

The forest starts to become less thick at this altitude. The ~~xxxx~~ have almost completely become replaced by aspens. By the end of the day I'll be past the point where any trees grow at all. At times it seems so necessary just to get away from the crowds and the pressure. It's time to stop for a while, one has to pace oneself to get ~~through~~ through the altitude. I take off my pack and take some cheese and bread from the top. I think I probably packed more than I'll need. I'll have to take it more slowly, but I'll be better prepared if anything unexpected comes up. I can hear the sounds of songbirds and of the everpresent crickets. Through the trees, downslope, comes another person. I'm fairly surprised to see anyone up here, this far up. I wave and shout 'hello'. He waves back and in a couple minutes catches up to where I'm sitting.

A:Nice day, like some cheese?

B:Sure, hold on a minute for me to catch my breath. Oftly steep slope up here. Do you come up here much? By the way my names' Ward.

A:Charles. Take off your pack?

B:Beautiful area~~xx~~. Haven't been up here sinse I was a child. It's encouraging that some things never change. How far is it to the summit?

A:about another 10 miles, another 3000 feet up.

B:If I made it this far, I guess I'll make it to the top. Looks like it might get cold tonight, maybe even a little rain. I don't care what my bag says, it gets damn cold anywhere below freezing.

A:It'll blow over before it starts to rain.

B:THink so?

A:yep.

B:I hope so. Sure is nice up here. You look like you're used to it. Me, I hardly ever get out of the city. I'm from the Springs. But I had some time off work between deals, and my wife wanted to go visit her sister, so I thought I'd try to make it up here.

Frankly, I didn't expect it to be this rough, I guess I'm not used to the altitude.

A:I'm going to get going again; you want to come along?

B:Sure. Gimme a minute to get my pack back on. Well let's go.

What do you do down back at civilization?

A:Oh, different things.

B:Sorry, didn't mean to pry. I'm in construction, mostly government buildings, schools, that sort of thing. It really gets old after a while though, it's really a pain the ass trying to work with the bureaucracy to get contracts, especially during this slump. I'm doing all right though, managed to buy out my own business couple years ago. Been working there a long time.

... sure is nice up here.

A:It seems that most people don't understand how necessary this part of life is. All this, as opposed to all that.

B:Well, yes. I never really thought about it quite like that, but I think you're right. Do you live up in the back country.

A:No, I think it would drive me crazy, the other half's just as important. I need the city too, just not all the time.

B:You know, Charles, I think you're right. I haven't been up here sinse I was a kid, but I think of it sometimes, even when things are busy at work. There are a lot of people who live their whole lives without ever being more than a couple miles out of a town. Now me, I haven't been up here in a while, but you know; it's really nice up here.

A: There's a stream in a couple hundred yards. We should fill our bottles at it. You can hear it if you listen for it.

B: You know this area pretty well. I should come up here more often. I was kinda shocked to see anyone else up here. I expected I'd have the mountain to myself. I'm glad I met up with you though, it's nice to have a little company up here. Sure is nice up here. I haven't heard birds like this since I was a kid.

A: I've spent some time up here.

B: I wish that my wife Kathy would have come up with me. She'd have liked it too. Maybe she would have complained about having to hike so far, but she likes nature as much as the next person. Do you have a family? A wife? or Kids?

A: No.

B: That's the stream up there to our left, isn't it? Is the water safe? I guess it is at this altitude, probably just melted off of the snowpack, I imagine. It really is steep up here. I'm tired from lugging this pack up thousands of feet. Why don't we take off our packs and rest here while we fill our canteens? Brrr, that's cold water.

It feels good to sit and rest after carrying my pack up here. Now, where did Charles go? Probably just snuck off to go take a leak or something. It really is nice to get away from civilization and all the stress for a while. It has been quite a few minutes since Charles went off. I get up and shout 'Charles'. I wonder around a little to see if I can see him. I can't seem to find him. Perhaps he continued up. I hope I didn't offend him, he did seem oftly secretive. Maybe he just felt like being by himself. I'll wait a couple more minutes; I'm sure he can manage either way. I hear a voice from behind shout 'Bye, Ward' and hear a gunshot. I see

a ricochet on a tree to my side. I start to turn around, then hear another gunshot and feel bite in my chest. Jesus! I put my hand to my chest and it is wet.