



THE WELLS CREEK ROUTE

by Jeff May

Everything about this story is true; that is, it actually happened, and I am trying to relate the events to you as accurately as I can. If you don't believe me, look at a map of the Wind River Range in Wyoming and find Wells Creek. I could have renamed it; I could have renamed myself and my climbing friend, John Zavgren. I could have given us large muscles, glittery teeth, and shining hair. Lying used to be easy for me, and even now I would love to twist the truth a little, but some stories need to be told as they happened.

After the Wells Creek route, I felt compelled to understand why I seek arduous climbs to solitary peaks. I thought about my dad, a World War II hero who earned a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and two Purple Hearts. He didn't talk much about

the war, but my brothers and I proudly took his war medals to school, telling our own stories about how he captured a huge Nazi flag and liberated the concentration camps. When our turn came to fight in a war and be heroes, the politicians served up Vietnam. Though my brothers and I would have gone if we were drafted, none of us volunteered, and we gladly accepted our high draft numbers. After the last American soldier left Vietnam, Dad began telling us about his war, how his luck held when he was lying in a ditch with his dead friends. A full moon lit the bodies white, and he lay there waiting for the Germans to pass, listening to them empty rounds into the corpses. He clawed his way out and ran. At that moment, a lone cloud on an otherwise cloudless night slid in front of the

moon and blackened the landscape. The Germans could only fire wildly into the dark as he escaped into the woods. War stories have leaked out of him bit by bit over the years: shrapnel in the head, holding the wounded colonel who begged him not to leave, blood all over, vomiting, hands shaking, an antitank shell thudding at his feet. Just when I think he's out of war stories, he remembers another, and with a little prodding, he tells us about it. Except the concentration camps. He hasn't been able to talk about them yet. He ends his stories with a laugh, telling us that we're all very lucky. A stray bullet, a few inches off here or there, and he would've been dead, and we would never have been born.

We grew up with badges of honor hanging from the image of our dad, and knowing viscerally that those medals had something to do with why he woke from naps violently lashing out, sometimes smacking us in the face. We watched war movies in an effort to understand. We wanted to be just like him but wondered if we would be able to stand alone against the enemy, and shoot, and fight, and sacrifice our lives. We were the sons of a war hero and though we didn't talk about it much, we tested ourselves, seeking adventure, searching for those moments when we would share the same space with death and perhaps discover our own heroism. On a single day, my parents received a photograph of my oldest brother running the bulls in Pamplona, and they got word that my second brother was lost on the Canadian side of the Boundary Waters, and they received my mud-stained postcard telling them how the enormous ships in Baton Rouge had swamped the small open boat I was piloting down the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans.

I had to leave this desk for a while to play outside with my two-year-old. It's cold out, windy, but Sam wanted to go outside. He stood next to me and looked at me with his very blue eyes and said, "Daddy, I want go outside."

"Okay, buddy," I said, "just let me print this out, one minute."

"One minute," he said.

"Yes, buddy, one minute."

Sam opened the file cabinet next to my desk, pulled out a folder full of bank statements, and flung it over his shoulder, the papers scattering, then he reached for another folder. I finished writing the paragraph about the sons of a war hero, then jumped up from my desk and rescued the title to our home from my son's grasp.

"Daddy, I want go outside."

"Ask nicely," I said, shutting the cabinet drawer.

"Please," he said.

"Okay, buddy, let's get our coats."

"Get our coats!" he said and ran. I grabbed the coats and ran after him as he pounded on the sliding-glass door leading from my basement office into our small backyard, surrounded by woods. After wrestling him into his coat, we went out and played ball with no rules, except that we both knew we had to chase each other and fall and roll in the grass.

Suddenly, Sam stood and stared into the forest.

"You want to go exploring?" I asked.

We ran toward the thick underbrush. I went ahead of him, pushing aside potentially disastrous sticker bushes, and we marched

into the woods, out of the chilling wind, and found a small clearing where we sat and felt the silence of winter.

For a two-year-old, it was a long time in that sun, warm on our faces, enjoying the woods, but for a forty-year-old dad, it was just a moment.

Everyone has stories to tell; anyone could be writing this or something like it. I make no special claim to humor, courage, anguish . . . and in fact the only reason I am making this disclaimer is to protect myself from an overabundance of self-esteem, from being too full of myself, which very easily translates into being just full of it. I have known personal suffering, but I also know it pales in comparison to floods, famine, war, children dying. There are countless others who have borne far greater suffering than I. On the other hand, such things are relative, aren't they?

The decade was closing like the doors to a weeklong party, a youthful endorphin dance into adulthood. I scaled high peaks from Alaska to South America, kicking into the bright snow of smooth white cornices and peering over the edges of sheer cliffs, shimmering black rock lined with ice, fantastic glittering towers in sunlight, and I felt the adrenaline surge like a revivalist God singing through my veins, and tasted the rarified air at 18,000 feet. On Christmas morning, I drank *aguardiente*, "firewater," the national drink of Colombia. In Mexico, I dug my hands into cool, loose dirt from ancient graves, uncovering artifacts, anxiously anticipating the next moment, and the next, ending up flat on my back in a sweat, deliriously hallucinating Aztec hearts ripped from screaming men while rapacious amoebas delighted in churning through my guts. I suffered a little, but mostly I had fun, flirting with Tijuana whores, chasing Paul Bunyan women in Juneau, and skirting the edges of death while searching for my heroic self.

John Zavgren, a mathematician, was the only one left at my decade-ending party. He was not married and was willing to climb Wyoming's Gannet Peak from the west. Even I was preparing to leave the party, succumbing to inevitable responsibility. On the twenty-second of November (a coincidental date), I wrote to my girlfriend: "I hike toward mountain peaks, and you call me home as I climb away from what I really seek." Then I married her and took her to Alaska for a honeymoon on Admiralty Island, leaving her alone in a cabin while I climbed Eagle Peak.

In Wyoming, Zavgren and I hike the Highline Trail along the Green River and past Squaretop Mountain, the sun warm on our faces, bright blue sky with only the thinnest of cirrus clouds spindling off the peaks. The route must be nearby, but we see no sign of a trail. On all our maps, Wells Creek is marked as a "route," a dotted line toward the imposing west face of Gannet. We thrash through underbrush toward the sound of rushing water, then stop and spread our map out on a fallen tree. John pushes his glasses back, and I wonder how in hell he keeps them from falling into the woods or down a crack in the rock, never to be found. No need for me to say anything because we've had this discussion before. He'll tell me that, without his glasses, the rocks look like cotton balls.

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