

A Ray Through the Clouds

The clouds bore down on me like the walls of a prison, restricting my thoughts, sapping my vitality. Those sprawling, gray clouds had the unique ability to change any scene, no matter how majestic, into bleak despair. So perfectly banal was the sky, oppressed by these clouds, that I could not distinguish between one horizon or another. That day, the sky was merely the sky, nothing more, nothing less.

I sat upon a boulder, resting from the journey behind me. The clouds gave off a faint glow that illuminated the objects around me, but this light, tainted by the clouds from which it emanated, sunk the landscape into helpless monotony. This taint destroyed beauty and brought despair. This taint penetrated my very mind and soul, corrupting my thoughts and stealing the passion I had, the force driving me onwards. The air that I breathed chilled my nose; the cold rock on which I sat numbed my body. Behind me lay a gray boulder field, extending down a thousand feet to the rocks from which I had come. In front of me, beyond the snow bridge, rose the cliffs of Granite Peak, piercing the sky like a jagged knife. Instead of thinking of the great climb ahead of me, I found myself thinking of the world I had left behind: warm sleeping bags, beautiful lakes, the shining sun, a house that sheltered me from the cold, and from the clouds. These thoughts, brought on by the depressing clouds, pulled me backwards, away from my goal, but deep inside of me, where no cloud or chill could reach, I felt a drive impelling me to continue on my ascent. These opposite forces pulled me with all the power they could muster, but, since neither could gain an advantage, I sat on my cold, gray boulder, unmoving. As I began to reminisce on my journey to that point, in the back of my mind I heard passage from a novel by C. S. Lewis, "Further up and further in."

My path to the top of Montana began at the West Rosebud trailhead. This trail winds three miles through the pristine Absorka-Beartooth Wilderness, leading to Mystic Lake. That lake possesses beauty of a different kind. The cold mountain water blends so harmoniously from a blue green color near the shore to a deep navy at the center. Mystic Lake evokes the most wonderful, swelling feeling of awe and marvel within me. The lake also marks the end of the easy part of the Granite Peak ascent. From Mystic Lake, the route turns southward, leading up the Switchbacks from Hell to the Froze to Death Plateau. These sections of the route bear discouraging, but appropriate names, for they reflect the brutality of the land and the unforgiving nature of the wilderness. With these daunting obstacles impeding our path, my group and I could do nothing but attack them at full speed, further up and further in.

The Switchbacks from Hell traverse the steep hillside leading up to the plateau that frames Mystic Lake. This path gains 2,500 feet in approximately 2.5 miles through a series of 26 switchbacks, attesting to the steepness of the route at this point. The group and I began our trudge up to the plateau right in the middle of the day. I could feel the heat of the sun bearing down on me, quickly turning my face red from the heat. As I came upon the first switchback, I could already feel my breath quickening from the arduous hike. I tried to ignore the fatigue building in my legs, instead focusing on making it to the top. I made it to the fourth switchback, and at this point the trail emerged from the trees that had provided me with some protection from the glaring sun. As the air around me grew hotter, I concentrated on the top of the plateau, where I knew it would be cooler. I kept moving onward, only taking a few short breaks to regain my breath. As I climbed through the tenth and eleventh switchbacks, I looked back towards Mystic Lake. The view from here was amazing, but I knew it would be better from the top. The straps of my heavy pack were digging into my shoulders and hips, but now I could feel the top nearing.

I pushed the pain to the back of my mind, rounding the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth switchbacks. Finally, going around the last switchback, I felt a sense of relief and accomplishment. I was now on the Froze to Death Plateau, gazing back on Mystic Lake, whose beauty was compounded when viewed from a half mile above it. The group and I took off our packs for a break, but in the back of my mind, I knew we would soon have to continue, further up and further in.

The path across the Froze to Death Plateau was less strenuous than the hike up the switchbacks, but it compensated for this by lasting for six miles, instead of two and a half. The easier route made my group more jovial and conversational, since we were no longer gasping for breath. The plateau began as a field of grass and shrubs, scattered with rocks and boulders, but as we neared the plateau's end, the rocks grew larger and more numerous. About four miles in, the plateau had become a massive boulder field, which slowed our progress considerably. The sun, which before had heated the ground and air to uncomfortable levels, now sank in the sky, taking with it the heat it had lavishly provided before. We arrived at our campsite before dark, and quickly went about setting up camp and preparing dinner. The temperature had dropped considerably, and I put on layers of coats and gloves to try to stay warm. I had the task of filtering water that night, and by the time I had finished, there was a definite blue tinge to my hands. We ate dinner, and soon after we headed to bed, since we had to rise early the next morning for the climb to the summit. At night, the plateau's true hardships revealed themselves. We had built a wall of rocks around our tent, and we had tied it down to several rocks about twice the size of my head. When the wind came that night, these defenses seemed almost nonexistent. Huge gusts of wind blew across the plateau, leveling our tent every time they hit. The rocks to which the tent had been attached moved a little bit when these blasts of wind came

through. That night seemed to have no end to it, and I feared the whole night that one of the blasts of wind would blow my tent into oblivion. Finally, around 5:00 in the morning, I heard the call to wake up, and I felt ready to carry on, further up and further in.

All that remained of the journey was the climb to the top of Granite Peak. From the edge of the plateau, I saw the great mountain, rising up from the glacier below. After a short descent from the edge of the plateau to the saddle between Granite and Tempest Mountain, the group and I hiked up the boulder field that rose 1,000 feet in front of us. I gazed at the mountain rising ahead of me, then as I looked beyond the mountain, I saw the sky, gray and cloudy. As I wove my way between the boulders, the sky slowly sapped me of the drive that had carried me this far. When I reached the end of the boulder field, marked by a snowbridge, I felt that I could proceed no further. I had endured trials of fire and ice, but now it seemed that I would fail this trial of the spirit. I sat upon my boulder, engulfed by indecision, feeling cold and numb, seeing no way that I could possibly continue. From deep within me, the voice that had brought me so far was now reduced to a mere whisper, "Further up and further in."

During this deep state of depression and forlornness I witnessed something amazing, miraculous. From within the great expanse of clouds, I saw a break. This break was small, insignificant, but through it came a single ray of sunlight. The ray struck my face, and within me I felt the drive that the clouds had so diminished grow. I sat there, bathed in sunlight, feeling the warmth return to my hands, watching the land around me spring to life. I could see the beauty in the once mundane rocks, and the snow, once a dull white color, now glowed brilliantly. I looked around at my companions, and I could see a change in them, too. The sunlight had brought us exactly what we needed, a sense of beauty, a sense of vigor, a sense of hope. I rose from my

boulder, and with the new vitality given to me by the ray of sunlight, I declared, “Further up and further in!”

The final stretch of the climb required the most technical skill, and was by far the most dangerous. We had to climb up two sets of cliffs, and, although the rock-climbing did not prove to be terribly difficult, one wrong move could mean serious, even fatal consequences. Despite the danger and difficulty of this last part of the climb, I felt better than I had felt for the entire trip. The rocks felt warmer, my legs felt stronger and sturdier, and I had more confidence than before. My hands gripped the rocks firmly, and with each pull of my arms, I knew that I grew closer to the summit. Every step forward seemed to strengthen my drive to continue, and the closer I came to the top, the more the sky cleared. With one final pull, and a short stretch of scrambling across a few more rocks, I gazed upon a breathtaking sight. To the north I could see the beautiful mountain lakes that extended like beads on a necklace from the great Granite Glacier. To the south I could see down the majestic glacial valleys, extending into Wyoming. Nothing obstructed my view, for at 12,799 feet in the air, I towered above everything that surrounded me. Despite all this, the most beautiful sight from the top of Granite Peak lay directly above me. As I looked up, I saw the beautiful blue sky, completely devoid of clouds. Standing there, gazing at the wonderful sights around me, I wished I could just float away, further up and further in.