



GENESIS ON THE GRAND

A near-ending is a new beginning

An insistent voice brought me out of the void and darkness.

"What is your name? Where are you?"

My eyes opened to see a chiseled face with furrowed brow. Pain stabbed my side, and my head, arms and legs were covered in blood.

I spoke softly, giving my name and our location as the Grand.

Three climbers huddled over me on a 6-by-4-foot ledge on the edge of the Exum Ridge, 400 feet below the summit of the Grand Teton. I had fallen, and by some miracle, stopped on this sloping ledge just feet from a 1,000-foot drop. We were 7,000 feet above the valley floor.

It was August 8, 2014, 11:30 a.m. The story had begun the year before. My life was in crisis mode: my business was failing, my marriage was falling apart, and I was the defendant in a U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission civil lawsuit.

I dug deep for courage, quit drinking, closed my business, and got divorced. In the settlement, all my assets went to my wife and five kids. I left the lawsuit uncontested.

As I sought to remake my life, my path led to the Upper Exum Ridge.

I had left the warmth and light of my car at 2:40 a.m., stepping out into the cool darkness and damp smell of Lupine Meadows. I moved quickly up the six-mile, 5,500-foot vertical approach. I had hiked this approach 16 times over 44 years and climbed the Grand by seven different routes. Reaching Wall Street ledge at 9:00 a.m., I made quick work of the exposed traverse and emerged from shadow to bright sun, soaking in the warmth.

Above was a party of three on the Golden Stair. They were firefighters from Boston, on the Grand for the first time. I asked permission to climb through, gave them some beta on the route, and headed up the sun-washed granite. Higher up, in the darkness of the Wind Tunnel, a party of two was climbing a chimney. I nodded and passed on an easier, less obvious step to the right. At the base of the Friction Pitch, a party of two women and I exchanged greetings, and they, too, told me to climb through.

Pausing at the top of the Friction Pitch to drink and eat, I noted with concern the dark clouds forming below me. My last memory is of climbing the easy slabs to the exposed so-named "V Pitch," at 10:00 a.m.

The Boston firefighters found me on the ledge. The face belonged to Keeghan O'Brien, a Marine with tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq. With him were Mike Aylward and Ryan Hackney.

The two women I passed saw me fall, cartwheel 100 feet, hit the ledge, and lie there motionless. They told the two climbers from the Wind Tunnel that I had fallen and continued to the summit to call for help. The Wind Tunnel party climbed to a ledge above me, also called the rangers and reported the accident, and headed up the ridge. They communicated my location to the Boston party. It was 11:15 a.m.

Soloing a technical alpine route, I would not expect less experienced climbers to come to my aid. Given the location, time of day and deteriorating weather, those parties made a reasonable decision to get safely off the mountain. It seems a miracle that the Boston climbers, with their emergency medical and wartime experience, were willing and able to help. They gave up their summit, stayed with me, and saved my life.

We heard the sound of a helicopter several times, but saw only clouds. I felt the creep of the insidious cold, heard whistling in my lung with every breath. There was a detached flap of my nose in my peripheral vision. It bugged me. I asked Keeghan if he had any tape. He produced a roll of gray duct tape and carefully taped the flap of skin back over my nose. The three stared at me, and we all burst out laughing. Most of all, I remember being grateful not to be alone.

After four hours, with temperatures in the 40s, I became hypothermic. First my body shook; then the shakes subsided as it began to shut down.

I said to my companions, "I'm not going to make it."

The thought occurred to me that some people would think my fall a death wish or suicide. Nothing could be further from the truth. I climbed solo to experience the joy of life. I thought of my kids. They needed me.

Around 4:30 p.m., roused by the sound of the helicopter, I opened my eyes to the welcome sight of blue sky. Attached to a bright yellow

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helicopter was a short haul line, stretcher and a park ranger, Nick Armitage.

The next 15 minutes were a blur of action. Two rangers, who had climbed up from the Lower Saddle over the top of the Grand and down the Exum, helped detach the stretcher and Armitage from the short haul line. The three of them put me in the stretcher. The helicopter returned. Attaching the stretcher to the short haul line, Nick said, "Don't forget to breathe," and I swung away. The pilot Jeff Parrish carefully lifted us off the ridge. With nose down and my stretcher hanging 100 feet below, he blasted down to the warmth and safety of Lupine Meadows.

It was one of the highest insertions/extractions in park history, and involved over 30 park personnel. Within 15 minutes after we were airlifted to safety, the Exum was again shrouded in clouds.

Taken to the emergency room of St. John's Hospital in Jackson, I was found to have three broken ribs, a punctured lung, a lacerated spleen, and lacerations that required 42 stitches and staples.

My accident changed me. Inspired by the sacrifice of the Boston climbers and the risk the rangers took to rescue me, I decided to become a health and fitness coach. My life is simple now, dedicated to helping people become stronger, recover from injury or illness, and lead healthier lives. The third of the Twelve Promises of Alcoholics Anonymous is, "We will not regret the past or shut the door on it." Humans make mistakes, and failure is a way to move in a new direction.

Ten months after my accident, I asked my son Charlie what he wanted to do for his 18th birthday. He said, "Climb the Grand." Perhaps he knew I needed to go back. My son Max joined us in Jackson.

Two days later, I guided Max and Charlie up the Exum Ridge. At the top of the Friction Pitch, we stopped. My return to the scene brought no recollection of what had happened, only dreamlike memories of my chest hitting and desperately trying to grab the ledge. Initially, I thought I had been hit by a rock, but it is not a place you would normally see rockfall. My best guess is that being fatigued, I lost concentration, stumbled and fell.

Describing my accident, I was filled with love for my kids, respect for this mountain, and gratitude for life.

Max said, "Dad, promise you will never solo this again."

"I promise."

Charlie put me on belay, and I led up the slabs.

Steven Markusen lives in Minnesota, and is a personal trainer, cycling coach, climber and skier.

patagonia

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ALEX LUGER on Pastafarian, 5.12, Meat Walls, Indian Creek, Utah.
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THE DRAGON BARES ITS TEETH

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