

The Last Climb

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She turned her head and looked around. It unbalanced her to do it, but she was sure she could hear someone calling her name, on the wind. She couldn't see anyone except for Darcy, ahead on the trail and about ten feet above her.

“Mrs. Patterson. Mrs. Patterson, don't ignore me. It's time to take your medication.”

The voice was familiar but unwelcome now.

“Are you OK Mom?” A voice called down.

She raised her chin enough to see Darc looking back concerned. She wanted to give a thumbs up but her hands were clutching rocks trying to hoist her body and backpack up the 45-degree climb known as the “Golden Stairs” through the Chilkoot pass.

They'd left Sheep Camp that morning early, in the fog, hoping to summit before the snow and ice on the trail got too soft in the warmth of the almost-August day becoming too slippery and unstable to hike over. The thick fog was making trail markers hard to see and the landscape passed them in ghostly mirages. Everything was damp.

Years ago she'd read the history of the Klondike Goldrush and drempt about following the trail, but now, clinging to the shifting, slippery rocks, she wondered how the Stampeders made it to Dawson City over one hundred years ago.

When she packed for this adventure, she had been determined to carry no more than 25 pounds. With her changes of socks and underwear, fuel for the tiny stove, the stove itself, and all the hardware for the tent, it weighed in at 18 pounds. Then they put in food and water and it crept upwards of thirty. That was too much. It pulled at her shoulders and tried to tip her backward, but what could have been left behind? Next time she would do it better.

The first day, hiking out of Dyea, was hard although the trail was well marked. They

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climbed the first steep hill just to plunge down the other side, then start up again. That day trudging through rain forest, it was hot and humid while the mosquitoes provided a nasty distraction from complaining muscles. But they made it to Pleasant camp. She took her time, slowed down by compulsive picture taking and the fact that her 65-year-old knees weren't what they had been.

She'd talked to her doctor before leaving. He'd said, if the pain wasn't too bad, she should just do it. She couldn't do any more damage and she was scheduled for a replacement later in the year. The Chilkoot information packet had specified that strong, experienced hikers were preferred on this trail. She was a good hiker, maybe not that strong, but slow and steady would win the day...right?

In January, they registered their dates for late July, imagining long beautiful summer days of hiking. Mountains however, have their own schedule, and with a late spring the snow was still heavy in the passes, creeks were high and the fog was constant. It didn't rain though, and even though the ground was cold, the air was warm.

"Mrs. Patterson" the voice insisted "Just look at us."

It was annoying. She needed to concentrate on moving one foot, then the other, mostly clamoring on all fours and grasping with her gloved fingers.

"We're almost there." Darcy crowed somewhere above her.

She thought again about the Stampeders in 1896 who were required by the Canadian officials to carry a tonne of supplies, food, and shelter to keep them alive in an Arctic winter. They'd climbed this stretch in the winter, going back time and again, trip after trip, to get the whole load to the top, wearing totally inadequate clothing. Her Vibram-soled hiking boots clung to slippery rocks, she'd brought concentrated food, and a tent that weighed next to nothing.

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Imagining their hardship, as she wiped sweat from her eyes, made it all somehow easier.

She could see Darcy's feet not far in front. They were almost there and she just had to make it to the top once. Her arms and legs ached. She was glad for the braces she wore because they protected her knees from the angles and edges of the rock she was crawling over.

Then, there they were, scrambling up and on to the solid ground of the narrow summit passage. The fog was deep and the mood was celebratory. They came in sight of the Canadian flag and started singing "Oh Canada," off-key and badly. It was a moment she would remember for the rest of her life.

At the top, the ranger at the warming station had hot chocolate waiting for them. She tucked a little rum in it.

"You carried that extra weight all the way here? That's crazy." The other hikers shook they're heads.

With a generous spirit, she poured shots in theirs too. There was laughter and celebration all around.

That outhouse would be in her memory forever, she thought, taking care of her last minute business before getting back on the trail. The mountain top wind whipped through it playfully, caressing her bare bits and making her wonder if anyone had ever been blown back down the mountain from that position. More than that, the outlook from its throne was a spectacular view of the mountain ranges ahead, still snowcapped and majestic. She didn't stay long but it was probably the best place she'd ever sat to take a pee.

As usual, they were the last. She was the oldest on the trail. She could have walked faster, but she could hear the footfalls of the gold-chasing fools that had gone before and she loved lingering in the mists of their dreams of riches and a better life.

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“Mrs. Patterson, can I tempt you with some soup?”

Now that her feet were on solid ground, she did look around.

“Are you hungry?” she asked Darc

“No, are you? I could pull some trail mix out.”

Confused, she shook her head, “No I can wait til we get to Happy Camp.”

And on they went. The pack was heavy. She wanted to drop it but she had half the food and things she would need for the night. She ached all over, but she couldn't stop. They had the glacier to traverse and some spectacular climbs along the edge of a lake before they could rest tonight. Her daughter was patient, waiting for her, helping her, but it was reciprocal. She didn't feel like a burden, except maybe for her speed. She should walk faster.

They would camp tonight at Happy Camp, tomorrow night at Deep Loon Lake and the next day they would arrive at the tiny village of Bennett where they would be fed in a large dining room then climb onto the historic train to go back to Skagway by rail. She could hardly wait to see the whole route backward from a vastly different perspective.

She and Darc were well matched. Darc was good with the gear and the tent but was afraid to light the Bunsen burner type stove. So, Mom cooked and Darc took care of set up and knockdown of the campsite. It was efficient, and had them set up and eating soon after arriving in camp, although both were surprised at how exhaustion numbed their need for food.

When packing, she had thrown in a soft climbing rope not knowing if it would be needed. It was. When one of them struggled they would string it between them to offer something to grab and the illusion of safety and support. Soon they found just reaching for each other, with the rope, hiking poles. or even a hand, was good enough to steady an ascent or descent. ‘Hold the rope,’ became a mantra. It made them laugh because often the grip was tenuous, almost

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imaginary, but it helped.

Food wasn't important, and neither was sleep apparently. They would crawl in the tent, too exhausted to be upright for one more moment and then just lie in bed awake til it came time to move on.

That night Darc said, "this was the hardest day, I thought we were going to die, really die, three times."

"Three, I only felt in danger twice."

Darc rolled up onto her elbow and looked at her. "When?"

She ticked off, "When I slipped off the stepping stones and fell into that wild creek just before the Weigh Scale. If that current caught me you wouldn't have even heard me splash at the bottom."

Darc nodded.

"Then when those rocks rolled out from under me near the top of the 'stairs.' My pack was dragging me and I almost fell backwards. That tumble would have broken me."

A tremour rocked Darc. "I thought I'd lost you." She crossed her arms behind her head. "I was sure we would slip off that icy cliff and crash through the ice on the lake after we left the warming station. We were so high."

"That was scary, but so beautiful and we got each other here. We just gotta hold the rope to make it."

They both smiled and shut their eyes. Morning would come early.

The last day, they left camp before the rest. She kept up a good pace. They wanted to reach Bennett for lunch and for the train back. It left at 2:30 and if they missed it, the next one wasn't til Wednesday.

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They crossed a small glacial dessert a few kilometers outside of Bennett and slogging through the drifts of sand was hard. Each step dragged at them. Reaching the hill above the log church in Bennett was a triumph. They'd made it.

Lunch was unremarkable. They weren't hungry. On the train, swaying, listening to the sound of the tracks passing under them, she started to drift. Four nights without sleep had taken their toll. With her guard down, the voices reached and pulled at her.

"Darcy, surely you hear them."

"Mom, I'm here." She heard Darcy say.

"Mrs. Patterson, this is important, open your eyes."

And again, her hands were clutching the rocks on the Golden Stairs. She was sure Darcy climbed ahead of her somewhere in the fog. She could hear her voice.

"It's okay Darc, I'm doing good. I'm almost there. I've got rum in my bag. There will be hot chocolate. Just hold the rope Darcy, we'll make it."

Darcy kissed her on the forehead adjusting her hospital gown. "Hold on to the rope Mom, we're almost there." She took her hand.