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DOWN AND DOWN AND DOWN INTO THE VOID,  
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taking the same great plunge

from the  
JON BELL  
OUTSIDE

For the first time in my relatively short climbing experience, I can actually visualize a body falling off the side of a mountain. In my mind I see it clearly. A person, dressed in red Goretex – or maybe blue, the shirt I'm wearing – is falling through the air for a long time, without a rupture. It is quiet; the only sound is a wind swishing over the rocks. Down they go, the figure plummets, racing past a backdrop of pure white and gray boulders and blue, sunny sky. It's almost as if he's flying, so peaceful this open-air freefall. Actually not a way to go, I think, at least until the very floor or a rock outcropping below is the deal. I'm only thinking this way because I've left the relative safety of a roomy, rocky ledge – a platform so spacious that climbing partners and I have just stepped here for the past hour – and pedaled up and around onto the north face of Mt. Stuart, a 9,400-foot beauty in the central Cascades of Washington. To my right is a blocky granite face, full of handholds and cracks perfect for hanging protective gear. To my left, very close to my left – say one small misstep – a nearly bottomless, very expansive, quite beautiful drop-off. I start climbing up toward my partner, a guy who is anchored some 50 feet high and who's got me tied on a rope, just in case. The climbing is very easy, and I'm worried at all. But when I kick a little snow off a ledge and watch it tumble left, down and down and down into the void, that I can't even come close to seeing where it lands, and when I really realize how close I am to that breathtaking emptiness, I can't help but imagine a human body taking the same great plunge.

Mt. Hood or Mt. Adams, which do not require any rock climbing, mixed climbs are a combination of different techniques: hiking in and up, using ice axes and crampons through snow and ice, and vertical rock climbing.)

Four of us had started up toward this great hill early in the morning, trekking up and over a hefty ridge, then down to the base of the mountain. We filled our water bottles, stashed a bit of gear to save weight, and headed up a route on Mt. Stuart known as the West Ridge Couloir.

The way followed one of many gullies cutting down the side of the mountain, crossing small snowfields and quiet little waterfalls that added a feeling of paradise to the climb. All around, jagged, snow-covered peaks serrated the horizon, and when we reached a place high up on the mountain known as the West Ridge Notch, there was little to fill our view but Glacier Peak, Mt. Baker, and a sea of mountain-tops stretching beyond our eyes.

So magnificent was this vista, so calm and refreshing the mountain air, we sprawled out like lizards in the sun for an impromptu doze before heading up to the summit to spend the night.

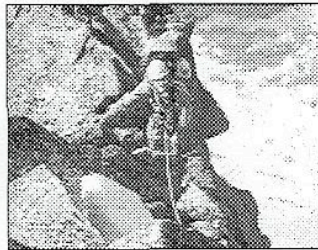
the claustrophobia, and I wake in a violent, kicking surge.

I rip myself free of my sleeping bag, breathe deeply, then easily, and realize that all is well: I am no longer at the notch, but higher, on the very mountain-top, in only a sleeping bag and bivy sack – essentially a waterproof sleeping bag cover not dissimilar in size and shape to a body bag. I have simply cinched myself in a bit too tightly, especially considering the relatively temperate night air and still winds at 9,400 feet.

The black sky above is absolutely filled with stars and a light breeze blows across the summit. This is one of the most unique places I have ever laid down my head.

John Bonin and Donn Venema pick their way up the slopes of Mt. Stuart.

Photos by Jon Bell



John Bonin high on the upper reaches of Mt. Stuart, and views of the mighty mountain in Washington state.

After that first pitch, the exposure and the falling-body visions are pretty much gone, and we work our way up four more pitches to Stuart's rocky summit – the top of my first mixed climb. (As opposed to the long slogs up

I feel like I'm being constricted. I can barely move my arms, and in my dreams I almost feel as though I'm being buried alive. Something is closing in around me: I'm sure of it. Finally, my subconscious cannot take

My three friends are sleeping among the rocks nearby; or maybe they're awake, thinking about this day, the waterfalls, the sunset, the star-filled sky – a falling body, perhaps – alone at the top of this mountain, the way I am.