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# A Descent in the Dark

R.R. Reno

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*In memory of Alex: I never believed you would die.*

I LOOKED UP as the sun struck the summits. The tops of the French Alps blazed, and the lifeless gray sky of the hour before dawn was suddenly, miraculously, vibrantly blue. Soon light was cascading down the mountainsides, and the blocky forms of granite on the ridges nearby surfaced like submarines, streaming up and out of the early morning semi-darkness. The avalanche of daylight swept past. In just a few minutes light swallowed the darkness in the valley below.

Colin and I were making our way down the long slope of ice that formed the bottom portion of the mountain face we had been unhappily descending all night long. With each deliberate step we stabbed the ice with the long, sharp picks of our ice axes, kicking in the front points of the metal-spiked crampons strapped to our heavy boots. With frequent glances over our shoulders to keep us on target, we were aiming slightly left, toward what seemed the least difficult way to get off the steep mountain face.

Now the ice slope ended abruptly. We had arrived at the edge of the *bergschrand*, the appropriately harsh-sounding German word that climbers use to describe the often large moat or crevasse (*Schrand*) near the base of the mountain (*Berg*)

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R.R. RENO is a professor of theology at Creighton University and the features editor of *First Things*. His “*Roughnecking It*” appeared in our April issue.

where the glacier fanning out below pulls away from the ice face that soars above.

“This sucker looks huge,” Colin groaned as he gingerly peered over the edge. I silently shook my head with the gesture of a no that really meant a reluctant yes. Colin busied himself setting up an anchor, preparing what I hoped was our final rappel—a fittingly pleasant-sounding French term for recalling or returning oneself to the bottom by sliding down a rope fixed in place. “A reflexive verb,” I thought distractedly as I organized the rope. “*Je me rappelle à la sûreté*—I recall myself to safety.” I suddenly had a reassuring vision of my remote, serene, and confident self reaching out to bring my all-too-present, tired, and worry-battered self down the final stage of the descent.

My daydream ended as I looked up. Our traversing descent had put us underneath large, hanging ice cliffs suspended below the summit, thousands of feet above. The morning sun bathed the surrounding mountains. The distant, snowy edges of the ice cliffs above us were brilliantly white in the fresh light. After long hours of darkness, the world was charged with life. My mind was drifting again, this time in a less pleasant direction. I thought for a moment about the coming heat of a sun-filled day—and of the cliffs melting, giving way, and sweeping down the face to engulf us. After having spent the entire night cold and lost in darkness, praying for dawn and then welcoming it, I now cursed its triumph.

I took off my gloves to fiddle with the gear and attach myself to the rope to descend. The thin prongs of the crampons rasped in the hard early morning snow as I edged into position. Aware that exhaustion was making it difficult for me to focus, I checked and rechecked the attachment of my descending device to the rope. It seemed to me that the ice cliffs far above creaked. Perhaps my mind was playing tricks. The glacier below moaned like a despairing prisoner kept in the deepest dungeon of a distant fortress. A quite real chunk of ice broke free a couple of hundred feet to our right and dropped with a roar into the gaping moat below. Mountains awakened by warmth always get up on the wrong side of bed.

As I leaned out and went over the edge I could see into the dark depths of the *bergschrand*. It was filled with the debris of ice blocks that had avalanched from above. After a few feet, I looked up to Colin and said, “Goddammit, the rope doesn’t make it to the bottom. We’ll have to set up an anchor and make another rappel.” Then down I went.

In the middle of the vertical ice face, dangling at the end of the rope, I twisted in our last ice screw to serve as an anchor. We had very little gear left of any sort; our unplanned, ill-considered descent had required us to leave a great deal behind as we engineered our way down the face. Once secured, I detached myself from the rope and barked up to Colin, “Off rappel.” Hanging from the single screw, waiting for Colin to join me, I stared at an invitingly flat spot on the glacier below. We were close now to safety, very close.

COLIN AND I met at Yale in 1984. He was a first-year medical student, and I had just begun graduate study. Friends of friends of friends somehow put us in touch. During the next couple of years we went climbing on the local crags, drank beer at Archie Moore’s bar on Willow Street, and spent hours talking about bigger mountains, bigger routes, and bigger adventures. It’s a wonderful thing to spend a clear, cool fall day rock climbing in New England, and we had many good days. But it’s something else entirely to leave the car behind and set out for thousands of feet of climbing across complex terrain to the top of a remote summit.

Climbers use a term from romantic life to describe the difference: commitment. At the local crag, if you get tired in the early afternoon or if storm clouds threaten, then you can call it quits and head home for an early beer. On a big climb it’s not so simple. The commitment is not just a matter of size and difficulty. In the mountains, weather, glac-

iers, and rock fall create a dangerous environment. Climbers need to move quickly, not only in order to complete a long climb in a reasonable period of time but more importantly to minimize exposure to danger. Speed equals safety, and serious mountain climbers need to be decisive, bold, and confident. There’s no time for extra safety precautions.

The element of commitment is what makes for adventure. You set for yourself an objective that cannot easily be attained—and one in which failure will bring a great deal of suffering—and then you kick away the obvious supports and block the ready avenues of escape. Rather than assembling a crew on a larger, safer boat, the sailor sets out solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Rather than the sunny, gentle ridge to the summit, the mountaineer chooses the dark, dangerous north face.

These choices are mysterious, but I don’t think they are unfamiliar. The term *adventurer* was first used to describe the soldier of fortune, the man who entertains the dangers of battle not in order to defend his homeland or fulfill his duty, not even for the sake of conquest and booty, but to live as one who risks death. He takes his chances. He romances *Fortuna*, confident that his skill with the sword will carry him through.

To a great extent, this basic meaning of adventure has remained constant, even as the range of activities we think of as adventuresome has expanded far beyond the exploits of d’Artagnan and his comrades. That is why mountain climbing or solo sailing or extreme skiing is not at all like the thrill-seeking of bungee jumping, or simply a matter of collecting summits. Anybody who has drunk enough beer can strap on a bungee harness and throw himself off a bridge; once you jump, the rest is just an exercise in screaming and letting the carnival-like mechanism do its work. As for summits, you can drive up Pike’s Peak or take a helicopter to the top of the Grand Teton. Serious climbing is about getting to the top by a route that tests your competence with difficulty—and your will with danger.

A true adventurer is not foolhardy. He must realistically assess his capabilities and choose reasonable objectives. The sailor looks at himself and weighs his skills, and only then decides that he can cross the Atlantic in a smaller boat. The climber takes an inventory of his experience and judges himself capable of more remote peaks by more difficult routes. But as soon as the next step is taken, the margin of safety decreases. Bad weather, bad decisions, bad luck—all these factors crowd in more and more closely against competence and determination. That’s why the best adventures involve a

strange combination of emotions: a strong expectation of success in concert with all sorts of doubts and worries about the consequences of failure.

During long hours driving to and from climbing areas in the rattling cab of Colin's old Toyota pickup, we seemed always to talk about commitment. Perhaps half-aware that we were coddled Americans to whom so much came so easily, we wanted difficulty. Young and healthy, we lacked the wisdom to know that life itself would offer us plenty in due time. So, between our self-ignorance and our partial self-knowledge, a general idea took shape. It might have been on the way back from the Shawangunks in New York on a May weekend in 1986. I can't remember for sure. But sometime that spring we made a plan: August in the Alps before school started again after Labor Day.

THE FIRST leg of our trip was a grueling marathon of travel. We flew from New York to Zurich on a Tower Air charter plane packed with American students in sub-economy seating designed to extract in pain every dollar saved on airfare. But we had young backs and knees, and a striking ability to endure the state of exhausted semi-consciousness that comes after staying awake all night. After arrival, wanting to save every possible Swiss franc, we immediately loaded ourselves and our gear onto a speedy train to Geneva, where we toiled through town with our packs and bags in the mid-afternoon heat to get to a suburban station. With still two more changes we zigged our way south, zagged west, and then clanked slowly up to Chamonix at the base of Mount Blanc.

We established ourselves in a European-style campground, with more than a hundred tents pitched side by side in a small field. Two English fellows, Dave and John, were set up next to us. Their ropes and gear told us they were climbers, and soon enough we learned they had spent the previous two weeks climbing rock routes on the west-facing flanks of the nearby Aiguille de Blaitière. "Great routes, mate," Dave reported, "and the brilliant thing is that the midway station of the Midi *téléphérique* takes you practically to base. The whole thing's right there. And you can get down quickly if the weather goes bad, which seems to be happening more often than not lately."

Colin and I could see the appeal, but a good night's sleep restored us to our full ambition. For us, the destination was obvious: the Argentière basin, a few miles up the valley and in the heart of the French Alps. On the south side of the Argentière glacier the summits line up in a closely spaced

row: first the Aiguille de Triolet, then the Courtes, the Droites, and finally the Aiguille Verte anchoring the western end. Their 4,000-foot north-facing sides are draped with ice from top to bottom, making this compact, two-mile long chain one of the most important places in the history of modern mountaineering. The steeper faces were first climbed in the 1960's; in 1970, Reinhold Messner opened up a new era of fast, bold ascents when he soloed the north face of the Droites. Even in the mid-80's the more difficult routes remained a testing ground for aspiring alpinists who wanted to get to the top of the game.

We spent a cloudy day lazing around Chamonix, with John and Dave showing us the best place to buy bread and pastries. The morning that followed was cloudless and inviting. We rushed around town buying a few days' worth of food, loaded our packs, and left our extra gear in safekeeping with our new English friends. Then we walked quickly into Chamonix to take the train for the short ride up the valley to Argentière. Enjoying the scenery, we tore the grease-stained bag out of Colin's pack and ate the six *pain au chocolat* we had bought with the foolish idea that we would make them last a day or two.

In the Café Mont Blanc, which sits across from the tiny train station in the village of Argentière, I ordered my third double cappuccino of the day. While I was waiting for it to arrive, Colin gently raised the issue that, in retrospect, was to define our experience. "What," he asked, "do you think we ought to do about guidebooks?" Ever the medical student, Colin was not inclined to ignore the obvious. "Route descriptions might come in handy," he observed.

A great deal of climbing involves an almost gymnastic skill in using hands, arms, and legs to move upward efficiently. But there are complicated and important technical aspects as well. All the high-tech gear for mountain climbers has been developed in order to minimize risk. The lightweight nylon ropes and slings tied with special knots, along with an array of metal pitons, carabiners, chocks, and cams are designed to provide safety against a possible fall. The ice axe and crampons allow for safe movement over slippery snow and ice. The down-filled sleeping bags, Gore-Tex jackets, and synthetic clothing protect against extreme weather. Our packs were full of the stuff. Guidebooks are simply another aid. They describe the routes, provide pictures from many angles, and give advice about how best to approach the bases and descend from the summits.

The waiter brought my coffee. As I lifted the

cup, I enjoyed the view. The mountains surrounding us were spectacular monoliths of granite. But almost immediately I felt strangely demoralized, as I often do at the beginnings of climbing trips. Well-equipped, well-trained, attended to by the technological achievements of modern society, the climber can make big mountains smaller simply by piling up sureties against failure. The warm milk foam caressed my lips. What had seemed such a grand adventure through all our planning and preparation was now threatened by a perhaps caffeine-fractured judgment that everything was going to be too easy, too straightforward. "I didn't cross the Atlantic," I said to myself in a haughty, self-important tone, "in order to be a marathoner, treating routes as well-marked courses, and the summits as finish lines."

SO I WAVED aside Colin's suggestion. "We won't need a guidebook," I asserted with an affected nonchalance. Gesturing broadly to the range of mountains before us, I said, "These are look-and-do mountains."

Colin knew my game, and perhaps silently shared my fear that our trip would be a failure because it would lack commitment. We weren't in Alaska or the Himalayas, where just the remoteness and the weather and the sheer size of the mountains generate a great deal of uncertainty. The French Alps are beautiful, but they are hardly remote. Everything seemed so convenient, so close to civilization's protective embrace. He gave his own long look at the mountains, and then laughed and said, "Alright."

After a few hours of hiking we arrived at the Argentière climbers' hut, which is anything but a hut. A large, modular building, it looked as though it could accommodate a hundred people, which apparently it does during the winter months when it serves as the first stop on a popular week-long ski tour from Chamonix to Zermatt. From tables on the long front deck that overlooks the Argentière glacier there is an intimate view of all the north faces we had come to climb. But before we arrived, the clouds had settled in, and we could see only the *bergschrunds* at the bases of the mountains across the way. The faces remained hidden, still hypothetical.

With my high-school French I tried to explain our plans to the hut keeper. His face darkened, and he rushed off. A few minutes later, translator in tow, he returned with a sheaf of hand-drawn diagrams of new rock climbs on the south-facing cliffs just above the hut. For the next few minutes we

were subjected to a litany of warnings about the horrible dangers of the north faces, alternating with a list of the virtues of the recently pioneered rock routes. "The ice is very bad this year." "There is a beautiful VIIa finger-crack just behind the hut." "Last week two Swiss had to be rescued off the Courtes." "The Arête du Genepy gets the sun all day long." "Weather has been unsettled all week." "There are excellent short routes only 15 minutes from the hut."

Dozens of descriptions lay on the table in front of us. Colin slowly collected the scattered pieces of paper, and then he patiently told the hut keeper—or more accurately the English-speaking fellow standing next to him—that we hadn't brought our rock-climbing shoes with us, just ice gear. Listening to the quick translation, the hut keeper gave us an extended and dramatic look of disbelief. Then he took the route descriptions from Colin, tucked them under his arm, and marched back into the building.

We hadn't planned to stay in the Argentière hut—by graduate-student standards, it was expensive. Our packs heavy with camping gear, we made our way up into some boulders as it started to drizzle. Eventually we found one large rock leaning against another: a relatively dry spot in which to sit and cook.

That night and through the next day, the light intermittent rain continued. The clouds remained low, shrouding all the surrounding peaks. We sat, cooked meals, made extra pots of pasta, invaded our cookie supply, got very bored. Another night of rain followed, and then another day. Overcome by inactivity, we decided to spend a few francs on a cup of coffee at the hut. After a couple of hours and a few unplanned but very satisfying, butter-sweating pastries, we watched out the window as a strong wind broke up the clouds that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in the Argentière basin.

By early evening the skies were clear, and we could see the famous north faces for the first time. Their top thirds were resplendently white with a fresh layer of snow. We studied them from the porch of the hut and discussed our options. "Maybe," I ventured as I took in their magnitude, "we should do something fairly straightforward first. Then, if the weather holds, we can turn to something more severe, like the north face of the Droites." We both agreed that the Couturier Couloir on the Aiguille Verte looked like the perfect warm-up route. It began as a moderate, sweeping snow slope that steepened toward the top, where the white of snow gave way to the light gray of alpine ice.

As we arranged our gear, Colin suggested that we might get some information about possible descents off the Verte. “We’ll figure it out,” I reassured him. “Besides,” I said, “this will give our warm-up a little extra edge.” I ventured the same rationale for refusing to take a second rope, extra food, or more gear. Colin raised no protest, and we turned our attention to a pot of rice richly flavored with butter, cheese, and pieces of French ham edged with a delicious crust of oven-hardened fat.

THE DAY dawned perfection and the Couturier Couloir went quickly and without difficulty. We congratulated ourselves on our speed and efficiency. “We’re definitely ready for the harder routes,” Colin said as we began to make our way across the narrow snow ridge that connects the top of the north face to the main summit of the Aiguille Verte. “The Droites day after tomorrow,” I replied, “or maybe even tomorrow if we get off this route as quickly as we climbed it.” But our banter turned to silence as a dense cloud engulfed us, cutting off all visibility. By the time we reached the top of the mountain, we were trying to force our eyes to see through the mist so that we could decide which of the gullies and slopes leading off the summit would take us down to safety.

We spotted a mass of nylon slings looped over a solid-looking pillar of rock—the certain sign of a frequently used fixed anchor for a descent. Since I had dismissed both a guidebook and the counsel of the hut keeper, I was forced back on vague ideas. “I’ll bet that’s the regular route,” I guessed (correctly, it turns out). “We could go that way, but it takes us down the wrong side of the mountain. We’ll end up on the Mère de Glace, and the only way back to our gear tonight will be to take the cog railway down to Chamonix, then the train back up to the village of Argentière, and then the *téléphérique* up to the Grand Montets and the hike across the Argentière glacier.”

We had yet to learn that this complicated (and expensive) way of navigating through the French Alps was precisely what is required, not just for this route but for nearly all the others as well. I had wrongly balked at what seemed to me an absurdly complex and involved way to end an otherwise perfect day of mountaineering. In retrospect, moreover, I can see that I was unconsciously making another serious mental mistake. Because we didn’t have a guidebook, we didn’t really know where the gully below led. I bent this uncertainty in a convenient direction. Our success that morning had tempted me to think about a grander route tomor-

row, which in turn required a quick and easy descent to give us adequate time for preparation.

We dithered for a few minutes, hoping the clouds would disperse at least long enough for us to see down. They didn’t. Then I said to Colin, “You know, I have a definite memory of seeing a poster of the Verte in the climbing shop in Chamonix. I’m pretty sure that there’s an easy glissade down the west side. From there we can work our way directly back to the Argentière glacier without any trouble. Let’s try going down that way.”

On the basis of my handy but false memory we began to descend the snow that sloped gently to the west. I was buoyed. The going was easy. But after a few minutes the slope got steeper, and at one point the clouds thinned enough for us to see that the snow dropped off below us. So we trended rightward a bit. The clouds thickened. We hit a series of deep fractures that broke the snow slope into huge blocks of disjointed ice. Eventually we dropped into one of the shallower crevasses and made our way down toward what turned out to be the edge of the summit glacier. It ended abruptly at the top of a sheer rock face.

Colin and I took counsel. We couldn’t see more than 100 feet down the face. Perhaps we should try to go back up to the summit? We should have, but at the moment it seemed as though we had already come down a long way, and the thought of returning was tiresome. Also, I remained convinced that an easy descent lay below. So we decided to start rappelling.

We were very wrong. As Colin joined me at the end of our third or fourth rappel, the clouds gave us an opening. We could briefly see the terrain below. It was not pretty. Although the base of the face was still obscured, we now knew that about 2,000 feet of steep rock and ice lay beneath us. Colin graciously made no mention of the picture I supposedly remembered.

There was no real possibility of returning up the rock down which we had come. Continuing our descent into the difficult terrain below was the only option. Although we didn’t know it (after all, we had no guidebook to consult), we were committed to going down the Nant Blanc face, a difficult route to ascend, unpopular because of its reputation for dangerous conditions, and certainly not one we would have wittingly chosen to go down.

WE WOULD need to make still more rappels. The process involves doubling the rope through a fixed anchor. Climbers slide down the rope, controlling their descent by a friction device,

and then they recover the rope by pulling one end down while the other snakes up and through the fixed anchor. Since we were in the middle of a face nobody descends, we needed to make our own anchors by looping a piece of nylon sling over a rock outcrop, or by placing a piton or metal chock in a fissure in the rock. After we pulled down the rope, those anchors above would remain unrecoverable. We had only a handful of nylon slings and a dozen or so pieces of rock gear, and the thought of the many rappels below made me fear our supply would be soon exhausted.

As we collected ourselves and I began counting our now precious nylon slings, a tremendous crash shook the face. Completely forgetting about the gear, I focused all of my mental energy on willing my entire body into my helmet. The summit cap of permanent ice above had just shed a sliver of its bulk over the edge of the face. Ice blocks thundered down about 40 feet to our left, covering us with fine crystals.

Throwing the still unknown number of slings over my head, I began traversing to a prominent rock rib on our right. Before I could think straight, I had moved 30 feet away from Colin and was clutching loose rocks and screaming, "Put me on belay!" The next volley of ice drowned out Colin's reply, giving me a Captain America adrenaline punch that quickly sent me still another 30 feet over and onto easier ground.

The rock rib put us out of immediate danger; if more ice fell down the face, it would tend toward the shallow gullies on either side. We regained our composure and began slowing climbing down the narrow spine of rock, belaying each other rather than setting up rappels and using up our limited supply of gear. "To belay" is another of those exotic words that climbers use—an old English nautical term for wrapping or cleating ropes to secure sails. A belayed climber can still fall, but the gear that has been fastened into the irregularities of the rock, along with the rope tied to his waist and then snapped through the carabiners attached to the emplaced gear, will limit the distance and serious injury. It's slower than rappelling, but since each climber is belayed as he descends, relying on the rope only for safety, all the gear can be collected by the second climber who follows the first, and thus reused later.

After long hours of down-climbing, dusk darkened to night. We reached a snow-covered ledge. We were physically tired and mentally exhausted. "Why don't we stop here and wait out the night," I suggested to Colin. He agreed, and in silence we

tried to find someplace secure and comfortable to sit.

**B**ACK AT the Café Mont Blanc in Chamonix, I had been full of hypothetical foreboding. This trip, I worried, would be pedestrian, mechanical. Now, as I sat on the small ledge on the steep mountain face, I saw myself more clearly. In my arrogance I had brushed off the suggestion of a guidebook. Now we were reaping the consequences.

I squirmed and shifted my weight, trying to find a place where the rocks would not be digging into my buttocks. Settling into a better spot, I found myself under an inward assault of memory. In quick succession, I saw images of Chris Robbin's body, a tiny dot 2,000 feet below me at the base of El Capitan, and then the blood-streaked rock ledge high on Middle Cathedral Rock, and then my father tumbling down the lower snow fields of Mount Assinaboine, and then Tom Kopley crying out "Oh no!" just as he slid over the edge, and then Charles Cole suddenly, tensely silent as he saw that the rope above him was nearly cut in half. I felt my heart beat more quickly as my mind replayed my own 200-foot fall in Yosemite. Down I'm going, hitting knobs of rock and desperately trying to twist myself so that I don't hit my head on the corners I know that I'll be swinging into when the rope finally goes tight—and it takes a long time for the rope to go tight.

Even now, as I write these words decades later, in the comfort of my home, my throat tightens. The memories are as fresh and afflicting as ever, and to them others have been added. From more years of climbing I'm remembering the daggers of hanging ice, the unstable slopes of snow ready to avalanche, the loose pillars of rock, the shitty belay anchors, the rappel ropes jammed, the bands of shale on mountain faces that are nothing more than stacked blocks ready to crumble. I can hear the sickening, deep whirring sound that large, killer rocks make as they tumble and spin while they fall. I can smell the pungent, acrid odor of granite smashing into granite.

And I'm thinking about Steve Mascioli and Alex Lowe and others with whom I've climbed over the years and who have died in the mountains. Why did they take the risk? Why did I? Climbing in the French Alps without a guidebook is a stupid, unnecessary flirtation with danger; but how does it differ from the game of climbing itself? I cursed myself that night on the ledge on the Nant Blanc face. I remember just as vividly cursing Steve when I heard that he died on Mount Hunter in Alaska,

and Alex when I found out that he had died in an avalanche in the Himalayas. Like my insistence that we forgo guidebooks, their deaths seemed to me the dark fruit of a vain enterprise.

**B**UT THESE and other reminders have produced little more than crooked branches of self-understanding intertwined with self-deception. I continue to climb. I don't doubt that I've done it for so many years because I'm good at it. It's fun to do something well.

Something more is going on, though, something captured in Aristotle's dictum that happiness is unimpeded activity. I dream sometimes about the wet, gray, crumbling limestone of the Canadian Rockies. I recall my parched mouth. I see in my mind's eye the long run of the rope down to my belayer. The afflicting memories return, but now they are guilt and alluring. The pain, the agonizing uncertainty, the exhaustion, the shocking realization that the mountains kill whom they will—it's all rearranged in my mind as a fire-lined gauntlet through which I have run, and I can think of nothing but the joy of running ever faster, ever harder. Even as I curse the vain folly of bringing death so close, I long for the adventure, for the lightning flashes of self-possession, for the tremendous concentration of will that comes from knowing that you've given yourself a thin margin for error.

This longing is not a death wish. On the contrary, I have come to see that my addiction to the risks of climbing is better understood not as wishing for death but as cursing it. God may have the power to defeat death, but I don't. My impotence angers me, as I think it has always angered men, underlying their desire for adventure. I've seen death often enough to know that she is repulsively ugly. I was not courting her on the Aiguille Verte; I was asserting against her my prerogative of life. And this act of self-assertion, it seems to me, explains the appeal of adventure.

Of course, the self-assertion is temporary, an illusion of the moment. No great ascent can cancel the car wreck that might kill me on the drive back from the mountains. No adventure overcomes the reality of divorce, the death of a child, or any of the deep mental anguish that finds its way into even the most fortunate of lives. So, yes, it's a temporary thrill. Yes, it's hopelessly arrogant. Yes, it's foolish and unnecessary. Yes, it's adolescent. Yes, it leads to illusions of grandeur. Yes, it deflects from a sober assessment of the human condition. Yes, it's a pagan impulse. Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. But ever since Agamemnon gathered the Greeks to sail

to Troy, men have taken life-threatening risks in order to get close enough to death to give her the finger. It's a life-affirming thing to do, and it can't be done at a safe distance.

I was too young for such coherent thoughts on the snowy, cramped ledge in the French Alps in 1986. In any event, Colin was not going to give me the time for an all-night reverie, because he had come to his own conclusions. He stood up and in an authoritative tone said, "Look, Rusty, I think we ought to keep going in the dark." I hemmed and hawed, but Colin convinced me that we should not sit out the night. As long as we were going to be cold, we might as well be making headway. "You've got to get out of what you get into," he added with finality.

Colin has a way of making reasonable things sound reasonable, so I put him on belay. His headlamp began flickering below me. Maybe it was the busy work of managing the rope while belaying him, or maybe it was just the fact that we were now taking initiative, but for whatever reason my mind shifted from my inconclusive collage of doubts, fears, and memories to hunger. I thought about our stash of hard sausages back with the sleeping bags. I pictured myself cutting off slices flecked with large, white, glistening globs of fat.

Throughout the night we worked our way down the rock and ice, rappelling only the occasional steep sections where fear of falling overcame the fear of being stranded on the face without gear. Around four in the morning, when I was feeling particularly paranoid because we had only two slings and six or so pieces of gear left, Colin reassured me that we could always slice sections off the end of the rope to make extra slings. "Great," I replied, "then we can make still shorter rappels." I had a vision of us desperately trying to reach the base of the face by twenty-foot rappels on a cannibalized rope.

**O**UR ROPE was still 150 feet long when I shouted "off rappel" to Colin as dawn was ripening into day and I hung on the single ice screw above the dark, hungry, man-eating *bergschrunn* at the base of the Nant Blanc face. Colin came down quickly, and with another rappel we were soon relaxing on a flat spot I had picked out from above. We had made the narrow passage.

The mental tension was released, but there was no rest. We were soon on the move. Descending farther down the glacier was out of the question. Its tortured icefall would take many hours to navigate. So up a promising gulley to the southwest we went,

trying to gain the lower portion of the northwest ridge of the Aiguille Verte to make our way back to the Argentière glacier and our camping spot.

When we reached the top of the ridge, we were truly and fully exhausted. Only 200 feet away was the Grands-Montets station, the top of the *téléphérique* that begins far below in Argentière. We wearily shuffled past a large party of climbers learning to use their crampons and ice axes on the gentle slopes. Japanese women in tight shorts and high-heeled shoes leaned on the rails of the station, pointing toward the horizon. Perhaps they had spotted some climbers on the distant peaks. A family in tennis shoes walked tentatively onto the glacier. As we sat to rest on the steps of the station, caressed by a calm-breathing wind, Colin and I looked at each other. After the long night of tension, fear, and concentration, the scene seemed almost grotesque. Could we really have been so isolated and distressed only hours before?

In the heat of the late-morning sunshine we headed down and crossed the glacier to our gear in the boulders above the hut. I boiled water on the small backpacking stove, and made a cup of coffee that tasted like a supernaturally perfect combination of bourbon and chocolate and felt like liquid velvet running down my throat. Our exhaustion-dulled appetites awakened by caffeine, we turned our remaining food into a haphazard banquet. Colin sliced the hard sausages and cheese. I ripped open a bag of cookies and we made meat, cheese, and cookie sandwiches, rejoicing in the fat and sugar. After a giant pasta meal and more cookies, we slid satiated into our sleeping bags.

Fifteen hours later it was raining again. We inhaled what food remained, hiked back down to Argentière, took the small train into Chamonix, and

made our way to the campground to recover our extra gear from John and Dave. We suggested that they join us for dinner and beers in town. "French fries dipped in mayonnaise," I explained to Dave, "can't be beat. It packs more calories per dollar than anything else."

We made the short walk and settled into a long evening of greasy food and beer at the Bar National. Becoming more expansive with every round, we told and retold our story. Between what we described and the pictures and descriptions in Dave's guidebook, we figured out that Colin and I had gone down the Nant Blanc face in the night. "Bloody hell," exclaimed John as he compared our descent with the Couturier Couloir. "You came down a more difficult route than you went up!" Then he added, with needling glee, "I'll bet you two made the first American descent."

I grabbed the guidebook from John. "Let's see if we can find something really serious for our next objective," I said to Colin with alcohol-enhanced bravado. Dave leaned back in his chair. He saw, perhaps, the perversity of our having turned a reckless, misconceived descent into a heroic endeavor. Or maybe he was just better at holding his liquor. "The fates might need a bit of a respite before they are taunted again," he quietly observed.

But our fears were now golden memories, and we wanted more. "What about the Central Pillar of Frêne?" I asked Colin, referring to a long route on the steep, remote, Italian side of Mont Blanc, hard to get to and difficult to climb. I handed him the guidebook with my finger in the page featuring an impressive picture. He grabbed the book and studied the pages. Then he looked up, his eyes narrowing to slits. "This time," he said, "we'll copy out a route description." I smiled and raised my glass.