

# **DUDEVILLE**

A Novel by J.D. Kleinke

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*For Sara, for everything*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Dudeville* is a work of fiction. The characters portrayed and incidents described in this novel are products of my research, imagination, self-indulgence, and spiritual attachment to several extraordinary places in the American West. Any resemblance between one of these characters and any person living or dead — aside from explicit references to public figures, mountaineering accidents, or acts of violence known to the general public — is purely coincidental. (All dogs portrayed in *Dudeville*, however, are based on real dogs. To honor their superhuman levels of physical stamina and personal loyalty, I have used their actual names.)

The dates of origin of the known universe as expressed by *Dudeville*'s narrator are based on generally accepted knowledge in 2001. These dates have been and will continue to be subject to revision, based on evolving scientific and political conditions.

I have attempted to align my descriptions of mountaineering, skiing, snowboarding and hang-gliding techniques in *Dudeville* with what were best practices in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Before proceeding into any Rocky Mountain, Sonora Desert, or Sierra Nevada wilderness area, you should understand the risks, know how to use your equipment, and be prepared for dangerous conditions. You should also use the same precautions before proceeding into a locals' bar in any small town adjacent to those areas.

J.D. Kleinke  
Half Moon Bay, California  
October 4, 2017

*I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.*

Mark Twain  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

**Colorado  
Summer, 2001**

## Summit Fever

Those kids shouldn't have been up here alone, summit-drunk and dancing around on an unstable boulder field above treeline, any more than I should have been up here alone to rescue them. But they were and I did, even if it spooked me from coming back for so many months to what had become a routine training run — an up-and-down solo climb with my snowboard and packful of emergency gear — onto the roof of the Rocky Mountains.

I probably shouldn't be back up here alone today either. But they were tourists, and I know what I'm doing. Danny and Aaron are both working, like they were a year ago. And Jill is gone again, finally and forever this time, not that I really care. I will always have these trees to keep me company, the glowing blue spruces and towering lodgepole pines and red-orange ponderosas, reaching up into a patchwork canopy of snow-bent boughs and blue sky. On this warm morning, they are shaking off big wet clumps of snow, and ripening sweet and spicy with the belated spring that is May at 10,000 feet.

They urge me up the mountain, my chest heaving against packstraps pulled tight with the weight of my board and gear, a cage for lungs scratching like dried paper for more parched air.

*Slow down and stay in the box, the aerobic box, I remind myself as the first glimpse of snowfield and summit pull at me. Breathe in, breathe out, look down at the trail, breathe in again.*

It is easy to get ahead of my own pace when I'm climbing solo; but otherwise, the solitude way up here suits me just fine. Right after Tom and Becky sold the company and I was finally able to run west, most of my big days up here in the mountains or down in the desert were exactly that: solo. No wife, no job, no kids, no worries, just me, the earth, the sky, and time.

When I look up again, the last of the snow is dropping in crusty clumps from the wind-sculpted trees, into piles across the trail, along old drifts and banks of it, spiked with cones and dusted with pine debris.

I climb up and over each snow bench with my load, into my own private sanctuary, these old trees a congregation of druid-priests in robes of glittering snowmelt. John Muir — who also started out as an engineer Back East before he too found the Presence up here — wrote love letters to the hushed anthropomorphic huddle of these old trees at altitude. But so far today, no Presence, not yet, nor any wind, just scattered birdsong, and the scratch of pikas, and the random clop of snow off a sagging limb.

Maybe the Presence is late to the mountain this morning because of the nagging memory, the lingering presence of those kids: I'm not here today so much as I'm still here last spring, when this sanctuary was pierced by a girl's scream somewhere up ahead, then more screams and a frantic flash of color through the green and gray and snow-rimmed trees.

"Help us! Please!!!" she shrieked, bounding over the ridge of snow up the trail, all spindly legs and big brown hiking boots, her dirty blond hair poking out of a blue bandana. She was maybe 25 years old and no more than a hundred pounds, her thin white arms, streaked with what looked like blood, waving at me, "Please help us!"

She almost knocked me over, winded, and when she grabbed my packstraps, I saw that it *was* blood, dried streaks of it down her arms and all over her hands. “Please! Now!!!”

I don’t remember what I said or she said next, only what I felt pulling at my entire body and can feel right now: the maniacal tug of those little bloody hands on my packstraps, trying to drag me up the trail. I also remember feeling, in that same instant, myself going into shitstorm mode, something deep inside me reaching up and holding her and me in place, something rooted and solid and steady as one of these tough old trees.

Then my own voice, as if from faraway, in the eye of that shitstorm: “Yes, I’m here, and I will help you. But first,” I watched myself holding and rotating her arms, scanning them for the source of the blood. “Where are you hurt?”

“I’m fine!” she screamed and pulled her arms away and bent over on her knees, gulping for air. “This is just — from that rock. I cut myself — trying to move it.”

I dropped my pack and pulled out a water bottle for her, but she kept sucking for air and then collapsed onto her knees. “But you’re bleeding,” I pulled my snowboard off my pack, wondering what other weight I could shed before we ran up the trail. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“It’s from — trying to move — that damn rock! But my boyfriend! He’s trapped!”

And then I heard Aaron’s voice, also from the eye of the shitstorm: *Always get their names*, he has told me a dozen times, *because communication and trust are critical*.

“What’s your name?” I asked and handed her the water bottle.

“Angie —” she gulped at the water through breaths. Her face was streaked with the mud of tears, sweat, and dust. “Please! You have to help us!”

“Ok, Angie,” I said, propping my snowboard and camera into the crook of a tree next to the trail, wishing I had more weight to shed but knowing all my other gear — of varying necessity in normal circumstances — might be critical in a rescue. “Take a deep breath, ok?” I cinched my pack down tight around my ax, shovel, and rope, and took the water bottle from her. “And tell me where we’re headed.”

“On the rocks! Up near the top! My boyfriend — his leg is trapped! Please hurry!”

“Toward the summit?” I pulled on my pack, now half the weight without my snowboard. “Up on the boulderfield?”

“Yes! Those damn boulders!” She took another gulp of water and coughed it back up. “His leg is caught — and I think it’s broken! I tried to move the rock,” she held up her bloody hands, “and it — I — I think I made it worse. Please come now!”

She sprinted back up the trail, and I hurried after her, jumping right out of the aerobic box, instantly winded, my breath gone and legs turning to dumb stumps.

But I caught her soon enough: she was actually trying to run, still frantic and wiped out by the altitude but driven by bad adrenaline, the worst way to get anywhere up here.

A few minutes up the trail, the last of the shriveled druid-pines gave way to a sweep of rock and snow, a terminal moraine cascading like a great river of rock, tumbling down at us and what was left of the treeline. She scrambled up the brown snowpack of trail zigzagging through the moraine, clawing at loose boulders for balance. I ran after her as fast as I could, trying not to post-hole in the snow or lose my balance with my pack pulling at me, flushed with my own bad adrenaline, time slowing, an odd metallic taste welling in my mouth.

“Hurry!” she turned and screamed at me from the top. “Please!” And then she was gone.

I crested the moraine, onto the long, jagged lip of the boulder field spilling off the summit of Sunrise Peak.

Reverberating through the rock I could hear and feel her frantic route before I could see her on it. She wasn't following the trail, marked by cairns if you know to look for them, that switchbacks up shelves of relatively stabilized boulders; she was scrambling straight up the middle, two and three hundred pound rocks shifting and clacking and clattering in her wake like giant bowling balls. As I started up the field and tested my own weight against each sharp, jagged, loose rock — splashed with lime-green and burnt-orange lichen on one side, worn and broken off on the others — I heard Aaron's voice again: *Panicking during a rescue will create a second rescue. Don't turn yourself into another victim. Watch your step, keep breathing, and stay calm.*

I picked my way quickly but carefully up the slope, over the top of that torrent of sharp, angular, loose rock spilled down through giant round boulders, fighting the weight of my pack and hot rasp of my lungs. I'd helped people with minor stuff on trails, and I'd been doing first responder and mountain rescue training with Aaron for more than a year now. But this would be my first real rescue, and my first one solo, as these kids' especially shitty luck would have it.

My mind raced with the possibilities, all of them until that moment textbook-diagram, clinic-demo, roadtrip-story stuff, and all of them horrific: a trapped leg, maybe a fracture, and if so, maybe open and bloody; if not, maybe closed but unstable, the fracture pinching shut a major artery, the leg dying right in front of you. But beyond all those images, lessons, stories, there was an odd, intense, inner trance of perfect calm at the center of everything.

*You can lever the rock off his leg with your ice ax, I remember hearing my own voice, in eye-of-the-shitstorm mode — a voice I hadn't heard since a very bad day at work several years ago — as my body struggled its way up those rattling shifting rocks. Assess first: how bad a fracture? If open, will it be bleeding? Or is the rock working like a tourniquet, compressing the femoral artery — and*

*when you lever the rock off, will he bleed out? Or even if closed, what if it's an unstable fracture, the tibia and fibula jammed into the neurovascular bundle, his foot gone numb, and without blood, his lower leg already dead or dying, and sure to be dead before you can get him off this mountain? What's the acronym to check for that? CSM? Yes, that's it: circulation, sensation, movement.*

I had only ever heard Aaron talk about CSM, or seen it in the manuals, or watched Aaron demonstrate how to check for it and fix it — *another damn acronym, TIP for traction in place, right?* — on Jill's perfectly fine leg during a clinic.

As I scrambled after her, I did not look up from the rock, from each careful handhold and foothold; I saw only Aaron's still young but strong, weathered hands on Jill's tanned and muscled leg, heard only Aaron's voice, explaining over and over how to traction an unstable leg fracture. *The leg wants to go back where it belongs, but you have to give it room. You can't just force it back. You have to pull it out, gently, straight out, and hold it in line, gently but firmly, and let it find its way back. It's all feel, and a little counterintuitive, but you'll feel it.*

And I remembered thinking, back in the clinic: I don't *ever* want to feel that, the twisted rubber of someone's shattered and dying leg in my hands, and certainly not on top of some mountain with no real help and no idea how to get him down.

"We're coming, honey!" her faraway scream jarred me back from the clinic, Aaron's voice, Jill's leg. "Almost there!"

I looked up the boulder field and saw Angie bouncing from rock to rock about fifty yards ahead. Another fifty yards or so above her, halfway to the summit and splayed out in that massive pile of rock, I spotted what looked like a tangle of rags, whipping in the wind. I felt another surge of bad adrenaline, watching her jump from boulder to boulder, screaming and waving her arms.

"I found someone, honey! We're coming! He's got gear and stuff and can get you out!"

I picked my way up the boulders toward them as fast as I dared, careful to look at my feet, the pack swinging back and forth. *Don't turn yourself into a second victim; watch your step; keep breathing; stay calm.*

Another dozen handholds and footholds, gravity and the howling wind pulling at me and my pack, and I looked up again just in time to see her reach him. He was not moving. Maybe he was passed out, maybe in shock from bleeding out, maybe all but dead by now.

The odd calm at my core was flushed with more bad adrenaline and another version of my own voice, crazy with fear, broke through all that howling wind, yelling over my eye-of-the-shitstorm voice: *What the hell are you supposed to do if he's passed out or dead? You've only ever done CPR on a resuscitation dummy, all of twice, and that was in the bright lights of the clinic with Aaron and Jill standing there, watching, correcting, encouraging. Your first rescue ever, and solo? Above treeline in a screaming wind, with no route out?? Who are you kidding???* This isn't some bullshit business crisis you used to be so good at handling. These kids are counting on you, and not in the way Tom or Becky or one of your staff counted on you to clean up some work mess back when — or the band counted on you with a long guitar solo when Johnny was melting down on stage **way** back when. That was all corporate trivia or party noise, all status, swagger, or saving face. *But this? This is life-or-death.*

I tried to ignore that other voice and shot up the steepest section of the boulder field, a three-dimensional puzzle of sharp and shifting rock, as fast as I dared.

“Here he comes, honey!” Angie shouted over the wind, as much to me as to him as I pulled myself up into the crevice below them.

He was splayed out on a 45-degree slab, hovering over the crevice at an odd angle, propped up on his elbows and grimacing, his left leg jammed down into a crack spilling off the other side. He was Angie's age, his freckled face drained of color,

his red curls tied back in a blue bandana like hers, shivering and moaning.

Angie crouched over him, trying to lift his head and get water in him, and he tried to mumble something to her over the wind.

“What’s his name?” I shouted to her, as I dropped my pack next to him.

“Sean!”

“How you doing, Sean?” I shouted over the wind. “I’m Jack.”

He mumbled something, and tried to make eye contact, but he was shivering and shaking, and going in and out.

I searched the crack, the gap above, alongside, and below his leg. No blood, good; the shiny black treads of a mostly new hiking boot along the seam at an odd angle, not so good. I scrambled back onto the slab next to him and saw the culprit: a round boulder no bigger than a very large watermelon had rolled down and wedged into the crack alongside the slab, grabbing and clamping down on his leg just below the knee.

A howling gust of wind blasted us with grit.

*First, get them warm*, Aaron always says. When the blast of wind passed, I stood and dumped out my pack. I pulled out my green poncho, a \$25 sheet of green plastic that has saved more lives in the backcountry in more ways — insulation, shelter, warmth, water-catcher, tourniquet — than every other piece of survival gear and technology combined.

“We’re gonna get you out of here!” I said as I fitted the poncho around as much of him as I could. “Ok, buddy?”

He tried to nod, his head mostly just lolling backward.

“Can you feel your left leg?” I shouted over the wind.

“What are we going to do?” Angie shouted, her voice still edgy and panicked. “We need to move this damn rock off his leg!”

*Speak calmly*, Aaron always says, *and look them in the eye. Take another breath, close your eyes, and you’ll figure out what to do. After*

*enough of these drills, a rescue strategy will come to you. Just take another breath.*

“Yes,” I shouted over the wind, my eye-of-the-shitstorm voice again. “We’re going to get this rock off his leg, and then we’re going to get you guys out of here. Ok?”

“Ok! But please hurry!”

The rest is a blur of execution, and Aaron was exactly right: I didn’t figure out what to do so much as it just came to me, and I don’t really remember how. I remember only this: seeing a flash of light out of the corner of my eye, and looking over at the glinting of the sun in the crisscross of silvery nicks and dings in the steel-blue handle of my ice ax. Then the ax was in my left hand, and a small rock just wider than Sean’s leg was in my right hand, and the long handle was sliding into the slot below his knee and above where the boulder was clamped down around his leg, bulging purple, like a huge grape about to burst.

And I remember saying, as calmly as I could over the wind, “Ok, Angie, I’ll lever this to get the rock off. But he’s going to start sliding down when it comes off. So you hold him in place, ok?”

“Yes! Please! Do it now!”

“Ok, Sean? Are you with me? Just keep breathing, buddy, and — ”

“Ok,” he tried to shout back, sounding like a drunk on the edge of passing out. “I’m cool. I’ll be cool. I’m cool.”

“Good,” I said, and forced eye contact. “And listen, man. This might hurt when the rock comes off — ok?”

Out of the corners of my eyes, I could see Angie’s eyes bulge with panic and tears, so I moved in right over him, looking straight down into his dazed, nearly vacant face.

“Just keep breathing, ok? And don’t look down.”

“Ok, man,” he panted, “ok.”

“Look over there,” I nodded toward Powell’s Peak, the high point to the south, still wreathed in snow and ice and gleaming in the late morning sun. “Check out that awesome summit.”

“Where?” he moaned, his head rolling around, eyes swimming.

“Over there,” I pointed with the ax. “That’s Powell’s Peak. A great summit.”

I probed the crack along the boulder and the slab with the tip of my ice ax, to see what else might break loose with the rock when I lifted it.

“What’s it called?” he mumbled.

“Powell’s Peak,” I said as I inserted the levering stone into the crack just above his leg. With the slightest movement of my own weight, I could feel gravity pulling me down off that angled slab to the ledge below us.

“You — you been — up there?” He was trying to make small talk, and I knew exactly why, and would have done the same thing. “On the top of that?”

“Many times,” I said as I tested the angle with my ax, the edges of the rock and where it would slip, the sharp edges wiggling and tightening around his leg. “You can see all the way down into New Mexico from up there. Amazing views.”

He mumbled something, but I was absorbed in trying to project which way the boulder will move when I pushed against the levering stone. I knew it would move fast and down, as fast and down as it could go; and I knew that at the exact same moment, his leg would explode into fiery and nauseating pain — if we were lucky, and he didn’t have an unstable fracture. Little or no pain would actually mean something much worse.

All bad outcomes, I thought. So my mind busied itself with the brute physics of the thing, a classical engineering problem of lever, opposite point on a curving plane, friction, weight and gravity. I would worry about the other thing after the eternity of the next few seconds.

“Ok, Angie!” I was snapped back by my own voice, straining over the wind from the eye of the shitstorm. “Let’s get this done.”

She looked up at me, her eyes frantic, searching mine.

“I’m going to lever this rock off his leg right here. And it’s going to go fast, ok? Right down through there. So help me out by holding him up as tight as you can. All his weight, with everything you got, ok?”

“Ok! Do it!! Please!!!”

“On my count of three. And don’t you look down at it either. Just look at me, ok?”

“Ok!”

I crouched down as low as I could over the slab and braced my foot against the only nub I could find.

“Ok. 1 — 2 — 3.”

I held the levering stone in place with my left hand and pressed down onto the ax handle with a steady progression of force with my right hand and with almost no effort, scarcely any pressure at all...

*POP!* the boulder sprang from the crevice and Sean let out one short piercing shriek — a stabbing yelp, like a dog rundown by a car — and the rock rolled down onto the ledge below, landing with a thud that stopped the wind, stopped all sound, stopped the whoosh of the blood in my ears for the eternity of an instant...

And then the wind and Sean’s screams rushed back with the thunder of blood rushing into my ears, and I turned to see Angie holding him fast and weeping.

I don’t remember dropping the levering stone and ax, or sliding down the slab into place, only that I was there below him, bracing against the wind and holding the bottom of his new hiking boot, staring at his bulging purple lower leg. It was turned at a slightly odd — maybe five or six or seven degrees off axis — but not the grotesque angle I’d been imagining. And I remember thinking: *Yes, keep screaming and howling, buddy. Your leg is broken just above the boot top, but there are no bones sticking through. And you can feel it, which means that it’s not dying.*

I knew I still had to check his leg for CSM, splint it, and figure out how to get him down off this mountain. But when I looked up and saw Angie hugging him, fiercely, her face covered in tears — yelling and crying “thank you, thank you!” to me over the wind — I realized how bad this could have been, and still might be. I looked back at his twisted leg, the skin purple and swollen near to bursting, and I felt a wave of nausea crash up into my throat.

I lowered his leg carefully onto the slab and myself into the gap where the boulder had been, trying not to look at his leg, trying to catch my breath and choke back the bile and find the eye of the shitstorm again.

“You’re free, honey!” Angie yelled and held and rocked him. “The rock is off! You’re free!”

He was trying to choke back the pain, writhing in a nest of muffled howls in her arms, as she wept and stroked his sweat-and mud-streaked face. She turned to shout *Thank you!* again to me but an odd *What’s the matter?* look came over her face when she saw I don’t know what on my face, and...

*FLASH!*

In the trees, just up ahead, a deer breaks from cover.

Angie’s face, wet with tears and splotted with dirt and blood, is whisked away, along with that horribly broken leg.

I stop and look up the trail as another clump of snow drops from the canopy and explodes onto the trail. Sunlight flashes off a field of snow further up. The woods are eerily silent after the memory of all that screaming wind.

I follow the trail up and over a gap between two boulders, and down into a little glade flooded with sunlight, the late spring snow cupped and dusted with tiny pine needles. It seems like a scene out of a bad dream I keep having, except I’m awake and it wasn’t a dream. And it’s especially real, standing here on the same rise where I first heard that piercing scream, caught that

flash of color through the old trees, saw the blood streaking her arms as she ran straight at me.

I stop for some water and a deep breath, and listen to the woods. No wind, the trees stilled, a cone dropping from the trees with a puff of pine dust and rolling down a tongue of snow. The skitter of a pika over a rock, a bird flitting through the canopy, the sound of my own heartbeat.

I've imagined far more gruesome things happening up here: the dozens of stories Aaron tells about rescues that didn't go as well; Danny's cataloging of every detail about his own accident — leg fracture AND a concussion — on Quandary Peak his first year out here; and all the stories in the rescue manuals, and climbing memoirs, and pages of *Outside Magazine*. And it could have gone so much worse for Sean too. He could have knocked a bigger rock loose and ended up with a nastier fracture. Or the way Angie was running around up here, she could have hurt herself too. Or if she had made it down this far in one piece, it was another couple hours back to the trailhead. Or on that particular day, I could just as easily have chosen instead to run up and snowboard off Powell's, or Prosperity, or Opal, or the left side of The Lady. Worst of all, Sean could have been up here hiking solo, like I am today, with no one around to run for help or bail him out. He would have died, eventually, from hypothermia, which wouldn't be painful, would actually have been a nice buzz on the way out, but he'd still end up dead.

I tighten my packstraps, drink more water, and look up through the last of the trees at the first long ridge of boulders, at that terminal moraine, the start of the push to the summit.

*Different situation*, I say to myself as I start back up the trail, *because I know what I'm doing*. I won't be up there wandering off the settled route through the boulder field, dancing around on unstable rock like two kids on vacation, drunk with altitude and summit fever. And Aaron and Danny both know where I'm headed, what route I'm taking, and the latest possible time I

should be back to check in, cardinal rules of solo summiting or canyoneering. The rest, well, is luck.

As for Sean and Angie, on that day a little more than a year ago, I guess they were unlucky *and* lucky. The accident happened; but I also happened to come along at exactly the right time, on what I know is a wildly random trajectory — to this particular mountain, in the cirque above Dudeville, on a spring day in 2001, two and a half years after fleeing the steady grind of a corporate job Back East to the wild blur of the mountains Out West.

I tried explaining that to them in Ullar's, where they insisted on buying me a bunch of beers a few days after Sean was out of surgery and the hospital, hauling his leg around in a huge cast.

But Angie and Sean — good Midwestern kids to the core, and just under the grad-school hippie surface, still Presbyterian or Methodist or whatever — insisted that it wasn't a coincidence at all. Our trajectories, Sean tried to explain to me, weren't random but something cosmic, the consequences of what he called "The Really Big Math."

"It's like you were meant to be there," he kept saying, because "God" (he lowered his voice; we were in a bar, after all) was looking out for him and Angie, and teaching all three of us important lessons about ourselves.

Maybe it was all those beers — and/or maybe just a little of the odd affection I had for them because of what we'd been through and the consequent intense affection they had for me — but I copped to just a little bit of my own ongoing fascination with The Really Big Math. I knew that what Sean was saying about cosmic trajectories was equal parts wishful thinking and nonsense; but I did admit to them that I mess around with The Really Big Math myself all the time, when I'm hiking around way up here, or way down in some isolated desert canyon. But the cosmic whatever I encounter almost every time I'm alone in the wilderness, I tried to explain, is hardly benevolent, or

malevolent, or either depending on the Almighty Mood Swing, as they and the rest of the believers would have it. What I find instead — what I feel, or intuit, or sense like an unseen but palpable presence in a room the size of everything — is simply that: an unseen but palpable presence. Hence my clever name for the Presence. (I was never any good at that corporate branding stuff.)

But they would have none of it. To them, my saving Sean and his leg was the sole, proximate and sufficient reason that I woke up one day at age 37, blew off my job, and moved west to snowboard in the backcountry.

So I eventually just let them believe that. It was a lot more interesting than the plain old truth: after years of daydreaming, planning, and hoarding, I blew off not just a great job but a great career, a good if dull marriage, and everything else I'd piled up and welded together from a rock bottom start to life. Or the not so plain truth: I moved west to run around up here in the mountains, sure; but I really came out here, and up here, because after twenty years of crawling out of my broken parents' small-town poverty — and then out of the self-imposed poverty of the big city music dream — I found myself right back where I started: alone, in the woods, where I was free. And not really alone, because there was always the Presence, usually somewhere just past treeline, or just below the rim of the canyon, or right up there on that summit.

How to explain this to these good kids from good families from the middle of wherever? How to explain that, after the long slow death of my marriage and another decade of seven-day workweeks, the success-rush was gone and money didn't matter anymore? Or that I had fallen not for any woman or drug or cult, but for this thing I can't name, let alone explain? Or that, in my pursuit of this thing, this Presence, I'd become preoccupied if not obsessed with snow and rock and ice, with channeling all my physical and emotional energy to the adrenaline rush of

reaching the summit of something massive and dangerous, and then hurling myself off on a snowboard, or a hang-glider, or skis?

The rest of that Really Big Math is — sorry kids — completely random. I happened to end up in Dudeville, because I happened to meet Aaron when he was working on a ski patrol back in Vermont one winter, because he happened to be renting a room in Amy the Rebound Girl's ski house, whom I happened to meet in a bar in Killington after the lifts had closed. I've been learning mountain rescue not so I could and would one day end up happening to rescue Sean, but because I have to: one day I might have to rescue someone with me on a climb.

And maybe just a little bit because I like being useful. Wanting to be useful, which always used to correlate, roughly, with the cash that usefulness generates, is why I gave up on the music dream. It's why I ground my way through that early, workmanlike marriage to a woman who'd also fled poverty. And it's why I ended up in engineering school. I always wanted to do something real, even if by the mid-1990s, that meant managing a hundred other engineers who built nothing more real than software.

What is real, by contrast to all of that, is what is all around me up here. No software, no people, no money — only these old, weathered trees, and those snow-aproned boulders up ahead, tumbled all the way down here from the summit to their angles of repose, and the electric blue dream of Colorado sky bathing all of this in light so intense it makes my eyes ache.

Out finally from under the edge of the canopy, I hike up through a maze of old pines that looks, from down below or a distant ridge, like treeline. But when you are actually up here in it, you know there is no *treeline*, only a gradual falling away of the trees, bent but not broken from uncounted thrashings of snow and wind. On this warm spring day, these old priests of the mountain — dozens or maybe hundreds of years older than I am

— slip off their encrusted snow robes, awaiting nothing but for me to pass by and be gone.

I thread my way through them on a trail worn brown into the snowpack, past their stooped heads and drooping arms. I pick my steps carefully, as the sun-softened crust breaks under my weight and the weight of my snowboard and gear. The last of the snowpack up here is pockmarked and pebbled with a maroon haze of late season alpine algae, melting into the climbing maze of boulders up ahead.

My breathing is off, something is off, and I realize that part of me is bracing — not for the usual post-holing, a breaking through the snowpack, which happens on this kind of snow all the time — but for the piercing of a woman’s scream, somewhere up on this mountain.

I stop, laugh it off and push on. It wasn’t really me who helped them anyway, just a well-programmed machine that looked like me but moved to the task like Aaron and did exactly what it had seen demonstrated in the clinic and read about a dozen times in the manual. I wasn’t up there with Sean and Angie; I was up there watching me with Sean and Angie.

“His leg is pretty badly broken,” I remember hearing myself say, mostly to myself, as I stood there in the crevice holding his leg in place and choking back the bile flooding my mouth, the wind howling all around the three of us.

Sean was moaning, whimpering, half out of it, and Angie was weeping silently and holding him, shivering, trying to keep him warm.

“Getting him out of here’s going to be a little tricky,” I shouted. “And I need to test for something first.”

“Test for what?”

I looked up at him. “Are you with me, Sean?”

“Yeah,” he grimaced. “I’m cool. What?”

The moldable splint in my kit looked small and flimsy next to that bent and bulging leg, and I needed the splint lined up

before I could traction it — *if* I had to traction it — which I hoped I didn't. Every minute would count if the blood had stopped flowing to everything below that fracture.

I started to unlace his boot as carefully as I dared, and he screamed and writhed with the pain, and I knew that was a good thing, but still I had to check. I felt for a pulse along the inside of his ankle, and thought there might just be the slightest tap-tap under the skin.

“Can you feel that, Sean?” I asked as I scratched at the skin down around his ankle.

“Yes,” he gasped for air.

“Are you sure?” I dug my fingernail in.

“Yes!”

“Ok, that's good. And can you wiggle your toes?”

“Ow! Shit! Yes!” he screamed, and I saw his big and second toe wiggle, just barely, but they did. “That hurts!”

“Good!” I said, relieved that I didn't have to think about let alone try to traction it. “Now — all we have to do is get you the hell out of here.”

And it really was all mechanics after that. The machine version of me followed the general directions for a full leg splint in the rescue manual and improvised the specifics, building it from the moldable splint, the detachable handle from my avalanche shovel, and my ice-ax — his foot stabilized inside the right angle where the handle meets the head. I secured the splint with the extra snowboard strap in my kit and rescue rope.

It took three agonizing, exhausting hours, step-by-careful-step, to half-lead and half-carry Sean — propped up between Angie and me — down off the boulder field, and then down off the moraine, to just right here among the druid pines at treeline. It was the middle of the afternoon, and the days were starting to stretch out; but the nights were coming fast and cold when they did. Sean and Angie were both drunk from all the hours at this

altitude, the stress and the adrenaline of the rescue. And we were out of food and nearly out of water.

It took two more slow, grinding hours to get Sean down the lower half of this trail to the junction with the fire road, where we stopped again to rest and finish the last of our water.

I was just starting to feel the trickling tug of more bad adrenaline as I thought about how far we still were to the nearest trailhead — and how it was hit or miss down there with cell phone reception — when I heard a familiar sing-song breathing coming up through the trees. It was a huffing and puffing with a tune in it, and at the very moment I thought *Tyler?*

“Hey guys!”

There was Tyler, bursting around the bend in the fire road, at a full run in a full backpack, humming some old pop song, out on his daily training route.

“What’s up?” he said to Angie and me, his tanned, sculpted, always busy face bathed in sweat, as if he’d half expected to run into us there.

“Oh man, are we glad to see you,” I said.

Then he noticed Sean sprawled out on the ground, half-passed out.

“Looks like it,” he said, dropping his pack with a heavy thud next to Sean. “How are *you* doing, buddy?”

Tyler was one more piece of good luck for them. And for me too at that point, I suppose, because the day, the stress, all the bad adrenaline, and the five-hour crawl of a descent had wiped me out too.

Before I could finish telling Tyler what had happened, he’d dumped out his pack, which was stuffed with his laundry — or “full and consistent ballast for the workout,” as he always calls it — he’d swapped out his hiking boots for trail runners tucked away in the ballast and he’d fished out all his water and emergency food for us. He told us to wait there with his pack and

the pile of laundry, and sprinted down the trail the last two miles to town.

He was back within 45 minutes with Aaron, Gregor, Leese, and a stretcher.

*Because Tyler is the man*, I say to myself, which is how we always end our trail stories about him, and I push on past the very last of the trees.

I hike out onto the first of the flattest, biggest boulder tops, submerged into tundra and snowpack, leading up onto the moraine. I spot the first cairn up ahead, note the stitching of the switchbacks beyond, trace the thread of a trail backward from the first cairn to the snowline at my feet, and dig in.

Tyler is indeed the man, as we say when we're telling stories about other climbs to pass the time. He's indefatigable, indestructible, and just a little bit crazy — everything I'd be if I could take all the energy I waste on rumination or regret up here and put it to kinetic use. Tyler ditched a ten-year business career to run ultra-marathons (100 milers), sky marathons (marathons at altitude), ultra-sky-marathons (100 milers at altitude) and, for pleasure and relaxation, climb ice and rock. He is a wire sculpture of a man — sun-bleached hair and hard blue eyes, mahogany from the sun, his jaw always a little clenched — and impossible to catch. Aaron told me on our first climb with Tyler that, when you're sucking wind trying to keep up with him on the trail, just ask him to tell you a story.

Like the one about his first one-day solo ascent of something that normally takes three days. (“Because gear is what slows you down, man!”) Or the one about his first ultra-sky-marathon (“I kinda got hypothermic because my blood sugar was messed up, so I ate a banana and puked most of it up and ate another and puked up only some of that and then I was fine.”) Or the first time he broke 2:30 in the Boston (“fricking damp and cold back there in April, man — I ran that fast just to try and keep warm.”)

And if getting him to talk the whole way up doesn't work, then you just ask him to sing: he knew the words to every pop song from the 70s and 80s, every word in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and every word in "American Pie," "Alice's Restaurant," and "Bohemian Rhapsody," and he did them with all the funny voices. I usually asked him to start backwards from there, because I knew the stories and knew I would never keep up with him just talking instead of singing. And he is always the first one on top, of course, giggling at the view, that clenched jaw finally let go into the goofy smile of a big kid.

At altitude, Tyler finally goes from alpha-beast to all-boy, a sweetness and joy splashed all over his face at altitude, like he's finally breathing normally.

Which I'm finally doing again, I realize, as I pick my way up through the boulders of the moraine.

I have been revving it too much all morning — hiking outside the aerobic box, running out of breath, having to stop to catch it every few hundred feet — thanks to that awful memory of what happened with Sean and Angie the last time I was up here.

I wonder how they are. Did they end up getting married? What do they think now about their time out here? After they tracked me down at Ullar's and we had those beers, they gave me their home number — told me they wanted me to come to their wedding — but I never did call them. Maybe I should have gotten their email addresses. I hate talking on the phone (just ask Jill), and email is how everybody keeps in touch these days anyway. I'm sure they're married by now, maybe even pregnant already, their big Colorado adventure story tucked away like an old photo album they pull out only when someone asks Sean about that scar down the front of his left leg.

I suppose I could dig up their number when I get back and just call them. "Hey you guys, guess where I was climbing today?" I'd say. But then what?

They probably don't want to hear any of that. It was a terrifying ordeal, and maybe they don't ever want to be reminded of it. Maybe hearing my voice would freak them out.

And I don't want to do that, I think, as I climb around the boulder below the crest of the moraine. The wind is picking up in my ears, a steady hum but just barely, and no wind compared to that day, or to most days up here.

The crest drops off to the northwest, opening out to the cirque and the canyon and the mountains beyond.

I thread my way up onto the ridge, into the first blast of wind off the summit, and there it is, one more time: the sweep of the ancient treeline pines into the forest below; the charcoal and red rock of the cirque; and the granite milky grays of the range beyond, all of it topped with a gleaming white as the horizon seesaws open into the searing blue sky and adolescent swagger and brawn of the Rockies.

The vastness of this continental cacophony is nothing like the old hills Back East, rounded and stooped. This is a youthful geology's arrogant challenge to gravity, the roof of the world turned upside down, mammoth formations of rock and ice the size of cities pointing upward toward forever.

Everything and nothing, eternity, infinity, home.

I turn and look back at my own private city this morning: the summit of Sunrise Peak, half a mile straight up this last boulderfield.

Breathe in, breathe out, and listen. Is it there yet?

No.

I push up into the boulderfield toward the first cairn, the weight of my board and pack pulling me back down the mountain. As always above treeline — not counting the last time I was up here, chasing Angie — I spot and place one careful step at a time, a mindful back and forth across the facial pores of a mountain awakening from a hundred-million-year slumber.

Stay in the box and breathe, ten more steps, cairn, breathe, turn, ten more steps, breathe.

The route up the boulderfield runs about fifty yards uphill of where Sean had been trapped. As I pass by the spot, I stop and just stare at it.

Nothing, just the wind, in and out of a low howl. Even on a bluebird day like today, there is always an unchecked wind up here, rushing out of the canyon and across the range, cleansing the mountains, cleansing the earth, cleansing me.

But today, so far, nothing.

I pick my way up through the puzzle of the boulders, well north now of where Sean had been. One foot at a time, a great pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces, all mass and movement beneath me. Because the entire mountain is restless, temporary, perturbed by my weight and unforgiving of any mistake of balance or timing, ready to turn a simple day's climb into my own broken leg or worse, and a long night of crawling back down the mountain. If I'm lucky.

Best not to think about all of that, especially when I'm alone and this close to the top. Aaron isn't up ahead, narrating weather, route, snowpack and terrain; or recounting some trip turned weird or rescue gone wrong; or telling another story about Kit Carson or Edward Abbey or David Brower. And Danny isn't on my heels, talking about the Tao or the *I Ching* or Whitman or Kerouac, or recounting raunch in triple-X deets from last night's local Betty or recently heartbroken tourist he was happy to help on her road to recovery.

I stop, wait, watch, listen. At my feet are the remnants of a cairn, a pile of rock splattered and splotched with sun-bleached green and orange. One of the burnt orange growths is perfectly roundly symmetrical, with dozens of tiny brighter orange squiggles emanating from its center, like a pictograph of the sun, or a sea creature in a tide pool, stranded two miles above sea level.

And there it is: the Presence.

I stand and turn, as if to listen.

A sense beyond all sensation, turned way up when I am way up here, the Presence simply *is*. It's an odd feeling, just off my peripheral field of vision, that someone is here in the room with me — except the room is the size of everything and I'm all alone, but not alone at all.

I slip out of my pack and grab some water and calories for the final push to the top. The tingle of sun and wind on my face for the first time today means I must be smiling, like a kid let out of school for summer.

I look back the other way, out across the haze of brown dust cloud running east. Unlike that kid, I know this summer will end. (It does every day, for a few minutes anyway, when I check email and the market and the news and I think about when I might have to go back to work.) But right now, my body knows only the release of standing above treeline, a speck of flesh on a continent of rock, flattened by a cobalt blue sky, far, far, far above...the haze-brown dirt cloud you can see from up here, enshrouding the silly little fluorescent-gray world way, way, way down there.

Up here, none of what is so real and pressing down there is real at all. Up here, there is no technology rush, or market bubble, or corporate earnings season. The only deadlines up here are sunhit, and thunderheads moving in, and the sun going down, and missing one of those can actually kill you. Up here, no one can hide behind their market share, or their big desk, or their stupid re-org, or their fucking lawyer. Gravity is the only law and it can't be bent in on itself by somebody else's fucking lawyer to screw you. Up here, only your weakness or carelessness or cluelessness can screw you, as Sean and Angie found out.

That, and bad luck of course. Up here this morning, in this rushing river of crisp, cleansing air, I'm happy to take my chances. Because I'm *not* weak, or careless, or clueless (even if

my father used to call me all that and worse during one of his benders). On top of this and every other decent mountain out here, I cannot control for luck, but I can control for me. Up here, calibrated to the scale of my own massive insignificance, I feel far more powerful than I ever did down there.

“It’s a *koan*,” Danny always likes to say, “the great power that comes with facing your powerlessness.”

And he is exactly right. There is a glimpse of pure freedom in the tiny safety margins up here alone on top of a mountain, and the very real fact that I could screw up with the next hurried step and be dead of hypothermia by sundown. There is something that feels like — I don’t know, transcendence maybe? — when the utter fragility of the human body and mind confront Earth Scale. And it should be terrifying; but it isn’t, because I do sense — beyond all sensations turned way up, when way up here — that I am not alone.

I hoist my pack with its swingweight of snowboard, ice ax, avy shovel, and emergency food and gear for the final push to the top of Sunrise Peak. Technically, I am not on top of the world, but it sure feels like it.

The summit top is blown clean, more tundra and scree than boulder, maybe a hundred feet as the alpine tern flies, its feathers black in summer, white in winter. And a couple of those terns are skittering around up there right now.

One final push up through the last upthrust of boulders, and suddenly, a stubby wind-chewed stick pokes into the sky at an odd angle, and it’s a few more precarious steps up, up, up and ...

SUMMIT!