

## DESCENT

The guidebook referred to the climb as a “sharply pitched step,” however looking up at the indifferent wall of granite, the word that came to mind was “cliff.” At the base, the ground was worn and pockmarked with cigarette butts, as if his fellow climbers, overcome by the enormity of the slope, paused at this makeshift staging area to calm their nerves and gather their thoughts. Jeff took a healthy swallow from the canteen. Below him, the valley was a vast sea of pine and deciduous trees. He shook his head at the view and gazed out at the distant fire tower where he'd started. It was astonishing how far he'd traveled.

“Okay, enough procrastinating.”

His words ricocheted off the muggy, still air. He put away the canteen, dipped his hands in the chalk bag, and began by pitching his knee over the top of a boulder and pressing his bare elbows into the dimpled stone. There was no room for thought now; what came next was between him and the rock. Finding hand- and footholds required absolute focus. Most of the time, the ones who died rock climbing let themselves get caught up in the beauty of the scenery, or they were so interested in *having climbed* that they neglected to stay in the present, where gravity ruled. When climbing, he never considered the wall as a whole; he only concerned himself with the six square feet in his purview, and at the moment he was directing his attention to a gloriously wide crack two feet up and to the right.

“I’m not trying to beat you,” he said to the rock face. “I just want to climb you.”

Reaching for the crack, he heard a man’s voice: “Somebody there?”

“Yeah,” Jeff said.

“Hey,” the voice said. It appeared to be coming from the ledge above, about fifty feet up.

Jeff steadied himself and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Are you all right?”

“I fell,” the voice said. “I can’t move.”

“Hang on, I’m coming.”

Immediately Jeff flattened his body against the wall and attacked the rock with robotic precision, alternating hand and foot, using the six-inch seam in the rock as the backbone upon which all his moves depended. Despite slipping a couple times, he was undeterred; this was the sort of situation that as a Boy Scout he'd always fantasized about: person in trouble, him saving the day, getting a medal.

He reached a narrow ledge and sidestepped along it until it broadened out near a twisted pine tree eking out an existence among the stones.

“That you?” the voice asked.

Jeff dumped his pack and crawled forward on his hands and knees.

The man wore tattered orange coveralls. He lay on his side about twenty feet down, wedged in a crevasse. His right cheek was scraped and matted with dried blood and dirt, but it was his left arm, splayed over his head like a yoga position gone bad, that made Jeff shiver with revulsion.

Slowly the man turned his head and Jeff realized this was the convict who had been on the news for the past week: Lloyd David Givens. A very aristocratic name, Jeff thought, for someone who had raped and murdered a nine-year old girl, chopped up her body, and mailed the pieces to the girl's parents. Givens had even taken photographs of the crime, and a couple of the photos wound up in the tabloids.

Since his escape, the murderer's face had been plastered on the front pages of the *Daily News*, the *Post*, and the *Times*, not to mention every local paper between Manhattan and Albany. Driving up here, Jeff had encountered three roadblocks; apparently the State Troopers were unsure whether Givens was still around Greenhaven State Prison, down in Dutchess County, or if he went north. Well, here was the answer to that one—he went north. Down in the hole, the convict looked up at him.

“What's today?” he asked.

Amazing. The guy was stuck in a notch, on a cliff, in the middle of the Adirondacks, and still he was worried about what day it was.

“I think you've got bigger problems at the moment,” Jeff said.

“Besides, you're used to doing time, aren't you?”

“Hey, have a heart. I just want to know what day it is.”

“Friday.”

Givens's lips quivered, like he was trying to calculate how many days had passed since he escaped.

“Six,” Jeff said. “You've been on the run for six days.”

“Damn.”

“What, a hot date?”

“I'm supposed to meet a guy at the border tomorrow.”

“You'll probably have to call and cancel.” Jeff pulled the canteen off his hip and took a long drink. “How long you been down there?”

“Since last night.”

“You know, they've got people looking all over the state for you. How'd you get way up here?”

“Freight train, underneath one of the cars.” Givens took a few shallow breaths. “I was shootin' for Canada. Train stopped just north of Albany, so I had to hoof it the rest of the way and ended up down here. Hey, any chance of me getting some of that?”

“Some of what?”

“Whatever you’re drinking there,” Givens said. “Water, right?”

“I have a policy of not helping escaped felons.” Jeff put the canteen away.

“Look.” The convict grimaced and rubbed his chest with his free arm. “You get me out of here and—”

“There’s a nice reward out for you,” Jeff said. “Fifty grand. Can you top that?”

Givens turned away, stared at the wall.

“I didn’t think so.”

Jeff backed away from the crevasse. He had no interest in talking with the loser. Besides, he was hungry and needed a moment to think. Sitting down on the ledge with his feet dangling over the side, Jeff unzipped his knapsack and produced a Powerbar—banana peanut butter. It amazed him how palatable the things had become over the years.

The escapee’s voice resonated from the hole. “Whatcha doing?”

“Eating.” Jeff chomped into a third of the bar and washed it down with water.

“Boy,” Givens said, “never thought I’d miss prison grub, that’s for sure.”

Staring out at the vast blanket of green, the image of another kind of green—a stack of five hundred Ben Franklins—flooded Jeff’s mind. Fifty thousand dollars. And all he had to do was keep Givens alive until he could lead the authorities back here. With the reward money, he knew exactly what he’d do: pay off his debts. He had close to twenty grand on credit cards, and another twenty in loans left over from graduate school. Maybe if he wasn’t shelling out so much money on bills, he could afford a little getaway cabin. Suddenly all of it—taking his vacation when he did, the escaped convict, the reward—seemed predestined by God. He, Jeff Manning, was meant to find this guy, to collect the reward, to be splashed across newspapers and TV as a hero, to have the hotties from HR squeeze his bicep and chirp about how brave he was. He’d be known everywhere as the valiant vacationer who brought in a fugitive.

But by bringing Givens in, wasn’t he in a sense rescuing a child killer? Jeff wished it were anyone else. He thought back to times he saw news stories about child rapists or murderers. In each case, he was overcome with a sense of outrage and dreamed of inflicting elaborate punishments on the perpetrators—castrating a guy by tying his genitals to a truck and driving away, knocking his teeth out with a hammer, or burning his flesh off section by section with a cigarette lighter. Now he had one of them, Givens, utterly at his mercy. What was stopping Jeff from dropping a chunk of granite down on the guy? If the body were ever discovered, which was doubtful, they’d decide it was an accident. The problem with killing him, though, was that no one really gained from it. Sure, a worthless, deranged moron would get what was coming to him, but for the victim’s family, society, and Jeff it did nothing. In

fact, he'd be in a worse position, constantly having to worry someone would find out. No, the smart thing to do was report Givens and claim the reward. He'd never been so lucky before, and he wasn't about to throw away a chance at free money. He'd hike back triple-time and lead them back here.

First he had to keep Givens alive, and doing that began with food and water. Jeff pulled a fresh canteen and another Powerbar from the knapsack. He dug out a coil of rope from the bottom of his pack, tied one end to the pine tree and looped the other end around his torso using a bowline knot so it wouldn't slip. Hooking the canteen to his belt and slipping the Powerbar in his pocket, he went to the edge of the crevasse and eased himself in so his back was against one wall and his hands and feet were braced against the wall in front of him. In this awkward position, Jeff inched his way down to Givens. Although it was shadowy here in the crevasse and hard to judge distances, the bottom appeared to be another fifty feet down. If he slipped and wasn't fortunate enough to get himself stuck like the convict, he'd plummet to a sure and stony death.

“What's this?” Givens said.

“Change of heart.”

He handed Givens the canteen first.

“I'm going for help,” Jeff said.

“You mean turn me in,” Givens said. “Don't.”

“I guess you'd prefer to die in this hole.”

Givens tried to sit up, but only his head moved. For the first time, Jeff noticed the guy's eyes—an amber color, almost gold—and he realized it was the hypnotic iridescence of those eyes that had enabled him to lure the hapless girl into his car. If they'd been ordinary, Jeff thought, the girl might still be alive.

“It's not up to you,” Givens said. “I got into this fix, it's my business.”

“Not anymore.”

As he started to climb back up, Givens grabbed his ankle.

A hot jolt swept down Jeff's back and legs, making his groin tingle.

“Maybe I just pull you down here with me,” Givens said. “And we both die.”

At that instant, a realization hit Jeff like a brick in the forehead: Guys like this viewed compassion as a weakness. Quietly unsnapping the pouch on his belt, he pulled out his hunting knife, flicked the blade open, and slashed Givens across the knuckles. The convict screamed and released his grip. With his ankle free, Jeff thrust against the rock walls until he was out of reach, then hauled on the rope to climb up the rest of the way. Remarkably, the rope held. Once on the ledge above, he leaned over the side catching his breath.

Givens wiped the cut on his pant leg and gazed out of the pit. “So, tell me, you got a daughter?”

“Go screw yourself.”

“You do, I can tell,” Givens said. “Sweet, I bet. Juicy lips, little nose, and skin so soft you wish you had a blanket made out of it. Cute little asses, by the way. Not all fat and flabby like they grow up to be. Believe me, I did that kid a favor. She would’ve gotten old and used up like all the others. Now her family gets to remember her the way she was.”

Jeff was trying to ignore the animal’s monologue. He strapped on his pack again and spoke to the hole without looking at its resident.

“I’ll be back tonight, jerkoff,” he said. “With the cops.”

Once he reached the base of the ridge and plunged into the trees, Jeff briefly considered going back to his campsite to pick up a flashlight. He decided against it. Camp was two miles in the opposite direction, and the sooner he led them back to Givens, the sooner he’d get his money.

To make certain he could find his way back to Givens later, he pulled out his hatchet and scalped the sides of trees at fifty-yard intervals. Jogging along, dodging rocks and fallen limbs, Jeff sunk the hatchet into the soft wood pulp and thought of Givens chopping up that little girl. Had he used an axe or a hack saw? Whichever way, the thought made Jeff shiver. To do what Givens did required seeing human beings as nothing more than slabs of meat—a special kind of sick.

An hour later he stopped at a brook and sat down on some cool, springy ferns. Already the sun had reached its apex and begun its descent. At the rate he was going, he’d be lucky to make it to the ranger’s station by nightfall. Jeff filled his extra canteen and added purification tablets. Despite the layers of DEET he’d applied to his skin that morning, a cloud of mosquitoes hovered around his head, as if probing every square inch for a chink in his armor of pesticide. Between the distance, the bugs, and the sun beating down, he was in for a serious trek to get the ranger. Then, once he got there, there was no guarantee anyone would be around. By the time he made it back to Givens with the authorities, the bastard could be dead, in which case Jeff probably wouldn’t get the reward.

And what about the reward? Sure, fifty-grand was a good chunk of change, but to get it he’d have to deal with the same government that had allowed Givens to escape in the first place. It could be *years* before he saw any money. The image of the girl flashed in his mind. He couldn’t remember her name; however he’d seen the girl’s fourth grade school photo on TV so many times and become so familiar with her curly blonde hair that she might as well have been his own daughter.

When they prosecuted the son of a bitch, the public demanded he get the death penalty, but New York didn't have capital punishment back then. Not only did the girl's parents have to accept that Givens would live, but also that part of their taxes would pay for his food, clothing and shelter. Meanwhile their little girl never saw her tenth birthday, Confirmation, prom, marriage—anything. The question was, if the girl's parents knew he'd found Givens, what would they want him do? Bring the murderer back in? Doubtful. Leave him for dead? Maybe.

Suddenly words rang in his head, as if shouted by the trees: *He chopped her up and mailed the pieces back to her family.*

“What a sick fuck,” Jeff said aloud.

He stood up, brushed himself off. The path to the ranger's station crossed the brook and faded into a thicket of evergreens. A few miles behind him, the smug Lloyd David Givens was probably coming to terms with returning to prison. The convict thought he was cute when he grabbed Jeff's ankle. Thinking of Givens, Jeff became very aware of the strength in his arms and hands. A sensation of pressure, like a ketchup packet being squeezed to its breaking point, filled his body. Gradually an image, hazy at first, came into focus in his mind...Givens cowering and screaming for his life. He took a deep breath, savored the piney aroma, and on the fringes, the odor of some decaying animal. Jeff licked his eyeteeth. Bloodlust pulsed thickly through his veins.

Across the clearing, a strip of bark dangled from one of the trees he'd whacked. As he stared at the pulpy fillet, he found himself clutching the camera strap around his neck and sliding his hand down to caress the smooth leather case. From his other hand swayed the hatchet, its blade cold against his knee. For what seemed like hours, he stood absolutely still and let Nature wash over him—the buzzing cicadas, the babbling brook, the verdant scent of the shady bank, and the dark clouds he hadn't noticed earlier gathering low and ominous to the south. When he emerged from his trance, legs trembling, it was obvious what he had to do. Although he was completely alone, he couldn't shake the feeling that someone, something, was watching him. And that something didn't seem to disapprove.

*Chris Orcutt's fiction has won the 55 Fiction World's Shortest Stories Contest and the MOTA Emerging Writers Contest. His website, NotWriting.com, was voted a “Best of the Web” by the editors of Yahoo!*