

Waiting for the Fall

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I was staring at a stone handhold, my salvation, no more than three feet away, but it might as well have been on the moon. My superstitious nature surfaced at its worst as I wondered, ‘What if some sort of malevolent force wanted to insure I never got off this mountain alive?’

It was late afternoon when the old Valiant had sputtered before dying in the driveway 1,100 feet atop Petit Jean Mountain. We had walked to the edge of the cliff above the plain and took turns spitting off the promontory. Far below, the Arkansas and Petit Jean Rivers curled like giant, silver snakes, and tiny cars raced cockroach-like across a miniature landscape of checkerboard fields and matchbox houses.

At sixteen we were a study in contrasts. Morris, short and pudgy; myself, tall and gaunt; and Chuck, tan and muscular.

“So, where’s the cave?” I asked.

“Down there,” Chuck pointed.

I leaned over the edge of the bluff.

“I don’t see anything. You don’t mean *down there*? Don’t we need a rope or something?”

“No, it’s not far. Come on. I’ll show you.”

He climbed down using the layers of the gray and tan stone for hand-and-toeholds. I looked at Morris who shrugged, and we gingerly made our way down the bluff about twenty feet

until we reached a small ledge and entered the opening. Chuck was already inside, as I waited to let my eyes adjust to the gloom.

It was a cave in only the narrowest sense of the word. In truth, it was more like a big crack in the face of the cliff, a foot or two wide and eight or ten-feet tall. Chuck shined our flashlight down a long, slim corridor and rushed ahead like a dachshund on the scent of a badger. I followed as best I could, but within in the constricted space all I could see was the silhouette of his head. At points, we ducked or turned sideways before the passage forked. As I slowed down, I was left in total darkness.

Now my mind began to wander down some of its own darker corridors, playing a cruel game of “What If,” as in what if I’m being led to my doom by a half-wit Ahab? What if we get lost in this labyrinth and can’t find our way back? What if we stumble into a den of copperheads or rattlesnakes?

I pulled a lighter from my pocket and lit it. Then it occurred to me. ‘What if we strike a pocket of poison gas? Like say radon, or worse, methane?’ I quickly put out the flame. ‘I mustn’t think like this. Focus. Be objective,’ I told myself. ‘How did these cracks form? What caused them? Maybe the great earthquake of 1811? Imagine that,’ I speculated. ‘What if,’ I wondered, ‘A tremor struck while we’re in here and closed these cracks? We’d be sealed inside this mountain like dead flowers pressed in Mother Nature’s scrapbook.’

As I groped along, the passageway widened so that I could no longer feel the wall on my right side. Morris poked me in the back asking, “What do you see?”

“Nothing. I can’t see anything.” I stopped and called to Chuck. “Come back. Shine the beam over here.”

My worst fears were realized as the light illuminated a thin ledge. Had we stepped no more than a foot to our right, we would have fallen into a deep abyss.

I felt queasy.

“I’m going back,” I said.

“But we haven’t seen anything yet,” Chuck replied.

“Do you reckon? Maybe that’s because there isn’t anything to see. Perhaps it hasn’t occurred to you, but this place is the pits.”

“Amen to that,” Morris echoed.

I snatched the light from Chuck’s hand and within minutes we retraced our steps back to the entrance. It was sunset now, the golden hour. My heart was pounding and I felt breathless.

On the ledge in the fading light, I put the flashlight in my back pants pocket and stood watching my friends climb ahead of me. I started up to the summit and all went well initially. Then halfway up, I came to an impasse, a spot where there were no good holds within reach of my left hand. A support nearer to my right was some distance away so that in order to reach it, I had to hang on with my left hand and turn loose with my right, stretching off balance to grab it. If I missed, I would most certainly fall.

Experts claim that any fall over 120 feet is nearly always fatal, even over water. Looking down, I realized the gravity of my predicament. It was probably twice that far to the tops of the oak trees below me.

That’s when panic began gripping me, slowly coiling around me like a python. At first my legs began to shake, and then the trembling spread up my body into my hands. I feared if I continued to quiver, I would lose my grip, slip and fall. Yet the fear of falling was causing me to shake worse.

I tried to call for help but could muster only what sounded like the feeble hissing croak of an asthmatic frog. I knew now it was just a matter of time before my knees buckled. Even if my friends were able to reach the park ranger station and return with help, in all likelihood it would be too late.

I took a deep breath and lunged as quickly as I could. My fingers closed around the sandstone, and it sounded like a hammer dropping on an empty chamber of a revolver in a game of Russian roulette.

A deep wave of relief swept over me.

I scaled the remaining strata as easily as climbing a ladder. My companions, oblivious to my dilemma, waited giggling in the car, sharing a cigarette and vegetating to the song “A Horse with No Name,” as it monotonously wormed its way out of the tinny AM radio.

I tumbled silently into the backseat and started gnawing my fingernails to the quick. In an alternate reality I saw my body sealed in that lifeless crack or broken like a bloody rag doll, splattered on the rocks at the foot of one of those ancient white oaks. I was glad to be alive, but part of me had died. It remains on Petit Jean Mountain, like a spirit, the ghost of things that never were.

The Valiant back-fired and rattled forward, as we disappeared into the twilight.