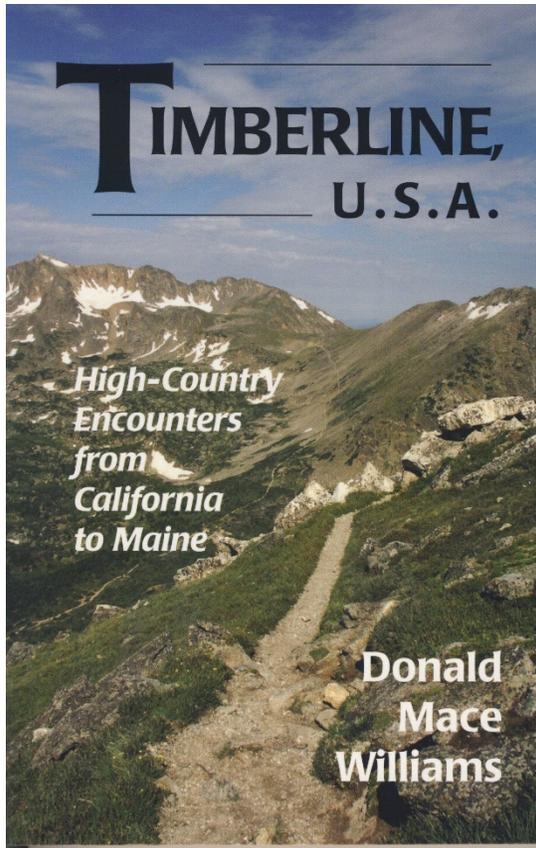


Timberline, U.S.A.,
Chapter Three

excerpt

By Donald Mace Williams



In a research center on top of Pikes Peak, 14,110 feet above sea level, in a building that reminded me of Headquarters, Company A, I waited for Dr. John Reeves to come out of the bathroom. It was a tense, rushed scene. Doctors bent over instruments and in the voices of movie howitzer officers fixing coordinates against a charging enemy called out numbers to technicians, who entered them on pads with ballpoint pens. I caught a couple of the doctors flicking their eyes at me, an outsider, but none had time to nod, much less speak. Several men and women occupied themselves with a bare young man, a towel

wrapped around his middle, into whose mouth a woman was jamming a thick black-plastic tube. He made a sour face around it. Two electrodes were taped to his chest. I stood in the doorway of the bunkroom amid unmade army bunks with olive-drab frames. Next to one bunk was a Monark 818 exercise bicycle. Packs and hiking boots lay about.

This was the site of an experiment, coordinated by the University of Colorado, in which Reeves and others would test and probe eleven young men whose homes were at sea level in California, feeding them a measured diet of bread, peanut butter, and an all-

nutritious drink for three weeks. "They give us things that do not vary at all, which means that they are exactly tasteless," a young man named Mark from the Bay Area told me later. The scientists also required their subjects to ride exercise bicycles. That was what the blond, bearded young man I watched while I waited for Reeves was doing. Breathing through the large-bore tube in his mouth, he pushed the pedals down slowly; it must have taken much effort.

In another part of the room, barely visible from where I was, another cluster of experimenters stood around a second captive. I didn't want to edge into the room far enough to see what they were doing to him. On an erector-set stack of shelves close to me, laden with electronic gauges and wires, a taped-up piece of paper bore in grease pencil the notation "Borg" and then numbers, one through ten, with explanations alongside them ranging from "nothing at all" through "very slight," "slight," "moderate," "hard," and "very hard." Seven, eight, and nine were blank. The line next to ten said "maximal." Another penciled sign, on a yellow sheet of paper taped to the refrigerator in my corner of the bunkroom, said, "Fecal buckets in freezer in laboratory—for a better environment. Love, Gail."

Reeves, tall and thin and about my age, with a lined face like mine, came out of the room that had the restroom in it. He did not look happy when I told him who I was, though he had sent word to me at the motel in Denver that I could come up and talk with him, not saying what day. Sunday would have been much better, he said. (This was Monday. The day before, I had climbed South Arapaho Peak.) "But we can talk," he said. That was good, because he was the only high-altitude physiologist I could find that week, and I wanted to get some questions answered. We went outside and sat on adjoining rocks in the sun, close to the level place where six or eight of the young men had just broken up a volleyball game. One player sprawled on his back on the ground, a knee up, arms behind his head, resting. It was warm and not especially windy. Having anticipated neither such a day nor an outdoor

interview, I had neglected to put on lotion to protect me from high-altitude sunburn, and I tried to keep the backs of my hands in my own shadow as I bent over, taking notes.

Mainly I was curious about the effects of high altitude on people who go there or who have always lived there. That, of course, is what Reeves was on the peak to learn more about. But the top of Pikes Peak is high only by some standards. I gather that high-altitude physiologists for a long time tended to dismiss the paltry teens of thousands—the Rockies, the Sierra Nevada, Mount Rainier, the Alps—and to do their studies in the twenties—the Andes and the Himalayas. So science knows a comparative lot about what happens inside Everest climbers and not so much about what happens inside people who go up for a weekend above Boulder or Fresno, much less Boston. Some of the things that happen to Everest climbers, who spend days or weeks in base camps 20,000 feet and more above sea level, would dismay your cardiologist if he observed them in you. On top of Everest, the oxygen level in the blood drops to about a tenth that at sea level, and oxygen pressure in arterial blood in the lungs falls so low that a pulmonary specialist at sea level would take the reading to mean that the patient was near death from a lung disease. The shortage makes organs sluggish or otherwise dysfunctional. The intestines become less absorptive than normal; the body's capacity to extract nutrients from food lessens. Climbers lose from one to three pounds a week, some of it in muscle, even if they eat a lot; people returning from Everest expeditions have skinny arms and legs. Memory and coordination may suffer, and not just in the presence of altitude; a year after an Everest climb monitored by Dr. John B. West, most of the participants had yet to get back full finger-tapping ability, though their short-term memory had returned. "Some physicians liken living at high altitude to having some kind of chronic, grumbling disease," West says; "nothing is really working as well as it should." He tells about the climb and his experiments in *Everest: The Testing Place*.

Never mind Everest. I wanted to know whether, extreme altitude being extremely bad for people, moderate altitude was moderately bad for them. Well, Reeves said, the number of old people decreases in Colorado as you go higher; those with heart and lung

disease have left for lower altitudes. (Not all have, as I knew from my earlier talks with a man and woman at Leadville.) But I didn't take time to discuss that or anything else with Reeves. I was intimidated by the scientific tension all around me. So I simply fired questions, scribbled as fast as I could, and hoped my tape recorder was working. Reeves added this about life in the Rockies: "We don't think that the moderate altitude of nine thousand feet is harmful to people who are healthy." (Around us the young men from sea level were back at their volleyball game. They shouted and laughed as they played.)

Leadville is a thousand feet above the altitude he called moderate; I asked if Leadville natives showed adaptations to the altitude. Probably a larger lung volume, he said: "We're not one hundred percent sure of that for the Leadville natives, but other populations show that." Animals show it, too; Reeves told me that beagle puppies, moved to Leadville when very young, developed large lungs. Another question: I had read in the diary of Herbert A. Ford, a mine manager who spent a couple of years in Leadville in the early 1880s, that "this is the worst place for colds on the face of the earth." Was that right? Reeves said he didn't know about colds at Leadville, but the body's immune system was not as effective at high altitude as at sea level: "Wounds heal slowly. Infections are more in-do-lent." (For my benefit, he spoke the word like a pronouncer at a spelling bee.)

Why, I asked, still hurrying, are some people exhilarated by high altitude? I had read the words of one Professor Roget of Geneva, who said,

I am at my best, most playful and light-hearted at an altitude. As if by magic my corns disappear, any rheumatic pains vanish, gouty twinges pass away, any lumbago or sciatic neuralgia contracted at home lessens its hold perceptibly day by day. No sooner do I return to the level of civilization than my feet drag, my corns call for the knife, all the symptoms reappear that bespeak an organism placed at a physiological disadvantage.

That seemed to belie what Reeves had told me about the immune system; but Roget was not talking about altitudes like that of our interview-on-the-rocks, or even like that of Leadville.

"I am a 6,000-foot man," he concluded. (He is quoted in a 1932 article by Dr. James J. Waring in *Journal of the Outdoor Life*.) Reeves's answer about high-altitude exhilaration was that high altitude and alcohol are synergistic: "The headache of altitude sickness is an awful lot like a hangover. And we say at altitude that one drink does the work of two. And there seems to be something about the two that is analogous. But we don't know what it is." He said yes, he thought altitude exhilarated him. He didn't show it, but I'm sure I didn't, either. We were under our separate kinds of pressure.

Also, he said, and his voice grew louder and higher pitched as if we were now getting to the interesting part, "the sympathetic nervous system gets turned on." It sets up a kind of high, he said. We talked a minute or two longer. Then a woman came out of the research building and walked toward us, fast. She looked even tenser than the standard for that group on that day. Reeves broke off.

REEVES: Yes, Gail.

GAIL: Well, John, we're coming to a...a little complaint. Nobody let Tyson eat. He hasn't eaten all day. And that won't do.

VOLLEYBALL PLAYER (overhearing): He's ridin' the bike.

GAIL (yelling across to him): That's true.

PLAYER: That's what happened to me when I did my vee-oh-two max; I didn't do my max till 1:30, and I hadn't eaten all day.

GAIL: *We can't do that...*

PLAYER: I know.

GAIL (to Reeves, scolding): I mean, that's why I've set lunch at noon and said the VO₂ maxes cannot happen until after two, because these guys have to have a chance to *eat*.

REEVES: Yes, of course they do. Well, I wasn't aware of it. I wasn't aware of it.

(Gail and the player talk during this, repeating things they have said about Tyson and about not getting enough to eat.)

GAIL: Well, I mean—it's not fair to him.

REEVES: Of course not.

GAIL: Because he's not—he's not going to be able to perform in this batch.

REEVES: Well, he'll be able to perform, but it's not right that he didn't have lunch, that's for sure.

(She says something about finishing with the blood volume. All three are talking.)

REEVES (very quietly): Well, we finished—the blood volumes were finished by twelve-thirty.

GAIL (she is quieter now, too): Well then, why didn't he eat?

REEVES: I have no idea. (louder and more decisively) Tyson bears some responsibility in this.

GAIL: Well, right, right. But I mean, there must have been something going on if he didn't eat.

REEVES: I, I, I don't know. I don't know what it is.
(She turns and strides back into the building.)

I asked Reeves what Gail's last name was. Butterfield, he said; she was a Ph.D. nutritionist. I assume she was the author of the fecal-bucket note.

REEVES (to me): Anyway, I don't have a lot more time because... (unintelligible on the tape because I, similarly tense, keep saying, "Oh, yeah. OK; OK.") things going on. But the sympathetic nervous system contributes—or prevents the symptoms of altitude sickness, whether it alters the fuel which the body uses for exercise, whether it alters the cardiovascular responses to exercise in terms of cardiac output and blood flow..., whether it alters the brain function and visual function. So, I mean, it's a huge study.

He got up and walked quickly back to the research building. In the doorway, his face civil and harried, he stopped to answer a last question before returning to the quiet refuge of science.

I talked with some of the volleyball players, who had broken off their game again—partly, I think, to observe the scene between the nutritionist and the doctor. The players said no, the experiment hadn't been so tough, though the scientists sometimes made them work hard, either at riding the exercise bicycle or playing volleyball. The usual bike ride wasn't all out; that—the VO₂ max—happened only twice during the stay.

I What do you do in your leisure time?

PLAYER: Read, play board games and cards.

I: You can't have a beer, though?

PLAYER: No, not at all. (chuckles from the others)

I told about an experiment I had just concluded in the parking lot next to them. With a six-pack of Coors, a package of plastic glasses, a wooden ruler, and a stopwatch as my scientific instruments, I had determined that the head on beer climbs much higher on top of

Pikes Peak than in Manitou Springs, seventy-seven hundred feet below, where I had conducted the first part of the experiment earlier in the day. Also, the head dissipates sooner. (Oddly, this seems to be a virgin field for research. Even the Coors people in Golden professed to know nothing about such effects.) One of the players asked, hopefully, what I had done with the beer I had used in the test. I had to tell him I had poured it out. I refrained from mentioning how wonderfully tempting, in that dry air, the feel of the cold beer through the thin aluminum can had been: *I could look forward to enjoying one of the science-surplus beers that evening in the motel.*

I asked the young men if they were continually getting stuck with needles; they calculated that it had already happened at least twenty times. (Earlier in their stay, one of them had told a *Rocky Mountain News* reporter, Joseph B. Verrengia, about the scientists' probing deep into thighs for muscle samples: "The worst thing about the biopsy is that your thigh muscles cramp around the tube like a charley horse." The observation was credited to "Tyson Vaughan, 21"—the Tyson of the missed lunch, I assume.) One of the players told me he was a medical student. Another, a dietitian, planned to apply to a medical school. The third, Mark, told me, "I'm unemployed—this is my job." The young men were paid two thousand dollars, plus transportation and all the peanut butter, bread, and nutritious drink one could desire. "Not too terrible," I said. "*Pretty terrible,*" a player said.

Only one of the group around me was married. "It's missing that, too," one told me. I said I was sure that wasn't allowed, any more than beer was. No, not allowed, one said, laughing. "Or available," I said. "No, not available," he agreed. Another said, "You don't miss something, you know, till it's gone." I speculated that up here they might be disappointed anyway, since performance seems to be lessened at high altitude. "Probably the performance would be impeded," a player said, "but not the desire." I told them I had read that the Spanish settlers of the Andes had to go to lower altitudes to conceive children. "Why?" one asked. "Because of the air? Because I don't care if I ran out of air, I'd keep on going." They stirred and arose from their rocks, getting ready to leave. "We need to take our

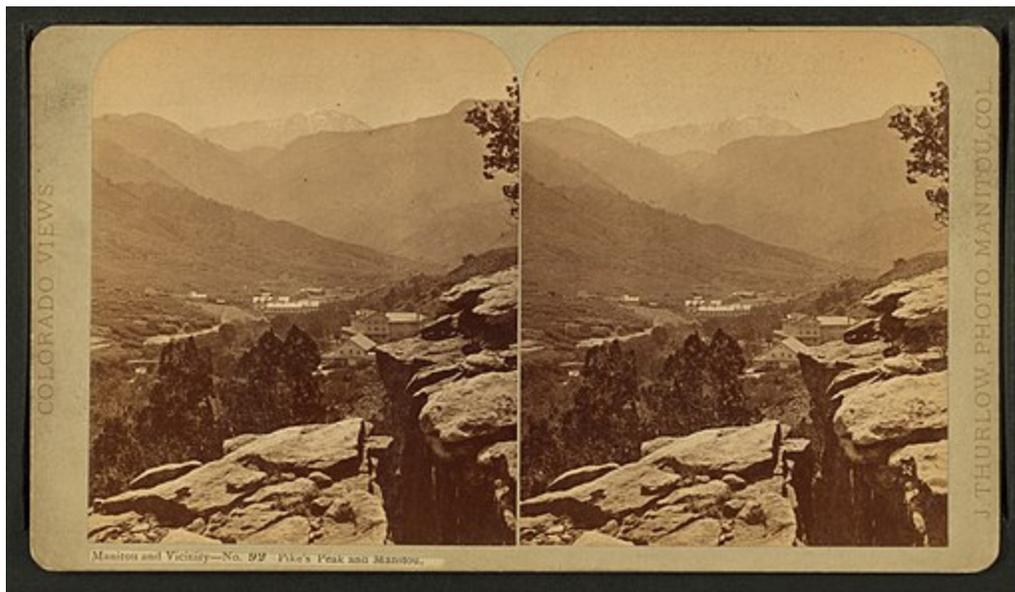
pills," one said.

I walked over to the summit house, which was full of souvenirs and picture postcards and of tourists who had driven their cars up or ridden the steep cog railroad from Manitou Springs. Bill Carle, a member of the family that owns the summit house, told me he had lived up there eight months of the year for seventeen years. (In midwinter on the summit, the average temperature is two degrees.) "I'm the fourth generation of my family up here doing this," he said. "We started in ninety-six, my family, and the carriage road started in eighteen eighty-nine. So we weren't too far behind the first personalized stuff up here. But they'd been running burros up through the eighteen-seventies and the eighteen-eighties." Why had he stayed in that business? Tradition, he said: "It's like a family farm, is how I characterize it. It's just something that your family's got so much into, and you're going to carry on because it's what you are; it's your identity."

Carle, a slender man of thirty-six with inchoate dark whiskers showing just at the surface of his delicately rounded chin, stood at the end of a counter while we talked. He seemed very serious, not smiling when I wisecracked. Down the counter from us, his employees hurried to serve fountain drinks to tourists. He said he and his wife had met up there; she worked in the summit house seven years. He had thirty employees, he told me; they worked ten-hour days, slept in bunks, and got two nights and one day off a week. When they first came up, he said, they had a couple of rough nights. Usually that was all: "Once every other year there will be somebody that comes up that does not acclimate." Such people went back down after a week, he said. Carle had also run the store on top of Mount Evans, west of Denver, until it burned in 1979. That was the mountain he loved, he said: Evans, not Pikes. "It's greener," he said, "and there's more animals." On Evans he had seen mountain goats and bighorn sheep, ravens, pikas, marmots, shrews, mice, and weasels.

It was true about the absence of greenery on Pikes. Though the view was splendid down the notch to Manitou Springs, across Colorado Springs, and far beyond, over the ridges of the Black Forest and across cloud-shadowed plains that never disappeared but

merged with the sky a hundred miles away and more, and though the foothills of the peak made up a whole landscape of rich forests, each a more-or-less separate domain set apart by its own craggy ridges, the peak itself lacked charm. From my car window on the way up, I had seen only sparse patches of tundra flowers, and instead of mats of juicy greenery between them, there was bare, reddish, rocky soil. That red makes magnificent effects from a distance, especially at sunrise.



People who live in Colorado Springs, as I did my last year of high school and again when I was twenty and edited a starveling weekly paper on the west side of town, keep their bearings and their perspective by The Peak. They say you never see it the same way twice, and it's true that because it reaches high and spreads over a great expanse of itself and its foothills from north to south, it presents every opportunity for both the occurrence and the display of changing weather. And it is so close to town that you have to walk only a few feet along Tejon Street or Nevada Avenue to make The Peak shift into a new relationship with Cameron Cone on the south and Mount Manitou on the north. I suppose that residents of Innsbruck may feel the same mixture of subjectedness and solicitude concerning their civic

heights as Springs people do concerning theirs, but the competition of cities elsewhere in the world has to be scarce. Still, it was as Carle said. Up close, The Peak has feet of clay.

I didn't much want to go stand by the cog road at the summit and look at the view. I was getting a headache. It must be because I had driven up, not climbed, and so had not had time to adjust, I told myself. Nonetheless, I walked over and stood amid the other tourists—fathers holding small children; pairs of thirtyish women with sunburns up to the hems of their shorts. Cameron Cone, which I had once climbed with my high-school friend Clare Gregg, looked big even from above. I remembered his mocking the tourists who looked west from town on a day when clouds hid the peak but left Cameron Cone visible. "Oh, I didn't know Pikes Peak was *that* big," they would say. At 10,707 feet, the cone is below timberline, but its slabs of summit rock reflect the light like snowfields. I stood looking at the green foothills, with the red earth showing here and there between trees. Beyond, the redder formations of Garden of the Gods jutted up prominently, but the Kissing Camels seemed, from where I stood, not to be kissing; nothing endures. A filmy shower like dark nylons was falling between the summit and Manitou Springs. Clouds, suspended above me, dangled fringes hundreds of feet below me. Enough. I yielded to my headache and walked to my car. On the way, I noticed parked cars with license plates from Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, and New York. Only six were from Colorado.

At 9,500 feet on the road down, amid a fine aspen grove, my head felt much better. At Cascade, at the foot of the highway, where the foothills were covered with symmetrical Douglas firs and red-barked ponderosa pines, I felt fine, and I thought, "This is the part of the mountains I really love." Later, though, as I turned onto Interstate 25 going north from Colorado Springs, I looked to the left, and there was The Peak, partly covered by clouds but—and this was as great a thrill as if I had never seen the mountain before—with the north part of the summit and the long north slopes unexpectedly emerging, looking higher than anything rooted in the earth could possibly be. The grand old Peak after all; the real country.

What a night. The two men in the next room, behind an onionskin wall, yelled drunkenly at each other and kept me awake for hours. But I finally went to sleep, and at 7:40, when I woke up, I felt good. I wasn't even sore from the Arapaho climb of two days before, except for a little tightness around the Achilles tendons.

I was going back to the Indian Peaks Wilderness Area and taking my fly rod. On my USGS map I had picked out Upper Diamond Lake, which seemed to be eight hundred feet higher than Diamond Lake—a gentle walk, to judge by the amount of white showing between the brown forty-foot contour lines. I had an interview set up that evening at the foot of Berthoud Pass, but I figured I could fish a couple of hours and get back to my car in time to make it. I took along a daypack with a lunch and some odds and ends, together with a couple of fly boxes and a few extra leaders. It was a little after 11:30 when I set out from the Buckingham Campground (called Fourth of July Campground on the map). Hurrying, passing a father and son and, later, a young man hiking alone, I made the mile to the Diamond Lake trail in a little less than twenty-seven minutes. That is what altitude and slope do to the notion of hurry. Working that hard on a level Wichita street, I cover a mile in fifteen minutes.

The clouds, which made jagged formations, were white, though earlier, over the higher mountains, I had seen darker ones. The trail led to a pair of hewn logs over the North Fork of Middle Boulder Creek, a lovely, swift stream with a rocky bed. On the far side of the creek, hikers had trodden green-leaved marsh plants into the mud. I walked on them, too, unavoidably. The trail went through sun, then shade; I kept flipping my clip-on glasses down, then up. After a while the going leveled out, and I slopped through marshy meadows. I reached Diamond Lake at 12:35; that mile had taken me thirty-seven minutes. The lake was set amid nice firs and spruces. Above and to my right, I saw a cascade: the inlet, I told myself.

Suddenly it was raining. Hailstones hit my hat. I struck out to find a trail up the cascade, gave up, and traversed the open slope, avoiding vegetation as much as possible. It

was steep enough that I edged my forward boot to establish each foothold, then let it flatten downslope. It thundered lightly; rain dripped; there was scarcely a breeze. Then a big clap of thunder came, so loud and rolling that I thought for a moment it was a rock slide and looked for a boulder to scramble under. I walked on. The flowers were gorgeous—a clump of columbines, surely two dozen flowers, growing out of a cranny in a ledge, and then more and more everywhere, the greatest profusion of columbines I had seen anywhere. I turned and climbed herringbone style along the cascade. The rain came harder; I put on my windbreaker. Then the sun came out. When I reached gentler ground, in the krummholz now, I picked out what must be the cirque of Upper Diamond Lake, discouragingly far away. But then I climbed a grassy ridge for a better view and saw a small lake directly below. *That* had to be Upper Diamond. How had I got north of it? Nothing looked the same as on my map. The altitude must have gone to my brain.



By the time I had climbed down to the little lake, it was raining copiously, a cold, cold rain. I took off my pack, sat on a rock, dug out my cheese-and-peanut-butter crackers, the kind you buy at a service station along the interstate when you're in a hurry—too salty and fat for high altitude, but I hadn't yet read that far in physiology books—and opened the plastic packages with my sheath knife. Nothing I was wearing shed rain—not my cloth hat, not the new windbreaker I had bought in Wichita. Within five minutes I was soaked except for my lap, where I had put the pack to keep at least one part of me dry. I hunched over to shelter my crackers, chewing, it struck me, forlornly. Lightning flashed and flashed among the rocks on the steep slopes above the lake. A couple of strokes came so close that the thunder followed, BAM, in two seconds. I was scared, and a Protestant voice shamed me for getting that irresponsibly wet and cold. I sat for twenty-four minutes before the rain dropped to a sprinkle.

Immediately, all over the lake, I saw the splashes of feeding fish. What insects could be flying in forty-five-degree weather with rain still prickling the water? I jointed up my fly

rod, with stiff fingers tied on a number-twelve Royal Coachman, and began casting. A strike, felt but missed. Another, seen but not felt. I moved to the exposed end of the lake, farther from the head of the cirque, and cast into the riffle. Shortly I caught and released a nine-inch cutthroat. No point in keeping fish with no way to cook them, and anyway, I had an interview to conduct. After a few minutes, I walked back to the upper end of the lake,



where my pack was, and put on a big buff-white fly, the first one being badly drowned by then. Standing on a quivering isthmus of grass and earth between foot-wide inlets, I missed a couple of splashy strikes, then got another. To hook it, I swept the rod up and at the same time stepped back. My left foot sank up to midcalf in lake water. Oh, well. As wet as I already was, it hardly mattered. The fish fought for just a minute. Cutthroats, the native trout of the high Rockies, by all romantic rights ought to fight twice as hard and long as the government-raised species in the warmer waters below. I have caught a few that fought hard, but they usually come in about as readily as, say, yellow perch, or as crappie that have not taken their vitamins.

This was a beautiful fish, a ten-incher with a vivid red V beneath the gills and a hint of a rainbow down the sides. The hook was sunk into the solid structure at the side of the mouth, under the eye. I couldn't work it loose. The fish looked at me with what seemed a cool awareness; damn it, I must remember to mash all my barbs flat. I laid him on the wet grass and went to get some needle-nosed pliers out of the pack. When I had unhooked him and eased him back into the water, he swam away handily, to my relief.

I had fished a half hour, all I could spare and be sure of making my appointment on time. I took down my rod, put away the reel and fly boxes, and started down the way I had seen two hikers come up as I fished, along the outlet from the little lake. As I walked, a stiff breeze arose from the direction of what I had thought was Upper Diamond Lake, scraping and whistling around the rocky cirques. I shook so hard from the cold that my shoulders, of themselves, tried to join in front and my chest ached with the tension. I made whimpering,

gasping noises to myself. But at least this was a much shorter, easier trail to Diamond Lake than the way I had climbed. I reached the main lake in twenty minutes, already warmer and feeling better at the lower altitude. Later, on the familiar trail on the other side of the North Fork, I was warm enough to enjoy the flowers again. It had quit raining, though clouds loomed behind me, upstream toward Arapaho Pass.

A little farther along, I remembered something. In my pack, I had a hard-finished reflecting blanket. It would have kept me dry. Later, looking at the contour map at an altitude conducive to reason and in the comparatively intellectual setting of my car, I perceived that I had climbed along a lesser feeder stream of Diamond Lake, not the main tributary. And the distant cirque did hold Upper Diamond Lake. I had fished something too small to have a name. Just as well. If I had gone to the right lake, I would never have made my appointment.



In Idaho Springs, I stopped for supper, then went to a Safeway store for some gifts to take to Jim Palmer and Susan Austin: gouda cheese, crackers, Valpolicella. He and she lived at Berthoud Falls, and Jim did any kind of work he could find that enabled him to ski all day, all season. That was nearly all I knew about them. I had met Jim a few months earlier, in late May, on top of a mountain named Colorado Mines Peak. In Colorado for a long weekend, I had taken an hour or so to walk up the little mountain, which rises above Berthoud Pass. Jim was one of a ski-touring

party of three on top. I had talked with him, made arrangements to come and see him again, and then watched him dip over the back of the mountain on his skis and make perfect jump turns down an impossibly steep chute in the breakable crust, as casual as a kid on a skateboard.

His cabin was a patched-together thing in a cluster of similar ones, along a dirt lane paralleling U.S. Highway 40 and maybe a couple of hundred feet upslope. In front were a small car and, as I recall, a small pickup, both with badly battered grilles; if you live at 9,800 feet in the Front Range and drive daily to 11,000 feet and back on snowy roads in the winter, you are bound to have collisions; if your work is whatever you can find after skiing hours, you can't afford either proper insurance or the services of a body shop. Jim stepped onto his log porch, grinning, and waved at me as I tried to jockey my car far enough off the lane to make room for other residents to pass. It was about seven o'clock, still light.

We sat at a round table in a corner of his front room while Susan, small and shy, sat on a couch in near darkness behind me. Their child, Abel, used his newly gained powers to feel his way along the wall, exclaiming piercingly every now and then at something he had found. The inside of the room was all unfinished planks. Wooden boxes contained assorted belongings, and a couple of wooden barrels held up a rough plank with books on it: *Diet for a Poisoned Planet*; *How to Choose Safe Foods for You and Your Family*. The gleaming blondness of Jim's hair, which fell to his shoulders in twists and mats, and of his impressive beard made a full-face solar halo like Apollo's. His skin was russet—as near to tan as it would ever get, I imagined. I gave Susan the sack of wine, cheese, and crackers. She set it down in the kitchen. Their big dog, Hobbes—named by his previous owner, though Jim had heard of the "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strip, all right—flopped on his side under the table.

I asked Jim how long he intended to live for skiing. "The rest of my life, for sure," he said.

I: You never get tired of it?

HE: Never. It grows on me. It seems it grows on me. I just try and do it more and more every year.

I: So you're doing exactly what you want to do out of life?

HE: Yeah.

I: And there're not many people that can say that.

HE: (laughs): Yeah, there isn't, is there? Yeah, I'm totally satisfied with the way I'm living. I give thanks for that, you know. You've got to appreciate that, because, you know, a lot of people can't. But you know, a lot of people can change their lifestyles and do different things. But you know they don't seem to want to, or they just want to meet in the middle; you know, like, say, a lot of folks that live in Denver and come up just a few weekends a year—they're totally happy with that. For me, I have to do it a lot more than that. But yeah, I want to keep skiing the rest of my life. Every day.

I: What is it about skiing that has that kind of pull?

HE: I don't know what it is. It just shows you—it's freedom, you know. It just shows you what life has to offer. For me, it's the ultimate.

Vacationing at a ski lodge in my youth, I found that after three days, skiing bored me; I had to stay in the cabin a day and read. On the other hand, I had never skied remotely as well as Jim Palmer. If I could have commanded all humanly negotiable slopes with his ease and daring, instead of merely surviving the repetitious challenge of the packed runs, I might have felt more nearly as he did. But not, I think, to the point of embracing a lifetime of dishwashing, and, worse, dishwashing during the hours meant for books and music.

I had already gathered that Jim was an environmentalist. He had sent a cheery, misspelled note to me in Wichita. It was on the back of an old letter to him from the *Amicus Journal*. He told me he belonged to Greenpeace, and along with the *Journal* he subscribed to *High Country News*, a biweekly roundup of western environmental news. His and Susan's season passes to the Berthoud Pass ski area, at \$290 each, caused them pangs even though, as he said, they did two or three months a year of climbing under their own power. "But the rest of the year we're riding the lifts, you know. Not every day, but we use them as a way to get further in, you know. And, yeah, it's a bit of a conflict there. You know they're all running off the electrical grid and that. I guess the ultimate, what we're going toward, is just

strictly hiking and skiing.” That would mean living where they could ski right out the door and not ride the lifts at all, he said.

Jim agreed that his abandonment to skiing was partly a dislike of organized life. They didn't have a television set. Once in a while he read a newspaper, but otherwise, mostly environmental nonfiction. Did his environmental interests affect what he ate? "Yeah," he said. "We're both strict vegetarians. And I don't drink alcohol. Suzy does, but I don't." Uh-oh: the Valpolicella. No problem, he said. "And I don't eat dairy at all." Uh-oh: the gouda. He laughed. I looked at Susan. "You can give him the crackers," I said.

About food, Jim said, "we're real spiritual." But he wasn't an activist on environmental issues: "I haven't gone out and done any protests or anything like that." I asked what his environmentalism sprang from. Was he worried about the future of the world? Yes, he said—about global warming, for instance. I said that might be rough on skiing, all right. "I've just got to keep going further north if it is," he said.

I went back to his remark about food and spirituality. Was he religious? "Yeah," he said, barely breathing the word. Did he go to church, or...? "This *is* my church," he said, and waved a hand. "The outdoors is my church. I go to church every day." I asked Susan if she felt the same way. She tried to keep an open mind, she said. Religions were all basically for the same thing: "Mankind loving each other and peace all over the world."

I (to Jim): But you do believe in a...?

HE: Higher power?

I: In a higher power.

HE: Absolutely.

I wanted to get back to his way of life. To confirm my memory of our mountaintop conversation, I asked him what kind of work he did at night during skiing season. His eyes flinched. "I dishwash," he said. I saw the same sensitive, retreating look when I asked him how big the rented cabin was (three and a half rooms) and what his father, back in Chicago,

did for a living (he sold insurance; when Jim was old enough for college, he asked his father, "Why should I spend your money on something I have no interest in?" And he headed for the mountains to do the one thing he wanted to do with his life). He said he tried to ski until five o'clock every day and then work till ten. Sometimes he operated the run at Fraser, where the tourists went down the hill on inner tubes. He worked four nights a week, Susan three, so they could trade off watching Abel. He and she had met at Telluride four years before. There and at Steamboat Springs, as here, he had been a ski bum; that was the term he used, and without the defensive look. He showed me photographs of him skiing beautiful S curves down a slope of new powder with Abel on his back. Tracks alongside, presumably the photographer's, had only half as many turns; Jim had skied conservatively to avoid endangering Abel.

In summer Jim worked days, but because he wanted to keep on skiing as late in the year as possible, he hadn't started work until well into June. It had been two weekends since he had skied: a long time. "My best year," he said, "I went every weekend all summer. I got two hundred and eighty-four days in for the calendar year. This year I'm right around twenty-five." He doubted that he could go every weekend for the rest of the summer. "This job I've got right now," he said, "it's just brutal on me. Roofing. I'm just so tired by Friday." The job was in Denver. He stayed with a friend two nights a week and drove home the other three so he could watch Abel in the evenings. He had to work hard like that in the summer to help finance his all-day winter skiing. "A lot of folks have day jobs," he said, "but it's just misery. They're working, and all snowy out, and they're just real unhappy with it." I asked him if he didn't worry about security. What if his health failed him at sixty-five or seventy? "The Creator will watch out for me, I know that," he said. "That's my security."

He took me out onto his porch to look across the valley toward Engelmann's Peak. The tundra on the far slope was aglow with the last of the day's sunlight, the air between as clear as a vacuum. Gazing, I felt something approaching the serenity of those few minutes

on the Arapaho hike, and I could see that Jim was similarly moved. I had felt that way, now, twice in thirty years or so; he, every day since he had become a ski bum.

I reflected, as I drove back to Denver, that Jim wasn't just a pleasure seeker, a snow-going beach boy, though he had that element in him. Like Thoreau—no, more than Thoreau, who lasted at Walden Pond only twenty-six months—he lived according to his vision. He had steadfastness and enthusiasm. But I wasn't sure whom to pity, him or me. He struck me as a prisoner of his fears and taboos, barred from the varied, small, and mixed pleasures of most lives by his commitment to a way that offered a single large and unqualified pleasure. What did Jim know about the kind of life he had fled? What scope could he draw upon to justify his decision? He would have said, "The outdoors is, you know, a lot of scope." He made me think, no question. Still, I had long ago given up my collegiate notions of being a nature bum. It wasn't a mere surrender to duty; I had found out I couldn't be happy in separation from the works of man and the work of man.

Surprisingly fresh, considering the miserable experience at the lake and the lack of sleep the night before, I negotiated the downcurves of the foothills and took the straight line of West Colfax back to the motel and bed. I went to sleep quickly, not much disturbed by the noises coming from the adjoining room, which was now occupied by a couple with small children. I dreamed that I caught a fish and laid it out to admire. It took on the shape of a child or perhaps a fetus, with stubby, fat arms and legs and a face of indeterminate but piscine features. Then it became a living Greek statue of a baby. I had hooked it in the side. After removing the hook, I put the trout-child back into the water feet first. It sank straight down, statuelike, its eyes expressing gratitude. Must all my recreations be guilty?



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