

"WALK ON THE WILD SIDE"

by Wagner Truppel

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This story is dedicated to Jill Carpenter.

In retrospect, those were the most exhilarating moments of my life. Never mind that death toyed with us all, or that one of us didn't make the trip back. I never felt more alive than when I was hanging, face down, three hundred feet above the ground.

Jill and I met while attending a sport-climbing class at the university gym. She made an immediate impression on me. Intelligent, driven, and strong-minded, this twenty-something thin but athletic girl loved the outdoors as much as I did. Yet - despite common interests - a relationship never developed between us, perhaps because of the age difference.

Later that fall, Jill, her brother Peter, and his girlfriend Nancy decided that they were ready for some real rock-climbing action. Needing an extra partner - and, to my surprise - Jill asked me to come along. We chose to scale "Walk On The Wild Side," a well-known route at the Joshua Tree National Park, in California.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning and our spirits ran as high as the clear sky, the brisk and slightly cold wind inviting us to waste not a single minute. Although "Walk On The Wild Side" isn't a particularly difficult climb - it is graded five-eight and we were all used to climbing five-nines and five-tens indoors - Pete took the lead while the rest of us followed. He was the only one with outdoors climbing experience.

The ascent proceeded without incidents, but slowly, since we paused several times to enjoy and photograph the awe-inspiring view. Even though I'm not

a religious person, I have to admit that the beauty surrounding us made me entertain the possibility of some higher power being out there indeed.

It wasn't long after noon when we reached the summit, a surprisingly small and flat area, not unlike a patio, extending away from the main body of the mountain in a formation known among climbers as a "roof." It took us several seconds to take in and fully absorb the immensity of the sky, spread unobstructed in all directions and without a single cloud in sight. Rejoicing in topping out our first real climb, we proceeded to eat lunch, an assortment of raw baby-carrots, cooked corn, homemade vegetable sushi, oranges, and apples.

Soon afterwards, Pete and Nancy began exchanging hugs and kisses, just as I was looking at Jill and thinking how beautiful she was and how much I desired to kiss her. She must have read my thoughts, or perhaps the cold air had been to blame, because her usually pale face had now turned a brisk red. I hesitated, trying to decide if it would be wise to make a move on her.

My hesitation didn't last long, however. Without warning, the rock beneath our bodies shook violently for several seconds. In the instant before we were jolted over the edge, I heard Pete shouting something about anchoring ourselves but it was already too late.

It happened all too quickly for my mind to record accurately. By the time the shaking stopped, I found myself hanging upside down, facing away from the rock. My right leg was jammed inside a long but narrow crack, extending out along the top, and down through the side of the roof. I didn't know it then, but I had a broken ankle. Luckily, however, my left foot was resting above the top, in a position that allowed me to use my heel as a lever. Despite the immediate and intense pain, I managed to shift my weight a little in order to better secure the leg inside the crack.

It's amazing how quickly one's legs go numb when blood flows in the wrong direction, and soon the pain subsided. Perhaps because the pain was gone, I now felt confident and proceeded to assess the situation of my friends.

Nancy was hanging by her arms but looked otherwise unharmed and relatively secure, giving the overall situation. Jill had been luckier. She too had been swept off the top, but had managed to keep all four limbs on the

rock side just to the right of my position, and very close to the summit. Pete, however, was nowhere to be seen.

It took me several seconds to register Nancy's hysteric shouting and it wasn't until I saw the agony stamped on her face that I fully comprehended the terrible truth: she had witnessed her boyfriend's plunge.

Thoughts that had been racing inside my head were then interrupted when the aftershocks struck. Helpless and in absolute, indescribable, horror - but still held by the crack - I saw Nancy let go of her grip of the rock, and of life itself. At the same time, Jill had been yanked away from the mountainside and, for the briefest of moments, was standing still, airborne, in front of me. Instinctively, we both extended our arms and, miraculously, our hands locked themselves in the void of space waiting below.

For a moment, which seemed to have lasted several minutes, the image of Nancy's body tumbling down the mountainside was all I could think of, and it was Jill who finally broke the silence. Looking up towards me, with an eerie and trembling voice, she begged, "Don't let me fall, please, don't let me go."

I looked into her eyes, widely open in terror, and realized I had never been so scared in my entire life. I wasn't afraid for myself as much as I was terrified for her life, since it was literally in my hands. What a responsibility to have, I thought. If I survived, I would never be able to live with the thought, let alone the image, of her slipping through my fingers. As difficult as it was, I had to accept that there was nothing I could have done for Nancy; she had been beyond my reach. But not Jill. No, not Jill. By luck or providence, our hands - and lives - were now interlocked. I decided I was not going to lose her, no matter what.

Forcing myself to regain a rational mind, I squeezed her wrists with all the might I could muster, and then some more. "Jill," I said with a tentative commanding tone, "listen to me, and listen carefully. We'll get out of here, both of us." But she wasn't listening. Despair had taken the best of her, perhaps because I had been lost in thought for so long when she first spoke to me. In a voice already affected by defeat, she said "We're gonna die, don't you see, we're gonna die. Please, God, I don't want to die."

"JILL, LISTEN TO ME!", I shouted, with a conviction stronger than I had thought possible. "I will NOT let you go. We'll both get out of here, ALIVE, but I need your help. I can't do this without you. Do you understand me? I NEED YOU!"

I didn't expect her to comply so quickly, but her attitude somehow changed right away, as if the sound of my voice had now carried hope rather than words. Or maybe I had yelled louder than I realized. With her eyes focused on mine, she asked, "What are we going to do?"

The wind had started to blow stronger and my arms were getting tired. Yet, it was crucial that we talked it over before we tried anything. Our moves had to be quick but precise, and there was no margin for a sudden confusion of which arm was the left one and which was the right. Slowly, struggling, I pulled her up just far enough so that her hands were within reach of my harness. As agreed upon, I let go of her left hand while trying to keep my right arm locked in its bent position. She grabbed my harness and, now with both hands, I pulled her farther up until I could reach hers. In a final daring move, we let our right hands part ways and they, too, met each other's harnesses. Phase one of our escape was complete.

With renewed energy, we discussed phase two. I pulled her up some more and she hugged my thighs. She then brought one foot to my harness and slowly propelled herself up. With extra care, which I very much appreciated, she stepped on my crotch with her other foot. She was finally within reach of the summit. I never before thought I'd be able to pull someone up like I did that day. But, then, it's not uncommon for people to find extra strength when death is tapping on their shoulders.

Once back on the mountaintop, she proceeded first to anchor herself. She then threw me the end of a rope, which I used to tie a climber's figure-eight knot through the appropriate loop in my harness. Soon afterwards, I took my weight off my right leg and, in excruciating pain, I managed to get it unstuck. With my left heel resting over the roof, once again used as a lever, and with Jill's help, another minute or two went by before I was safely back on the patio.

Ironically, perhaps because we had not yet realized the magnitude of our feat, we weren't elated. Instead, we simply continued to talk and agreed that our best chance to get back to the ground alive was to climb down right

away. We had no food or water left and the only cell phone had been Pete's. By the time help would have arrived, if ever, we'd surely have been dead.

After improvising a contraption to keep my broken foot in place, down we went, belaying each other in turns. We both kept silent now for most of the descent, except for the occasional mandatory climbing commands.

I was the first to reach the large ledge situated about three quarters of the way down. To my surprise, Pete's fall had brought him there. He was badly injured and unconscious, but still alive. A quick look at his condition indicated that he had broken his right arm, both legs, and possibly a rib or two since his midsection was swollen. I feared he was bleeding internally. I realized then how wise our decision to come down right away had been. Had we waited on the summit, he would not have stood any chance to live.

Immediately after joining us on the ledge, Jill rushed to her brother's limp body and, unable to control herself any longer, she let it all out. "TALK TO ME, PETER! GODDAMNIT, YOU GET UP RIGHT NOW, YOU STUPID SON-OF-A-BITCH! DON'T YOU DIE ON ME, YOU HEAR ME, PETER, DON'T YOU DIE ON ME!"

Her emotions had now run amok. Crying profusely and shaking from head to toe, she tried hard to wake her brother up, to no avail. Worried that she might inadvertently make his condition worse, I pulled her away from him, then hugged her silently. A few moments later, I told her we had to continue climbing down. She insisted on bringing him along, but that was a crazy idea and she knew it. We didn't have enough rope, strength, or experience to improvise such a complicated rescue.

Just before resuming our descent, she turned towards Pete one more time. Gently moving his hair out of the way, she whispered into his right ear, "You hang in there now, do you hear me, Pete? We're coming back for you. I love you, Peter, I love you."

The remainder of our descent was uneventful except for the intense hurting of my leg and swollen foot, which made progress very slow. Finally on safe ground, the realization of our escape, the extreme fatigue, the unbearable pain in my leg, and, especially, the sight of Nancy's lifeless body laying nearby, took complete hold of me and I started shaking. It was now time for my own catharsis.

Jill moved away from Nancy's body and started walking towards me, slowly, in tentative steps. I felt as if her eyes, now soft and locked onto mine, were in direct contact with my soul. Hugging me, she spoke only two words, in a soothing and straightforward tone: "Thank you." It was then that I collapsed in her arms.

That is the last memory I have of the events of that Saturday, until I woke up in a hospital bed late in the afternoon of the next day. Jill was sitting next to a nearby bed, the left side of her face resting on it, by her brother's side, her arms crossed under her head. Pete had bandages on his head.

Jill was asleep when I woke up. The parts of her arms not covered by her head caught my attention; there were bruises and deep finger marks in several places. I then looked at her face, so peaceful now. Once again, I thought of kissing her but then I realized how frivolous that thought was: our lives had now been forever linked by events far far more memorable than any kiss.

Exactly a year later, and again on subsequent years since, Jill, Peter and I met at the foot of the mountain, where Nancy's body came to rest. We didn't climb and we didn't talk; we just stood there, silently, each one of us reliving in our heads, in our own ways, the remarkable events of that Saturday.

As you would imagine, Jill and I have become close friends. We never hooked up, however. We never kissed, either.

The story behind the story

I woke up early on the morning of February 17, 2001, awakened by a nightmare. I usually don't have nightmares or, if I do, I usually don't remember them. This time, however, I woke up almost in a state of panic. The nightmare was essentially what happened in the story. As soon as I got my bearings, I got up from my bed, sat down in front of my computer, and typed a fairly complete draft of this story right there and then, while I still remembered it. Of course, later that day and on the next day, the story went through several revisions, but it's still very close to what I had seen in my nightmare.

Jill Carpenter, as suggested by the dedication, is a real person. In fact, this paragraph

Jill and I met while attending a sport-climbing class at the university gym. She made an immediate impression on me. Intelligent, driven, and strong-minded, this twenty-something thin but athletic girl loved the outdoors as much as I did. Yet - despite common interests - a relationship never developed between us, perhaps because of the age difference.

is entirely true, as was my interest in her at the time, as portrayed in the story.