

Friends and Spirits in the Bernese Oberland

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"Entschuldigung." The man stopped flaking out his rope and looked up at me. "Wo ist der...uhh..." My fledgling grasp of the German language failed. "Excuse me but do you know where the door is? To the glacier?"

Kelson and I drove the four hours to Switzerland that morning with a simple plan: summit three mountains—the Eiger, Jungfrau and Mönch—before work on Monday morning ended our bid. We had four days, door-to-door. I had a side agenda. In a week, it would be eight years since my best friend's helicopter was shot down in Afghanistan. I had made his mom a promise. I was there to follow through.

Our only guide book was entirely in German, which neither of us fully understood. The Google translation to that point had been fairly accurate: "get off the Jungfraubahn at the Eismeer Station, make your way to the hole carved into the south face and rappel down onto the glacier." There was no mention, however, that the Eismeer Station, a train stop burrowed deep into the limestone beneath the hulking summit of the Eiger, was a cavernous series of maintenance tunnels, viewing windows, bathrooms with polished Quartz countertops but no exit signs. We had been wandering, lost, when we stumbled across the two climbers.

The man I addressed looked at me with narrow eyes. A patch glued to his jacket indicated his status as an elite IFMGA mountain guide. In a sort of Hippocratic way, he was professionally obligated to assist in the rescue or aid of distressed climbers. The look on his face was clear—we looked like rookies, and as such, we were a threat to his afternoon. It was a familiar look, almost part of the routine now. Kelson and I had been climbing in Europe for over

a year on a tight budget with no room for professional guides. We felt no shame with his annoyance.

"It's there," he said and pointed. His English was perfect. "Behind the door that says 'glacier.'"

There was a bright yellow rope coiled over his shoulder. He tested the overhand knot attaching it to his climbing harness without looking. Satisfied, he threaded the open hook of a carabiner through both knot and harness. He looked at his client, hand still on the carabiner.

"Los geht's!"

As he turned toward the door, he flicked it closed. The spring-loaded gate slammed home and the crisp metallic snap of colliding aluminum echoed off the rock walls. The door slammed shut behind them and we pulled the rope and harnesses from our packs, eager to get started, slightly nervous about what we were getting into.

Collectively, the three peaks in our sights were known to climbers as the Bernese Oberland Trilogy. On a map they appear orderly, close together, with neat contour lines supporting theories of successful link-ability. The reality, we were discovering, was quite different. Complicating things further was the order in which we chose to climb them, which was opposite most recommendations. Although the lowest of the three at 3,967 meters, just over 13,000 feet, the Eiger was considered the most challenging. The standard guided itinerary warmed up on the Mönch, graduated to the Jungfrau, then called for a day of rest in the pretty Swiss village of Grindelwald, then included some strongly-worded warnings about fitness and a head for heights before describing the climb up the Eiger's Mittellegi Ridge. But that route requires two train tickets up the JungfrauBahn and, with each ticket costing over \$200, was entirely out of the question.

Kelson and I worked together and had bonded early on over shared hobbies in the mountains. We were both in Germany on orders, assigned to the same military unit. We did not know each other prior to our assignment but had endured the same training, same schools, deployed to the same conflicts with the same people—our military careers moving more or less in parallel over the years. In a way we were lucky, our shared experiences allowed us to skip most of the basic social vetting new climbing partners endure. He was cautious and deliberate, the technical expert between us. He grew up in Montana and had honed his skills as a boy, skiing and wandering through the Teton and Bitterroot mountains. His dad ran a working horse ranch outside of Missoula for most of his childhood. In the rare moments when he opened up, he spoke fondly of the work.

Most of our planning happened after hours at work, huddled around guidebooks and translation apps, strategizing routes and watching the weather. Our families were in Germany with us, and balancing needs of wives and young children with the gravitational tug of the Alps was challenging. On the rare weekend when all the variables aligned, we would race down the Autobahn in Kelson's second-hand junker, sprinting for a summit or new line somewhere. The fix they delivered carried us through the next week. They offered clear objectives in stark contrast to the ambiguity of our day jobs. Planning and strategizing military objectives in peacetime Europe is, by definition, a perplexing task. As we marked up a map with various symbols for this maneuver or that effect, I often caught myself drifting, wondering how many peaks and frozen waterfalls and powder-filled couloirs lay covered beneath our lines, waiting to be explored.

We had reserved beds in two different huts for the three nights we planned to spend in the Bernese Oberland. The huts provided food, water and warm place to sleep. They were a luxury and allowed us to travel light. We carried only the essentials on our backs—ice axe, rope,

water, helmet, crampons, warm layers, snacks, and a few comfort items for the hut. I had one extra item with me. At the bottom of my pack was a bright yellow t-shirt with the name Jesse Pittman stenciled across the back. Ida, his mom, was expecting pictures of it from the top of whatever peak we made it up.

Every summer since Jesse died, Ida has organized a charity 5K in their hometown of Willits, California. She prints a batch of shirts, like the one on my pack, for each race. She started a foundation in his name and gives away the money in the form of college scholarships to the local high school students. Jesse never made it to college. In high school, he spent his summers in the local fields, cutting hay and stacking bales, earning 25 cents for each bale stacked. After graduating, he was hired by Cal Fire and spent the dry months dousing wildfires in the parched hills of Northern California. The work was seasonal and it was hard; the slow months made him restless. After two years with Cal Fire, he enlisted in the Navy, and two years after that completed Basic Underwater Demolition School, earning a spot on a San Diego-based SEAL Team.

Willits is a small town off Highway 101, three hours north of San Francisco by car. At one point, before environmental restrictions killed the timber industry, it was a growing town with stable jobs. Now, unemployment is high, and Ida worries many of the locals are using drugs as a substitute for opportunity. When Jesse died, his name was in the news and Willits was proud to have produced a hero. They organized a grand memorial that summer. On the day of the event, American flags lined the streets for miles. Grandstands and a stage were built at the fairgrounds. The fire department suspended a 30ft flag between the extended ladders of two engines behind the stage and podium. The whole police department was there in dress uniform. The entire town

showed up that day and lined the streets to pay their respects. Later that evening, at a barbecue hosted by the local chapter of the Lions Club, an old woman introduced herself as his high school teacher. There were tears in her eyes and she put her hand on my shoulder as she talked.

“He never sat still in my class,” she said. “He was always making jokes and cutting up. But I knew he was going to do something big. He was a good boy.”

There was a large turnout of and showing of support for the first 5K. The second year was decent. By the third memorial run, attendance was down. Training and deployment schedules within the SEAL community were relentless and people had been reassigned. When I wrote Ida asking her to mail the eighth anniversary shirt to my new overseas address, she mentioned it might be the last year she organized the event. She was getting old, she said, and it was a tremendous effort. I hadn't been able to visit his grave since leaving the U.S. two years prior. I had never made it to Willits for one of the runs and it was a constant source of regret. Unconsciously, it seemed memories were fading. I hoped the shirt in my pack would help dust them off.

After a three-hour scramble across ice and loose scree, Kelson and I hauled ourselves over the last few boulders to the Mittellegi hut. It was a simple, two-story timber building balanced precariously on the rocks. The ridge beneath is extremely narrow—two sides of the square building hang off in space and are anchored into the rocks with diagonal steel beams. The Mittellegi ridge, our goal for the next day, rose from behind the hut like a jagged reptilian dorsal.

Inside, the hut was crowded. Every bed had a climber in it, the warden told us as we checked in. Huts in the Alps are typically serviced by a team of caretakers or wardens. The

Mittellegi was small, and had only one. She was simultaneously concierge, chef, bartender, maid, meteorologist, and soother of pre-climb jitters. In a room packed with brash mountain climbers, she was clearly the Alpha. She moved smoothly through the crowded hut, as if it were a ring, as if she held a chair with one hand and whip in the other. A flick of her wrist or a stern look put lions in their place. Over a simple meal of soup and goulash we struck up a conversation with a young couple from Colorado. They were both new doctors on a month-long climbing trip through Europe before buckling down in their first career jobs in Grand Junction, Colorado. Instead of traveling on an expected combined income that was about to launch into the stratosphere, they were skimping by with money saved from meager resident paychecks. They had slept in the back of a rental car for most of the trip, bathed in whatever body of water they parked next to, and used the free WiFi at gas stations to research their next stop. Throughout the course of the meal, they carried on a low-grade debate on whether the cheese and luncheon meat they left in the rental would be safe to eat when they returned. They decided it would be fine. We figured we could probably learn something from the pair and made plans to climb together the next morning.

Later in the evening, Kelson and I found a flat rock away from the hut where we could brush our teeth and watch the sun set. The lush, alpine village we had left early in the morning was blurred in the dying light; only the distant tiers of jagged peaks were visible, each a different color—blue, purple, black, orange, yellow—painted by the aspect of their flanks and their relative position between light and shadow. Two crows soared in front of the cliff below us, riding the last wisps of warm air from the valley, faces into the breeze, gliding motionless, with no apparent purpose other than the pure joy of flight. The mountains were still and quiet as the

sun dipped below the massif. The landscape reminded me of a conversation Jesse and I had, years ago, in a much different place.

It was 2008, we were on our first deployment together to the Anbar province in Iraq. He was based in Fallujah, I was in Ramadi—the two camps separated by 20km of cratered roads and burnt villages. We saw each other often on that deployment, during supply trips or when our platoons were combined for especially large operations. During one of those meetings we were lounging on the roof of a crumbling sandstone palace that housed our operations center in Ramadi. The palace, on the west bank of the Euphrates river, was formerly owned by Saddam Hussein's son, Uday. Before the war, it must have been a beautiful place. Almost a mile of the Euphrates River was visible from the roof—to the south where it flowed under a road the Americans had dubbed "Route Michigan," and to the north where it passed under Highway 1, the last thoroughfare still open to Baghdad. The green reeds and cattails still growing on its banks distracted the eye just slightly from the desolation and rubble spread around it. Jesse was stretched out on a dusty cot, shirt off, working on his tan. I sat in a folding canvas chair smoking a cigar. We were discussing plans to rent apartments close together, near the beach once we returned home to San Diego. Neither of us owned a couch or chairs or dishes or a pot to cook anything in. He was going on about how much he hated the idea of spending money on silly things he had always taken for granted. After a long pause in the conversation, he sat up on the cot.

"Do you believe in God?"

Earlier that day, a dump truck carrying two tons of crude explosives was detonated by its driver 500 meters north of our camp, near the Highway 1 Bridge. It was headed for our main

gate but the driver lost his nerve when he saw the barbed wire and concrete barriers around the perimeter. The concussion knocked roof tiles off the palace and fragments of the truck landed inside our camp. We could see the huge crater from where we sat. A large piece of the chassis was still smoking nearby. The last open road to Baghdad was damaged. Traffic sat hopelessly in both directions, as far as they eye could see.

"No," I said, looking out at the line of cars. "I don't see any evidence. You?"

He laughed and matched my gaze into the desert. Spirituality had never been a central theme of our conversation before. It had been a part of his childhood though, I knew that much, and his words often stalked it, like a boxer seeking his range. It was something we had in common.

"Maybe, I don't know. This could all just be a transition, you know, like a seam between big things. And we're just too dumb to see past this mess."

I looked at the muddy ripples of the Euphrates. The Mighty Euphrates. It flowed through centuries of human conflict, through the pages of two holy books. In the military, it was known as "key terrain." It had been settled, disputed, swapped; borders drawn and re-drawn around it. The land spreading from its muddy banks had churned between revolution, peace, invasion, liberation, occupation, insurgency and counter insurgency. The river flowed through all of it, impervious to the commotion. That day it flowed beneath an old bridge, a crater in the sand, and the smoking engine block of a rusty dump truck. There would be a mission once we found out who ordered the attack.

There were things we all thought about but never said out loud. The bottomlessness to some questions were counterproductive to our task there. But Jesse's optimism was relentless and his constant humor often kept me afloat. He stood up and wrestled his shirt back on.

"I'm starving." He pointed at my cigar, "Whenever you're done gagging yourself on that little pecker, I'll be in the galley." He swung a leg over the edge of the roof and paused at the top of a wooden ladder. "You know, there are places out there that will make you change your mind."

At 0430 the next morning we stepped off the metal grate surrounding the hut and onto the first rocky steps of the climb. Our warm breath fogged into the freezing air. A distant glow from the sleeping village far below was the only light outside the narrow beams from our headlamps. The sticky rubber soles of our climbing boots thumped the limestone as we stepped and tested toeholds. Pebbles, kicked loose from the occasional clumsy foot, clattered out of earshot to the glacier beneath. In front of us, tiny lights from the guided parties dotted the way up the route. The initial ridgeline steepened to a scramble, we crawled on all fours over the rocks. Our movement became rhythmic: look, reach, grab, look, step, match the feet, repeat. My mind was quiet. I thought of nothing else. We continued up. The angle of the climb increased; both flanks of the mountain became visible from the thin ridge, a fall to one side or the other would be a long one. In places the rock was near vertical. We stretched our arms overhead, feeling ledges out of sight, fingers spread wide, moving delicately, scanning the rock like antenna for solid handholds. The sky turned pink as we reached the first section of fixed rope. The silence between Kelson and I was broken just long enough to coordinate a pass with a French team of three in front of us. There were three generations in the group, the eldest clearly in charge. He coaxed a young teenager on belay through a tricky section. "This is the Eiger!" one whispered to me as we shuffled past, fist in the air, his face a jubilant smile beneath his plastic helmet.

After five hours, we closed the last few steps of icy ridgeline to the summit. A light wind was blowing. It was cold and my fingers were numb, but at that moment it didn't matter. Kelson and I grinned at each other. We started to high-five but ended up in a hug, slapping each other hard on the back, hooting loud into the valley below. I pulled Jesse's shirt from my pack and struggled to hold it flat in the wind. Kelson took a picture with his cell phone. I wondered if I should smile. It was a confusing thought and for a second I wished the sun was lower, so that I could turn my back to it, so that it would silhouette and black out my face and leave only his name on the yellow cotton hanging in the jagged skyline.

The CH-47 helicopter Jesse was on went down on August 6th, 2011 in the Wardak province of Afghanistan. The event became known by its call sign—Extortion 17. The 30 American service members and eight Afghans on board had left their Forward Operating Base that night on a rescue mission. They were part of an immediate reaction force, scrambled to support members of a friendly unit pinned down by enemy fire. As the aircraft approached and circled the landing site, a rocket propelled grenade fired from the tree line struck the tail rotor and brought it down instantly. There were no survivors. A lucky shot. The body parts were bagged up together, sent to a forensics lab in Dover and sorted as best as possible.

One administrative requirement before every deployment was to complete an Emergency Data Sheet. It was a packet containing basic information - emergency contacts, location of a will, life insurance beneficiaries, etc. The last page of the form asks for any specific instructions for one's own funeral. Jessie and I filled ours out together, sitting on the ratty couches in the large bay where our gear was stored. We were just kids then really so, naturally, the whole thing was a joke. He chuckled as he wrote. When he finished, he grinned and held the

last page up for me to see. Below his list of six pallbearers, in large messy letters was written: "All will be wearing gorilla suits." We both laughed, never expecting it to happen, not really caring if it did.

But when meeting the plane carrying his remains, at his funeral in Coronado, at the memorial in Willits, to the other funerals at hometowns across the country, we all wore our best dress uniform. Part of the decision was respect for Ida and the rest of his family. Part of it was the realization that it was not a joke, that we were no longer boys. The six pallbearers listed on Jesse's Emergency Data Sheet moved through that month and those after it in different ways. One of them got divorced. One left the military as soon as his contract was up. Another sought revenge and volunteered to go back overseas as soon as possible. For me, I found a refuge in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, a six-hour drive away. Climbing was a hobby before Jesse died. After, it calcified into something more important. There were no grand visions from the tops of the granite peaks, or enlightenment among their grassy meadows. It wasn't spirituality or anything explicit I was seeking. But something inside me changed when I was there, and it was calming. The simple stillness and peace and awe soaked up amidst those mountains helped mortar the gaps between purpose and loss in the years after his death.

The cell phone ringer jolted me awake the next morning at 0230. My eyes snapped open in the darkness but there was nothing to see. My heart was pounding. It boomed off the earplugs I wore to sleep. What is this place? I clicked on my headlamp and switched it to the red light setting so as not to disturb the people snoring on thin pads next to me. The confusion of sleep quickly gave way to nerves. We were unsure of the route; would we get lost? Did we have enough water? If the wind picks up, will I be able to keep my fingers warm enough to work the

straps on my crampons? The doubts were brief, forced out by soreness and pain as each muscle group was summoned to help the body squirm from the bunk. Kelson and I dressed in the hallway as a courtesy to our fellow climbers—the chaffing of waterproof clothing is like a bullhorn in a room with 20 sleeping strangers. After a quick meal of bread, butter, yogurt and coffee we made our way outside. We pulled on our boots, cinched our climbing harnesses and broke our ice axes loose from where they had frozen overnight to the porch railing. Our bodies had loosened. Soreness was a memory, the nerves faded. There is wisdom to the method of the alpine start. The simple steps of its process—waking, dressing, eating, packing, gearing up and stepping into the frozen darkness—have a way of harnessing brain and body for the rigors of the day. The snow was frozen and felt good underfoot. For almost four hours we walked, roped together and guided by headlamp, over the flat glacial approach. At 0530, the first fingers of daylight began to reveal the Jungfrau and our route up a rocky ridge on her south side.

Mark Twain saw the Jungfrau in 1878. His description of it is one of the rare sober moments in his lively travel memoir—*A Tramp Abroad*. He writes, “One had the sense of being under the brooding contemplation of a spirit, not an inert mass of rocks and ice—a spirit which had looked down, through the slow drift of the ages, upon a million vanished races of men, and judged them; and would judge a million more—and still be there, watching, unchanged and unchangeable, after all life should be gone and the earth have become a vacant desolation.”

Jungfrau means “virgin” in English. While planning our route on a two-dimensional map, the name seemed like a strange title for the highest mountain in the formidable range. But there, standing below her towering flanks, under the sheer, overhanging glaciers and seracs, amidst the condominium-sized boulders of ice calved off in their slow-motion flow, the name

was clear. Virgin. Holy Virgin. Mother of this ruthless and beautiful landscape. In the almost century-and-a-half since Mark Twain wrote those words, she hadn't even blinked.

We decided to take our crampons off below the first few boulders of the ridge. Unlike the route from the day before, the line up the Jungfrau was mostly snow and ice, broken by occasional rocky sections. Although possible, climbing and walking over long sections of rock with metal spikes attached to your boots is not optimal. It dulls the points, forces you to second guess your footing, and every step shocks the body with the same vibration and noise as nails on a chalkboard. But it takes time and dexterity to take them off. Both were in short supply that day and when we put them back on, we left them on for the day. We worked our way up the ridge for three hours. As we neared the top, the altitude and late morning heat slowed our pace. Our cadence was methodic—plant the shaft of axe in the high side of the slope, walk the feet up, free the axe, plant it a little further forward, step again. We crossed several crevasses on bridges of frozen snow, stealing quick looks over the side, leering at the black and blue depths, imagining the feeling of being wedged into the ice after a fall, 60 meters down, fading heat from your broken body slowly melting you lower in the ice, the impossibility of a rescue, your corpse eventually becoming one with the glacier, the contents of your stomach being argued over by anthropologist a century later. The summit finally came into view and we could see a small guided group resting at the top. As we topped out, the guide smiled and greeted us with genuine warmth. It caught us off guard. It was as if our arrival on a summit warranted reward while shameless bumbling at a starting gate would not be tolerated. He offered us a handful of nuts and dried fruit from a bag in his hand. We took off our packs and sat down on the cold rocks to rest.

If God exists, he lives in the Bernese Oberland. The evidence lay spread around us like a feast. The tall spires to the south rose from the glacier like cathedral columns from marble floors. We sat there in silence, on our perch atop the Jungfrau, the highest point, the steeple of the range. Kelson handed me a piece of frozen beef jerky, the holy sacrament, I chewed it slowly. The friendly guide stood in front of us and the other believers resting on the rocks. He called out points on the landscape.

"The Aletschhorn there," he pointed at a stark pyramid rising from the glacier. "is a good, long, technical climb. The glacier at its base is over 700 meters thick."

His long hair, wild from days without soap, was matted in knots around a strong, sunburned face. He turned toward us again, still grinning. A prophet in waterproof pants. The tools of his faith jingle jangled from where they hung on his harness—aluminum carabiners, nylon runners, rescue pulleys, light-weight, titanium ice screws—each piece with a critical role in delivering the faithful, safely to their chosen place of worship. He looked at his watch.

"We should probably start moving before the sun wrecks the ice."

Jesse's shirt stayed in my pack that day. The moment passed in celebration with Kelson and the strangers around me. The shirt was personal. The questions it would have prompted were best left unasked.

The guided party began to gather their things from where they lay spread out on the rocks and within 15 minutes were descending down a different route. Kelson and I left at the same time, retracing our steps from the morning. The sun was high overhead and the day was getting hot. We crossed each crevasse deliberately. The first one of us to the ledge anchored himself to the solid ice with two, eight-inch ice screws and belayed the second across the snow bridge. Once across, the second would repeat the processes. If the bridge collapsed, it would

only be a short fall into the crevasse and the rope was best configured for a rescue. We made it across the bridges without incident and began to relax as we picked our way down the ridge. My mind began to wander, pushed out of focus by the fatigue of the morning. My steps were clumsy and while walking across a wind-formed ridge of snow that overhung a steeper face, I broke through and started sliding. Before I hit the end of the slack in the rope attaching me to Kelson, I rolled over, buried the pick of my axe in the slope and stopped the fall. I looked down past my feet and watched the snow from the broken cornice slide out of sight. It was a close call.

After the fall, we took the safest possible route to the glacier. Once there, we began walking slowly back the hut. The high afternoon sun reflected off the glacier, we had sunburns in strange places like our chins and inside of our noses. There was still the risk of crevasses, and staying alert through the fatigue was challenging. Around mid-afternoon we gained the safety of the groomed path where we could un-rope and relax. After a short walk, we were back at the hut. The hut was safe. There was warm food cooking in the kitchen, beer on tap. But as I looked out to where our tracks disappeared into the gathering shadow of the mountain, there was a tinge of regret that the climb, with all the focus and work required to go out, do it safely and come back alive, was over. I felt a similar feeling when I stepped off the C-17 cargo plane that brought Jesse and I home from Iraq.

Beneath the excitement of being home and alive, was a sense that, compared to what we had just been through, things would never be quite the same. Among the everyday worries and cares of life in Southern California was the nagging thought that none of it really mattered. Like we had turned our back on something more important over there and it wasn't finished.

For a few months, everything was normal. Jesse and I found apartments by the beach on the same block. We helped each other move. We were able to fit everything he owned into the back of his 1985 Toyota pickup. A few weeks after moving in, we went to a warehouse store in San Diego to buy furniture to fill our empty living rooms. I picked out a sofa, a lamp and a dark wood coffee table. It was one of those stores where you collect tags from items and pay for them all at once in the front. We met up at the register; he was holding only one tag from a couch he liked. I asked him where he would put his feet while watching TV.

"I don't think I'm going to get a TV. I can watch movies on my computer."

"Where will you put the computer?"

He shrugged. "I'll figure it out. I don't want to pay for a coffee table either."

A week later he called me early in the morning and told me he needed help. His truck wouldn't start and he needed a push down his street so he could pop the clutch and crank the engine to life. I walked into his apartment, annoyed.

"Hey man, we gotta be at work in..." The smell of bacon and baking bread caught me off guard. He walked out of kitchen, beaming, wearing two pink oven mitts and holding a steaming casserole dish.

"I made quiche!" He laughed because I looked completely confused and that was exactly what he expected. "My mom sent me a recipe book."

He set the pan down on a large black plastic box in front of his couch. His new coffee table. There was no pad for the heat and through the clear glass of the casserole dish I watched the plastic start to melt. I had a box just like it—we called it a "cruise box." The Navy issued it to protect expensive gear when we traveled overseas. In a pinch, it doubled as temporary furniture.

I looked around his apartment. The walls were bare and his things were arranged in various piles in the corners. He lived there but never really moved in. I don't think he planned to stay long.

The deployment that killed him was optional. About two months after returning home, we were informed about a Request For Support—an official ask for help. Combat operations in Afghanistan were ramping up and a sister unit needed as many extra bodies as they could get. Jesse volunteered immediately. If he thought about it at all, it was for the time it takes to finish one sentence and start the next. In emails he sent before the incident, he assured me he made the right choice. In his words, I saw that he believed in what he was doing and was truly excited for the chance to participate. On August 5th, 2011, the day before he died, he wrote: "This place is good to go. We are staying busy, doing good stuff." In my mind, he was the first one to board the helicopter that night, eager to help, driven by the basic need to do things right until they were done. No matter what it cost.

On the last day of our climb, Kelson and I got up two hours before the crowd climbing the Mönch. In the dining room of the hut the night before, we had questioned another guide about the route. Initially he confirmed what we had read, the climb was short, the difficulty moderate. But after almost an hour of badgering, he grew weary of our questions. He leaned in close, out of earshot of his client who was drinking a beer at the next table.

"Listen, conditions right now on the last 300-meter ridge to the summit are bad. It's like a balance beam. On one side, you die. On the other side, you die. It's too narrow to pass. I turn most clients around on the shoulder before the actual summit." We decided we had a better chance if we left early.

As we stepped from the warmth of the hut into the freezing morning, we saw wisps of cirrus clouds threaded across the dark sky. I slid my sore feet into my boots and tied them slowly. My dry, cracked hands bled on the laces as I tied them. My shoulders and neck ached where the pack pulled. We were sluggish in our routine and it took us longer to complete. We started off across the glacier again, plodding under the weight of our packs. It was a short approach, and after 30 minutes, we were beneath the first few boulders of the route. I pulled off my glove and moved my bare hand gently over the rock. It felt solid and grippy and primed for us to grab its ledges and crimps and flakes and pull our bodies up and over its boulders. Excitement pushed the last dregs of weariness out of mind.

Two hours later, Kelson and I stood on the final shoulder before the summit. Separating us from the top was a razor-edged ridge of snow and ice. In some places it narrowed to less than a boot-print. On either side, the flanks of the mountain dropped away at a near-vertical angle. On the east side, the slope led off a cliff. To the west, into a deep crevasse. If there was a fall, the partner would have to throw his body off the other side and trust the rope to hold us both. The guides' decision to turn new clients around made sense. There should be a better reason before you trust your life to a stranger. But we were far from strangers and we decided to go for it. Although we had not been climbing together long, there was an implicit trust between people in our community that at times overruled reason.

Jessie was buried at Fort Rosecrans Military Cemetery in San Diego, on the western slope of a grassy bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. A grove of old cedar trees nearby shades the plot and keeps the sun from drying out the grass around it. It's a fine gravesite. We paid him a visit before leaving for Germany—my wife and I and our 2-year-old daughter who was still learning

how to walk. From the parking lot, his grave is a short, steep walk up a gravel path. We lagged behind and watched her struggle with the climb. She took shaky steps, arms out wide, pushing herself off the ground when she stumbled. It took her a long time but she made it without help. She squealed and laughed when she reached the grave, delighted with a pinwheel and some wilted flowers left behind. She used his headstone to balance, slapping the cold granite with both hands. It made me smile to imagine the look of confusion on Jessie's face if he could see me with her, this little girl and her wobbly legs, the new warmth inside me.

The snow was still hard underfoot and we had the ridge to ourselves. Kelson took the lead—the riskier position as he would not be able to see a fall before it jerked him off his feet. In a crouching stride, we stepped off, arms out wide, each of us gripping our axe, wishing for a second, ready to drop to the snow and bury the pick deep at the hint of a stumble. Every footstep had to be precise. Every shred of concentration was focused on the snow directly in front of our feet. Step-by-step we picked our way across. When our feet were finally secure on the summit, there was silence between us as we savored the moment. The sun was beginning to crest. The gathering clouds filtered its light and cast the panorama in long, pink and orange shadows. There was dopamine in our blood, racing through our brains. It spread pure, thick magic into the thin air around us. The brooding spirit of the Jungfrau judged us from off to our west. She gave us a pass that morning. I unpacked Jesse's shirt for one more picture. It hung flat in the windless morning, the rising light behind it making the yellow cotton glow electric.

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