the trail, I pull my camera from an easy-to-get-to pouch and tell her to look back at me. She freezes and looks back and smiles. She even exaggerates the first step onto the trail, raising a leg and pausing with her foot hovering just above the packed earth that will eventually lead us to the summit. I snap her picture. Then, almost on all fours, she scrambles up a couple of steps and slips and comes sliding and scooting back down to me, knocking into me and my camera. I'm glad I'm there to catch her.

"It's pretty steep, Dad," she says, blushing and adjusting her pack.

"Maybe this is the worst part," I say hopefully. But my backpack suddenly feels so heavy. *I can't scramble up this hill! It's too steep!*

She shifts her load a bit and checks her straps. I snap a couple more pictures of this. Then she leans forward and tries again, no posing this time. Her boots slip a little at first, and pebbles avalanche down the path behind her and stop at my feet. Using her hands, she finally finds purchase in some large green tufts of grass on each side of the trail and pulls herself forward and up. Just before she reaches the top she remembers to turn and smile, and I snap another frame. She goes over the top and out of sight, comes back to peek over, then waves me up. "Come on!" she calls. Her bandanna is a darker green now because of the sweat.

Even from where I'm standing and looking up, I can tell Chera's breathing hard. I put away the camera and cinch down my belts and straps and, remembering Chera's struggle with those first two steps, get a running start. Bad idea. At almost seven thousand feet of altitude, and after a warm cheese and roast beef sandwich, running up a mountain trail isn't the smartest thing I've ever done. But I make it past the loose gravel and grab hold of the grass like I'd seen Chera do. I'm scrambling up the mountain.



I scrambled up the hill that felt like a mountain, just off the highway and at the edge of woods, because Dad had just driven by for the fifth time, and if he didn't find me soon, I was going to get caught by the dark. I was eleven, and Mom and Dad had been fighting again. Sometimes when they did this, when they filled the little hollow we lived in with so much noise that I felt sorry for the trees, that's when I'd run off into the woods and make them find me, just to give them something else to do besides yell at each other.

The first time I had a real sense of trouble at home came a couple of years earlier. We had moved from the city to the country, to a small house with three rooms and no indoor plumbing—that is, until Dad piped in

fresh water from an icy cold spring on one side of the house and, when we were finished with it, piped it back out to the creek on the other side. This seemed like a brilliant piece of engineering to me.

On the night when things broke, when things began to go wrong, Dad and his brother were sitting in lounge chairs out by the spring. It was dark except for the light afforded by the moon and front porch light, and they were drinking beer. Just a couple of grown men sipping and chatting is what it looked like. But Dad never drank beer that I ever knew of. Back in the city the people who drank beer were bad people, people who stayed in trouble, smelled bad, and wore shabby clothes. That Dad was drinking beer made my stomach hurt.

Not long after this night, the fights started. Usually this only happened when he was drinking beer. When he wasn't, life in the country was pleasant enough (even more so after we got the plumbing in). I was close to God then. I had found him at Sunday school back in the city. So I asked him to help out: *Please put a stop to all this, would you?* And I thought that settled that.

Instead things got worse. More drinking, more fighting. Maybe God just needed a little help getting started, I thought. When running away didn't help, I decided to pour out the beer. Dad would try to hide it from me—out in the woods or behind the smokehouse. Wherever he hid it, I always found it and emptied every bit. Then I'd put the cans back like I'd found them. I don't know why. Part of me wanted him to believe the cans had just leaked out. Perhaps he'd think God had intervened, and this would make him quit. But when he'd ask me if I had anything to do with it, I always said yes.

This was definitely a job for God. Only now I believed I'd lost him somehow. But my family was too important. I would find him, I promised myself. Moses had found him on a mountain. I'd seen the movie. I'd find him too. No matter how hard it would be. And when I did find him, I

would make him help me. Make him help Mom and Dad. So I set out looking for God, having no real idea of where to start, or if I was even on the right trail. And this is how my first mountain climb—that knowledge of God—began.



When I get to the top, Chera congratulates me by grabbing hold of my backpack and giving it a little shake. This is something that I guess backpackers must do all the time, since you can't give a real pat on the back and a high-five could send you straight over the edge. I want so badly to do that Rocky dance, but I can't celebrate too much because I'm leaning over with my hands on my knees and taking in great gulps of thin air and working to keep my sandwich down, all while Chera is shaking my backpack and saying, "All right! Way to go, Dad!"

When I can, I ask Chera, "How far do you suppose we've come?"

She peeks over the small knoll again and studies for a moment before saying, "About eight feet." Good. Only 6,992 more to go.

"It was a good eight feet, though, right?" I say, proudly. Then, stepping to the edge and taking a peek for myself, I say, part in disdain for the elevation I had just conquered, part in hope for the future elevation I would tackle, part in dread, and part in prayer, "Maybe that's the toughest eight feet of the trail." I imagine there's even been songs written about this part of the trail, songs about people dying and freezing in the winter and running out of food and all that stuff, right here, right on this eight-foot part of the trail we've just whipped.

Once I'm able to straighten to at least a mountain climber's lean, we walk on through a small, level grassy field, beneath some electrical wires strung through these giant metal poles and brackets (*Is this safe?*) until we come to another parking lot, only this one is paved and busy with cars and

with people coming and going. Across this stretch of asphalt is a huge wooden sign that reads Barr Trail Trailhead, and there are people taking turns standing by it and having their pictures made.

“Oh look, Dad,” Chera exclaims, pointing to the sign. “*That’s* where the trail starts!” I’m still breathing way too hard when she sings, “Come on! Get a picture of me by the sign.”

It was all I could do to hike to the point where we would start our great adventure.