

My Cards on the Table

An “Easy” Spring Solo Becomes a Heavenly Winter Wonderland ... *and a Little Slice of Hell*

By Max Armpet

Mountaineering is like religion. Many people just don't understand it. Of those who do claim to understand it, each understands it differently. Even the goals of religion and climbing are similar. Everyone is looking for answers, for guidance, for that special something they can't quite put their finger on...

On the afternoon of May 6th, I pulled in to Bishop Park Campground, elevation 8,200 feet, and was immediately taken by the enormity of the mountain across the road. Unlike the “typical” Eastern Sierra peak, which can be described as sharp and rocky and relatively compact, this mountain was massive, rounded, and the flat top extended for miles with more than half a dozen separate knobby summits.

A quick look at the map showed that this was Table Mountain. The two summits directly across from me were 10,505 and 10,574 feet high; to the right were two higher knobs, at 11,200+ and 11,286. The true highest point of this “mountain,” being 11,711 feet and approximately two miles south, was not even visible from this vantage point. Peak 10,574 was looking like a very real possibility. There appeared to be several fairly straightforward routes up scree and slopes to the right. Only a few moments of deliberation were necessary. It would be Peak 10,574 in the morning.

To some, climbing isn't as much a sport as it is a religion, and for them it takes the place of some other organized type of worship. The wilderness is the climbers' church, the mountain his sermon. His collection of gear, techniques, and knowledge is his bible. When distilled down to their most elemental

forms, the main difference between the two religions is that the traditional worshipper is worried more about an afterlife, while a climber is preoccupied with or even obsessed by death.

May 7th. 6 a.m. I awoke late because it had been a bitterly cold and snowing constantly all night. My internal alarm clock was telling me to sleep in for a while longer. Surely there was no use in waking up early; my talus and scree route up the side of Peak 10,574 must be covered with at least two feet of fresh powder.

Within five minutes of waking, and without even peeking out the tent flap, I had decided to give it a try. What harm could it do? I would get cold and wet, turn back in 20 or 30 minutes, and at least have some pleasant memories of the aftermath of a beautiful Sierra snow storm. Then I could spend the rest of the day in the tent, reading and sleeping, but only a little disappointed, knowing I had at least given it a shot.

Double socks, separated by plastic bags so the feet would at least stay dry for a while in my lightweight summer hiking boots. Heavy pants, covered by rain pants. T-shirt, covered by a heavy sweater, topped off by a Gore-Tex jacket. Gloves covered by Gore-Tex mittens. Balaclava. In the 30-pound backpack, a stove, a tea kettle, two quarts of water, PowerBars, storm kit, ice axe, climbing helmet, ski poles, crampons, dry clothes, and enough other equipment and supplies to (hopefully) keep me safe, no matter what happened.

At 6:35 a.m., feeling (and undoubtedly looking) like some swollen victim of a bad allergic reaction, I clumsily stepped out of the tent. The scene was stunning. To a sightseer, the view would have been



unbelievably beautiful; to me, daunted by the task ahead of me, it was a mixture of the sheer beauty and the stark reality that I intended to climb in these conditions!

Munching the last bagel not either stolen or partially eaten by the presumably rabid campground chipmunks, I set out across the road and dropped down to a peaceful marshy area where the previous afternoon I had spooked some mallard ducks. This morning there were no ducks, in fact no signs of life, just snow. And it was still snowing, ever so lightly. Skirting the marsh to avoid an unpleasant dunking, I picked up a rough trail through some aspens on the right. I meandered through trees, out on to sage-covered flats, around and over rocky knobs, and then dropped steeply into a small canyon. The far side was an interesting, overhanging cliff about 20 feet high. This would be a great place to come back in the summer and rock climb, I thought, but right now it was an annoying barrier barring any further progress.

Luckily, it was not as bad a couple of hundred feet to the left, but it was covered with fallen trees and small branches that made it almost impenetrable. After some thrashing and wasted energy, I emerged on the plateau. This had to be the emotional low of the whole trip. Nothing beats thrashing about in near-impenetrable vegetation to make

you feel like the biggest idiot who ever put on a pair of hiking boots.

A few minutes later, I was at the edge of the talus slope that began the ascent of Peak 10,574—my peak. The first few hundred feet were pretty ugly. A few inches of fresh, wet snow covered the talus. Just enough to hide the underlying rocks, but not enough to support any body weight over the rocks. In a word, it just plain sucked.

After that, it only got worse. Plenty of slipping and sliding to be had that morning on the slopes of Table Mountain! My goal became not to make it to the top of Peak 10,574, but to make it a couple of hundred more feet to an abandoned mining road traversing the side of the mountain.

Having gained the road after more thrashing, it was decision time. And the decision was simple. Another 1,500 feet or so on snow-covered talus and scree would not be possible. Maybe it was time to head back to the tent. Or maybe just follow the mining road for a while and see where it went.

The road went to the right for a quarter mile or so, where it crossed Jawbone Canyon. This canyon separates the two main flanks of Table Mountain. To the left, the two highest points were Peak 10,505 and Peak 10,574. To the right, a long plateau speckled with perhaps a dozen or more

rocky knobs reaching over 11,000 feet. Jawbone Canyon curves around and points directly towards the very shallow saddle between Peak 11,200 and Peak 11,286, the northern most two of these knobs.

Up the canyon I went, towards the saddle, my intent being to at about 10,000 feet break off to the left and ascend the (hopefully) more consolidated slopes up to the top of Peak 10,574. For the first thousand feet or so the easiest way up was right up the center of the canyon, often suspended a few feet above the trickling stream below by a tongue of ice covered by fresh snow. When conditions changed and the bridge began to give away at regular intervals of every 12 to 15 steps, my route tended to follow the break line between the stream bed and the adjacent slope.

It got steeper. And the snow got deeper. Place ice axe with right hand. Bite snow with ski pole in left hand. Move up with feet. Take a deep breath or two. Repeat ten times. Stop and collapse on the ski pole for a minute. Then go again. It seemed like very slow going, but glancing at my watch proved that I was making excellent time.

Whenever a boot broke through the thin crust of snow a few inches below the surface and sent my leg shooting down two feet into the snow, I would swing my ski pole back and make a large arc in the snow. This, I reasoned, would allow me on the way back down to spot and avoid the weak spots in the snow before falling through. It was a great idea...

The slope was getting ever steeper, and soon I stopped to stow the ski pole in my pack. It was just me and the ice axe from here on up. Judging from the map and the slight easing of the angle on the slope above me, it was only another two hundred feet or so to the summit. Bonus!

Then an odd thing happened. The muscles in my left thigh began to cramp; first moderately, and within a few minutes so intensely that I was hobbling along the steep slope towards the summit. As the slope suddenly lessened, I dropped my backpack and continued on, across a near-level plateau that rose gently to the top of Peak 11,200+. Although the snow on this plateau was iced over and very crusty—the first non-powder encountered so far on the journey—I judged that with the short distance to the summit and the very kind slope, the effort to go back to the pack and put on crampons was not

worth it. A few seconds later, I was on top.

The view was wonderful, but what should have been a delightful experience at the culmination of a long journey was of course overpowered by unfinished business—the ruggedly beautiful older sister, Peak 11,286. Her features were sharply defined, bold rocky outcrops juxtaposed against the softness of the fresh powdery snow and white wisps of low clouds. A natural beauty.

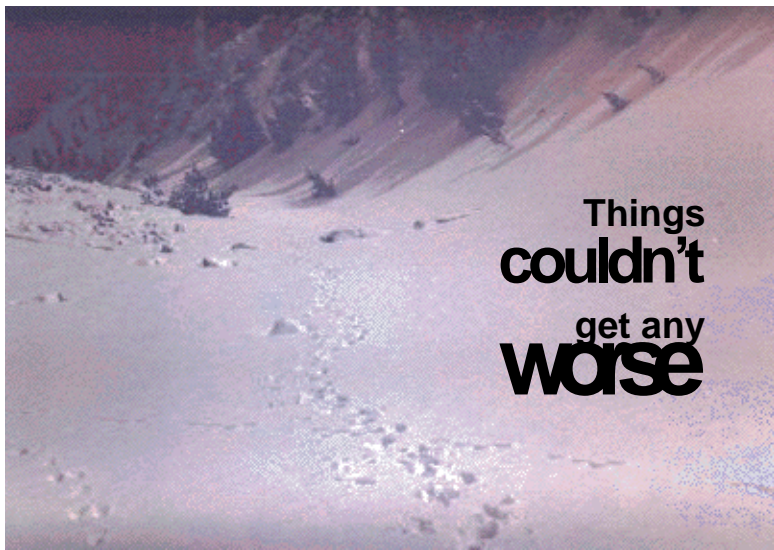
My visit with the little sister lasted less than a minute. I thought about turning back to the comfort of my tent, leaving my loftier goal for another day. Deliberation took only about two seconds. It just wouldn't be right, after all that work. It was so close, literally a couple of hundred yards and about 75 vertical feet away. Big sister was calling. Built like a brick house, she had more to offer.

The route over involved a descent of maybe a dozen feet to a large and almost indistinguishable saddle. Again, the ice was very slippery, but slow going and careful foot placement easily tamed it. Steering clear of an imposing icy cornice to the left, the traverse quickly dumped me at the base of the summit. The crusty ice instantly changed to fresh powder, about four feet deep. Picking my way through twisted trees and over large chunks of exposed rock, I gained the summit blocks. Success. Confirmation. Redemption.

Like religion, climbing can be a bit tricky. You know that when you die, the answers to all your questions will finally be answered. The tricky thing, the part you're after, is that you want to know the answers **now**. To get the answers, you must tempt death. It's like Halloween, except you want what you can't have—both the trick *and* the treat.

Looking at my watch, it was 10:35 a.m., four hours to the minute after leaving camp. It was snowing lightly, as it had been for most of the morning. Balanced precariously on the icy summit blocks of Peak 11,286, the view was absolutely incredible. In front of me, I could look down into the valley where I had started. To the left was a virtual winter wonderland, the Table Mountain plateau stretching for a mile or two, dozens of miniature peaks topped with powdered sugar. To the right, Peak 10,574, my original goal, looked small, tame, and insignificant.

Then I looked behind me.



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My route up looked steep and wild, true testimony to the adventure that had just transpired. Not small, nor tame, nor insignificant. Then it happened so quickly that it was like a dream. One second I was admiring the beauty of the steep chute that had been my stairway to heaven. The next moment I was in whiteout conditions, being pelted by heavy snowfall. It was like looking down an elevator shaft and watching the elevator car come up, straight towards you, except the roof was painted white. Then it rammed into my head with the force of a large piece of cold steel.

Things couldn't get any worse...or could they? I spent two, maybe three minutes on top. Running down the slope to regain my backpack, my left thigh started giving me problems again. Then the right joined in for a stereophonic symphony of pain and paralysis. Getting to the pack was hard; going further was hell. I'd limp a few steps then collapse in the snow. Getting up was easy; it was the walking that was hard. I tried glissading a few times, but the snow was too deep and soft. Time to evaluate the situation.

Going on like I had been was not an option. No amount of will power or adrenaline would unlock the vice grips on my leg muscles. I spied a tree where I could hunker down in a forced bivouac. If I put on all the clothes I had, covered myself with my emergency space blanket, pulled out the stove and start brewing tea, I could survive for a while. But would people eventually start searching for me? I doubted they would find me. I was a couple of peaks away from where I had told people I was going. My footprints up Jawbone Canyon surely were already obliterated by the new snowfall. And I was on the

back side of the mountain, invisible from the road.

Gaining a summit is only 49% of the climb, I had heard somewhere. 51% of the work was still ahead of me. But I was beginning to think that maybe in this case, 99% of the work was still ahead of me.

While evaluating my limited options and searching for the perfect bivy site on the sparsely vegetated slope, the tight grip on my legs suddenly loosened ever so slightly. It was still extremely painful to move, but it was at least becoming possible now. Then I had a brainstorm. Time to take the express elevator down.

I remembered an as yet unused feature of my new backpack. The padded area between my back and the pack was removable, a little pad to sit on after a long day of hiking. "I'll never use that," I had thought when purchasing the otherwise attractive pack. But here I was, in a raging snowstorm at 11,000 feet, trying to remove the pad.

It came out easily, and unfolded into a 19-inch by 19-inch pad. Sitting on the pad and grasping the leading edge of it with my left hand, I laid my ski pole across my lap and firmly grasping my ice axe with my right hand placed it behind me for use as a brake. My legs were two stiff boards sticking straight out in front of my seated body. Completely useless, but at least no longer painful.

The next 15 minutes was a blur of excited screams and flying powder. After what must have been at least 1,500 feet of elevation loss, the slope lessened and more rock began showing through the snow. But the improvised sled had done its job. I had gotten down the steepest, hardest part of the climb safely and quickly. And the brief rest had restored the energy to my legs, which now showed absolutely no signs of the debilitating cramps that had so severely threatened my retreat only half an hour before.

The rest of the hike out was relatively uneventful. Fresh snow had completely obliterated my line of ascent and my carefully marked "sand traps," but the surface had somewhat consolidated from the increasingly cold temperature, so it didn't matter. After a while, the snow turned to rain, which almost gave the impression of a warm shower even though the real temperature of the

falling water was only a degree or two above freezing. Taking a more direct route down, I avoided the difficult parts experienced on the hike up.

Camp was a welcome sight. The uncomfortable folding chair looked like nirvana. Glancing at my watch, it was only 12:05 p.m. Unbelievably, my adventure had transpired in only five and a half hours. Time to sit down, drink a beer, and eat a big old ham sandwich. Life was good.

Back at camp, I quickly changed into dry clothes, made my sandwich, and opened a “warm” (i.e., not quite yet frozen solid) beer. It was snowing on me, but I didn’t care. I was hungry, and definitely used to the conditions. A few minutes later, I crawled into the tent, but the warmth of my -20 sleeping bag and tent was too much. Of course, the adrenaline was still pumping from the events of the day, so instead of sleeping I began reading the first chapter in *Mountains of the Great Blue Dream* by Robert Leonard Reid.

“Mountaineers climb because they love the mountains, yes; but they climb too because climbing prepares them boldly and tenaciously for death, then guides them faithfully to the edge of another world, a world I now recognize as the world of the dead, and there allows them to dance, mountain after mountain, year after year, as close to death as it is possible to dance; which is to say, within a single step. They go, not to die—that is very important—but far from the tumult of the valley below to linger in safe communion with death, to feel the exquisite tension that separates it from life, to glimpse its radiant smile and comprehend its peace.”

A strange thing happened. Within a few minutes, the whole experience started to make complete sense to me. It placed the solo of Peaks 11,200+ and 11,286 correctly in the larger context, of my previous climbing experiences and of my entire life. All my life I had been looking into a hazy mirror, and after 31 years the fog had lifted. I could see myself, everything about myself, all crystal clear, all making perfect sense. I had tested myself on Table Mountain, had accepted my fate, and lasted to see another sunset. This was what life was all about.

Solo. A performance by one person alone; with out a companion or partner. In mountaineering, possibly the ultimate test of one’s mental and physical capabilities. That was what made the religion of climbing so different. I didn’t need a preacher to tell me what to think, to tell me what to feel, to interpret my own feelings and experiences. The wilderness was my church, the mountain my sermon; my gear, techniques, and knowledge my bible. What I only now understood was the power of climbing as a religion. For I was alone; I was my own preacher.

You can lie to your friends, spinning very engrossing stories around the campfire, and if you’re a good enough actor you might even be able to pull off a show in front of your climbing partners at the brew pub. But only a complete idiot lies to ones self. In soloing, be it rock climbing, mountaineering, hiking, or whatever, go to the mountains, test your limits to the very edge, and find out who you really are. You’re all by your self. Just you and the mountain. Lie to yourself—or the mountain—and you die. Be honest and you just may discover the ultimate truth.

Looking back, my five and a half hours on Table Mountain were an incredible test of my mental and physical capabilities. Quite simply, it was the ultimate mountaineering—or more, religious—experience. I would have to make a lot more time for this in my life.