



"Head's up, Dad. Mom found your rescue bill in the mail."

## THE CLIMBING LIFE

### Say the Words

DO YOU THINK IT'S WARM because we're drunk? Ben asked.

Behind him, a bouncer dressed in shorts and a T-shirt bulldogged his way toward us.

No, I said. It's warm because it's high pressure.

The bouncer held a credit card up and read the name slowly: Stu Padaso?

Ben shrugged.

I watched the bouncer move on to a crowd of smokers on the balcony. Stu Padaso? Stu Padaso?

There was a pause, then shrieks of laughter.

I looked at Ben. Joke names on credit cards? That's a felony.

It was Ben's war: he believed credit companies were ripping off the public, and it was fair game to rip back.

I never signed anything, Ben said. And you drank off it too. He shrugged again. Besides, it serves the idiot right if he can't figure that one out.

I WALKED HOME ACROSS THE TRAIN BRIDGE, the river sparkling cold below me. It felt like a waste to have this chinook blow in when I was

drunk and had to work in the morning.

An hour later, the phone rang. I sat up and grabbed it before it woke my girlfriend.

Hello? I said, cradling the receiver closely.

Colin Zic?

My pulse quickened. Could I pull it off without losing my job? My girlfriend?

Colin Zic? the voice asked again.

Outside, bright stars flashed over the peaks.

Yeah, that's me, I said quietly.

Downstairs, I dialed the next number. It rang twice. He's still at the bar, I thought. I felt a surge of relief. He'll break the chain. Then:

Hello? a sleepy female voice answered.

Colin Zic there? I asked, wincing slightly.

I heard her wake him, exasperated, accusatory. I fidgeted while I waited.

When he came on the line, I asked, Colin Zic?

There was a pause. Finally he said, Yeah, OK, that's me.

I hung up, went to the garage and pulled out my backpack and boots. I had it all spread out when the next call came.

Stanley: North Face?

Snow might not be good, I said.

Make the call, he said.

I hit redial.

Yeah? He was much more awake now. I heard the clink of gear on concrete.

Cavell: East Ridge, I said, then hung up.

I looked at my rack. I was still drunk enough to think that carrying a big rack could be fun. But I would want to go light. Something long, something fun.

When the phone rang for the last time, I didn't even speak.

Cavell, he said. Ten minutes.

I crept upstairs and knelt beside my sleeping girlfriend.

Call in sick for me? I pleaded quietly.

Sleep-muffled and annoyed, she asked, Again? then collapsed her head back into the pillow.

HEADLIGHTS FLASHED through the windows. Car doors banged.

Colin Zic? a dark figure asked.

Yeah. You?

Yeah.

WE DROVE IN SHIFTS, sleeping against rattling windows, our legs cramping. In the parking

lot, the mountain cut out a black mass against the spilling stars.

Dawn speared the pitchy sky. Our headlamps poked up the moraine to the little col, tiny against the vast puddling darkness. In the frigid air below Edith Cavell's tiny glacier, we questioned the high pressure. But the day was clear blue—so clear the endless distance made it hard to focus. Only the remains of the Angel Glacier affirmed that time could pass.

It was one of those days when it seemed as though God had the same size stride as you do when he built the route. Cavell's East Ridge was a quartzite church: we bowed, knelt, stepped up. Stairway to heaven, Ben said.

At the summit we sat marveling at the long ridge and the view and the stillness, while Ben chipped small flecks of summit

ice into a blue water-bottle cap.

We're not the first to climb up here hungover, he said, tipping a small flask into the cap.

Who had that honor?

Why, it was Scott Shawn LeRoques.

He spread his arms out, grinning deeply, and said, If we're not makin' war, we're findin' peace.

HOME. BONE TIRED. Burnt. I had a disorienting dream of swirling, blending color. Before I could really sleep, I was up, trying to stretch and think clearly behind the concierge desk of the grand hotel.

In the bustle of the late-season crowds, I could see the sunlight and beautiful weather holding. The tourists were impatient as ever, though smiling at their luck to have caught what they were told was an unusual autumn.

Beside my desk, an interpreter was giving a tour of the hotel. She stood next to a display of stuffed animals and trees and cliffs and glaciers—a miniature slice in time.

Is it true that the glaciers will all be gone in fifty years? asked a squat woman in capris.

My desk phone rang, one of a hundred calls that morning.

Hugo Cendit? Is that you?

I shook my head and hung up. I felt sick. I needed to work. People were joking about my priorities in the staff café. I had never been so truant before. I was a hard worker, dependable.

An hour later the doorman walked up with a check-in card in his white-gloved hand. He

waved disgustedly at a rusted Oldsmobile under the marquee. Sun heliographed off the front windshield, still dirty from our jaunt up the Parkway. Inside, three men in dark glasses were looking at me.

I knew what was in the trunk. I knew what would be on their feet. They wore light summer shirts over micro-mesh, all a disguise.

Bryce's Suite, the card said. Sadie Worts and Shane Joproffeson.

Mt. Bryce: the rarely climbed, triple-crowned monarch on the far side of the Columbia Icefield. Yes, that would be sweet. The clock on my computer screen ticked.

Is it true that the glaciers will all be gone in fifty years? the woman repeated.

I pulled my bundle of keys from my pocket



and handed them to my shift mate.

Say, Enora? I said.

—Jerry Auld, Canmore, Alberta, Canada

### Recompense

THAT SAME MOVE always made me nervous: clapping the ledge near the top of Recompense, my palms would feel greasy, the granite damp with the humid New Hampshire air. As I mantled up, the exposure would open out underneath me, and a sudden

vertigo would make my heart race. But once I was stable on the ledge, my pulse would fall as I looked down at the tiny trees below.

Doctors are hardwired to think and operate a certain way. When I used to climb with Rand, one part of my brain would quiver with electricity as I fiddled with a Stopper, while a deeper center would slowly idle, efficiently processing the guts—or so I thought—of each and every thing he said. Rand had graduated from medical school as well, and I imagine his brain was doing the same thing. We were both processing different questions, the answers to which we needed to live through that moment, physically or mentally: mine would be the integrity of the flake on which I was hanging or the gear I'd placed; his was something I'll never know. Nothing drives a doctor crazier than not finding a solution. It's what we exist to do.

This time, as I climbed once more up the route's complicated features, my thoughts kept toggling back and forth between observations of the grainy texture and the dizzy sweep of the line—and images of Rand's medical record, its pages flipping as I kept trying to find a hint of a mistake I'd made or a clue I'd missed. I didn't find anything. Rand had hidden his feelings so well that on September 2, 2007, when he took his own life, he'd surprised everyone.

RECOMPENSE STARTS with a series of overlaps and corners and ends with a brilliant, arcing dihedral. Only the dirty chimney on the second pitch detracts from the climb's aesthetics and perfect granite. Most people bypass that part by choosing a parallel pitch called The Beast Flake. It's this inconsistency that makes

Recompense a fractured route.

In 2003 Rand, then new to the Mount Washington Valley, had fallen on the route and shattered his ankle, an incident that proved to be unexpectedly fortuitous: the ensuing rescue introduced him to a number of local climbers, including Rick Wilcox, the owner of International Mountain Equipment, who later became his employer. Rand was an outgoing guy, resourceful, charismatic. The community embraced him, and rightfully so. He was instantly likeable. I felt it the first time

I met him.

"His name is Rand McNally?" I asked my friend Eric in disbelief as he pointed to the man skinning effortlessly toward us. "You've got to be kidding me! Is he related to the map guy?"

It was a brittle day in late October; steam floated off the skintight polypro that encased Rand's fit upper body like shrinkwrap.

"I don't think so, at least not directly. He's a great guy. You guys have a lot in common. He's an airline pilot..."

"I'm not an airline pilot," I replied.

"I know. Stop interrupting. He's a doctor too. You'll like skiing with him."

It was the first day Bretton Woods Ski Area was blowing snow, and everyone was anxious to ski. Lifts wouldn't open for weeks, the Black Dike hadn't yet formed and the rock was too cold to climb. In New England, where our "good" conditions pound the hell out of visitors' ski bases, locals don't think twice about carving up a little turf and kicking off a few sparks from exposed rocks in order to make a half-dozen turns on man-made névé.

"Come on, slowpoke!" Rand hollered to me as I lagged

behind. "Just because I don't know you doesn't mean I can't race you!"

I flipped him off. He smiled, smeared his glove across his generous forehead and laughed in a soft, charming tone.

We quickly became friends. He chose me as his doctor, a status he gave me permission to mention freely. Doctoring another doctor is an honor, but also a challenge, humorous at times. Although he didn't practice, Rand still found creative uses for his degree. He'd occasionally call my office and notify the staff that Dr. McNally was on the phone with an important question for Dr. Irwin. My nurse would dash down to my exam room, interrupt me and advise me of "a call from another doctor on Line 3." When I'd pick up, it'd be Rand, asking me to climb. It was a pain in the ass. But I kind of liked it. In a matter of weeks, he had me calling his lab results to IME and sometimes even dropping off prescriptions there. Such errands often turned into cups of coffee or after-work laps on short, local routes. Approach and belay-ledge conversations rattled with raucous jokes and stories.

"Where'd you go to medical school?" I once asked him.

"Texas. While I was living there I heard a rumor that medical school was cheap if you were a resident and that application numbers were down. I thought, what the hell... An MD is always nice to have in your back pocket."

"Back pocket?" I'd said, sarcastic, almost jealous. "All that's in my back pocket is a wad of student-loan statements."

He chuckled sympathetically. It was difficult to imagine Rand needing anything in his back pocket. Pursuing a career as a commercial airline pilot, he'd raised a family and even-

tually moved to the valley, semi-retired at a fairly young age, full of energy and ideas for volunteer work, climbing and sheer fun. He was one of those guys who pissed you off simply because he was good at everything he did.

NEAR THE TOP OF THE FIRST PITCH, I torqued my fingers into a damp slot and moved a few feet onto the ledge where Rand had stood at the time of his accident. The rock was slick, much like it had been on the day he fell. I tried to focus, making nervous smears with the balls of my feet, but Rand's words invaded my mind.

"Brian, you're a doctor." His voice sounded casual. "What does someone who's a doctor do if they don't want to be a doctor and they just want to be outside as much as possible?"

My foot slipped. I scrambled to regain a stable stance, discharged a cam into the crack and clipped it. Relieved, I pressed my hands against the same coarse minerals his hands had touched. I let my mind drift again.

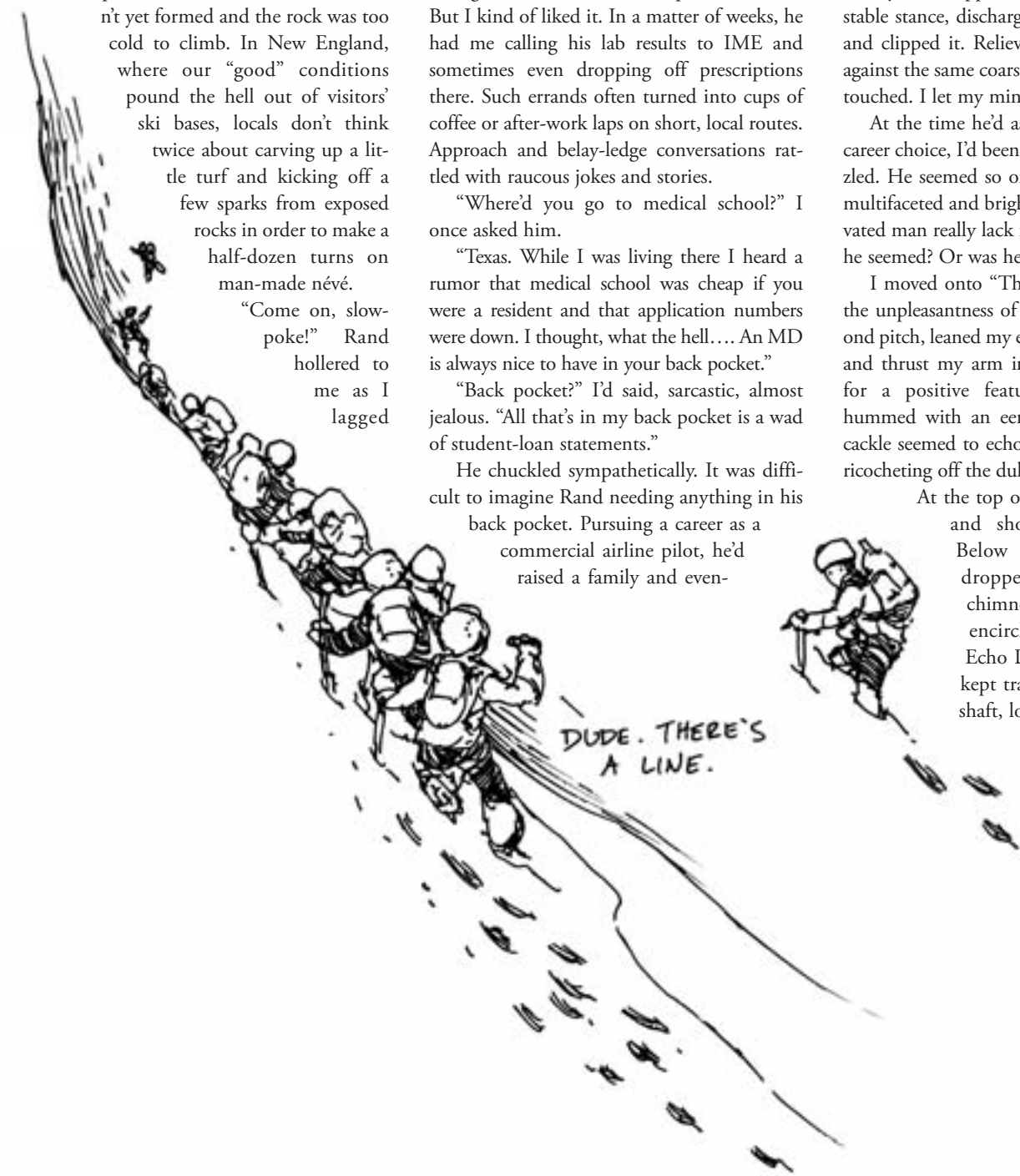
At the time he'd asked me about a second career choice, I'd been amused and a little puzzled. He seemed so organized, so together, so multifaceted and bright: Did this highly motivated man really lack focus? Was he as calm as he seemed? Or was he a little lost?

I moved onto "The Beast Flake," avoiding the unpleasantness of Recompense's dank second pitch, leaned my ear against the wide crack and thrust my arm inside, blindly scratching for a positive feature. The hollow gash hummed with an eerie energy. Rand's sharp cackle seemed to echo from deep within, as if ricocheting off the dull, dark walls. I missed it.

At the top of the route, I clipped in and shouted to my belayer. Below me, the last pitch dropped off into the dirty chimney; beyond, dense trees encircled the fiery glare of Echo Lake. But in my mind I kept traversing that bottomless shaft, looking for light.

Rand had tried very hard to cross over his own darkness.

What I'll never



Cartoon: Jamie Givens

know is whether anyone could have thrown him a line.

I could see the spot on the lakeshore where his memorial service had been held just weeks earlier. I'd hid behind my sunglasses as raindrops drummed my hood. Across Echo Lake curtains of rain fell in gentle sheets onto the looming face of Cathedral Ledge.

Rand's son Neal spoke under the tent. He stood tall, inadvertently leaning the same way his father had, and with the same robust confidence. He said he missed his dad, but was looking forward to fresh turns with him in the afterlife: "Someday we'll be out of the Whites and together again, raising heel in knee-deep powder."

I'd tried to prevent myself from bursting into tears, then spun around out of embarrassment and faced the lake. A breeze floated another veil of mist against Cathedral's Prow. A thin ribbon of water ran down the dihedral to its right and dripped, swiftly and smoothly, over the broken but beautiful ledges of Recompense.

—Brian Irwin,

Madison, New Hampshire

## Idaho Outback

I'VE NEVER LIKED WASPS. When I was a kid, I disturbed a nest while climbing a tree and got stung by seventeen of them. The bites swelled up pink and hard like pomegranate seeds, leaving a burning itch that lingered for days and drove me mad, until I scratched them too much and they oozed a light yellow pus.

Two decades later, twenty feet into a route at Heise, Idaho—tired of blowing wasps out of pocks in the gray basalt, tired of dipping my hand into my chalkbag, anticipating a sharp prick, tired of wondering whether wasps are like horses and can sense fear—I come down.

David gives a nonchalant shrug and a half-bored look at the wall. He starts up, swatting intermittently, as if the insects were mere houseflies and his confidence were adequate repellent. Thoughts of searing pain don't seem to enter his mind. I lean into the rock, and the familiar rhythm of belaying lulls me back to

calm. Now instead of focusing on the minutiae of flying bugs and brittle holds, I can absorb the landscape on a larger scale, the soft sounds of aspen leaves twisting in the wind, the silhouette of a redtail high above and the thick smell of sweet and dusty sage.

David's five bolts up when I look down: a rattlesnake, thick as my wrist, sleeps in the crack just inches from my foot. I shudder, jarred out of my reverie, and shout up to David. But he simply grabs a draw, continues swatting. I shuffle back, counting on luck that snakes dream and that this one dreams deep.

I head to the gravel where nothing can



"Pitch 5: use your imagination."

sneak up on me, or so I think, until a baby rattler speeds across the rocks right in my direction, head raised, prepubescent tail shaking. The pitch of my voice, like my heart rate, rises, as I call to David to clip himself to a bolt. I quickly tie him off and toss rocks toward the snake, managing to scare the venomous little body into the dark safety of my

pack, which lies between me and David. Not the result I'd been hoping to achieve.

Minutes pass before the snake finally slinks out of my pack. In the sunlight before me, its lithe body ripples in shades of golden argyle. Suddenly I'm tired of disputing turf rights. This creature's wild beauty trumps any claims to the place we might have. And we're still animal enough to know what a raised head and rattling tail warrant. We retreat with our gear.

At the wall's southern end we meet a boy heading the way we came. In response to our snake stories he says in the clipped speech that's common around here, "Oh, yeah! Wait

till my brother hears that." His eyes are bright with anticipation. He wipes his hands off on chalk-smear Wranglers, nodding his closely cropped head toward a bend in the wall. "He always brings his gun."

His brother rounds the corner, harness strapped over his thick, bow-legged thighs, high, stiff climbing shoes tied tight. He is indeed holding a shotgun.

"Where those rattlers?" he demands. "I'm gonna go get 'em."

I stare at him, wishing I'd kept my dumb mouth shut, wondering whether the snake is tucked into a crack in a tight coil after its tense encounter with us.

"I hate them sons-a-bitches. Where'd you say they're at?" He is pacing, each movement tighter, faster, increasingly amped.

"Umm," I stutter, distracted by this young boy cradling a loaded gun in his skinny, freckled arms. The barrel isn't much thicker than his chalk-caked fingers.

David looks at me, perplexed, as if struggling to interpret what place a rifle has on a climbing rack.

"Down that way" is all I manage, pointing vaguely at a route farther down the cliff than the one we'd been climbing. The boys march off, quick in their step, toward the execution.

We wait for the crack of a shot, the shake of a rattle, or the sound of revenge: a loud, long yelp. ■

—Molly Loomis, Victor, Idaho

Cartoon: Jamie Givens