

Peter Quinn

Touching the Void

I held two bricks in my hands—once clay, risen to the top of the Shomali Plains from the deep igneous rock of this region, eons ago, mixed with sand, and formed in one of the dozens upon dozens of brick factories that plumed great black smoke cauldrons. Those rising stacks that we would fly around—like a giant slalom race in the skies in our helicopters—were erected, pointing upward amongst the people of the greater city of Kabul, a millennia after this clay was birthed to the surface. Molded and shaped for utility in time and the two bricks did not seem heavy, but I knew they would grow in weight the farther I ran that morning.

“Ah, I see Kris got you your mentor stone.” said Thor, the Norwegian commando, leader of a kill team that was here on a rotation with the FSK. Thor looked exactly like his namesake. Six foot eight inches tall, with a long flowing blond 1980’s Jon Bon Jovi mullet—that had anyone else worn, could not have pulled off, save his bullet proof torso, and arms as thick as the hallowed stories of wielding that mighty hammer: This Thor lived up to his name in stature and feats accomplished on the battlefield alone. Legendary.

“Mike, you going to hand me one of those, or what?” said Travis Peterson. Smoking a Marlboro Light, with deep long drags—like a skin diver deep breathes in quick successions before immersing himself for the descent. Except we were to ascend to the peak of a training route—Mentor Mountain.

We sat in lounge chairs, on the sundeck of the FSK compound, on the outskirts of Kabul—Camp Lion; and with the sun breaking through the clouds and warming us in our skivvies and European hiking cloths on loan by the Norwegians we could have been anywhere—a lodge midway down a ski run in Kitzbuhel, Austria, a

chalet atop a fjord in Norway, anywhere but here in a warzone. The sundeck was masterfully built, as if Lars Backer—the famous 20th Century architect who designed the *Ekebergrestauranten* in Oslo—had been resurrected and flown out here himself to lay design in rock. Straight modern lines and materials, a dissonance in congruency with the rises and falls of the mountain we were nestled into.

“Why do you guys call it Mentor Mountain?” I asked.

“Because you’re going to need the Gods by the time you’re almost to the summit,” laughed Thor.

I looked up the trail that started at the base of Camp Lion, by the razor wire fence at the perimeter to their Afghan counter-part’s compound, Triple Two—222; and, counted one, two, three rises, each to an escarpment in the steep ascent in altitude. Then one final vertical ascent to the summit. A solitary spire, touching the sky.

“It’s only 3.1 miles, there and back, Bro.” said Peterson, taking one last drag of his cigarette between his thick and red and bushy Norwegian-like beard—he looked like a Viking himself, and had I not known he was American would have mistaken him for an FSK man.

His eyes separated when he looked up at the mountain peak, one a little higher than the other—having sustained an ocular blowout when thrown from the back of the aircraft last month. The helicopter going into a spin in high winds—complete loss of tail rotor effectiveness—his monkey harness, tethered to the floor of the cabin, was the only thing that saved him from being tossed directly into the buzz saw of the tail rotor blades. “You get a prize if you finish in under 30,” said Travis. He flexed his basketball sized calf muscles in anticipation of the little jaunt we were to embark. Short and wiry, but for his calves that were obscenely large—my Air Force special operations friend was genetically engineered for such a run as this, a muscled *Norsk Villsau*.

“Yes, but it’s a 750 meter climb from base camp. The lower grades are 40% and the last surface grade to the top approaches 60%.” said Thor, in a typical Norwegian manner, flat and frank in tone, using no unnecessary words to embellish his point. The hike would be a climb, the run would be a trot at best, and to reach the pinnacle, there and back under 30 minutes, would wreak havoc on the thighs, the lungs, and the mind.

I took in the seriousness of needing a mentor to get there and back in that moment, “What’s the prize?”

“Respect.” said Kris, having rejoined us with his own brick in hand, placing it in his rucksack. He was suited up in a black unitard—the kind rowers wore to cut down on the wind and friction when attempting to gain the most speed in a race. Wearing his chest rack, too, with a combat load of ammo for the love of the additional challenge.

“What are the bricks for?” I said.

“You’ll see.” Kris said, then started a stopwatch, and we got up in haste, drank one last swig of water from our camelbacks and scrambled to the start line below and beyond, up towards the first escarpment.

The first leg was fast, at least I was, having easily passed Kris and Thor’s steady slow trot, running as a team, in rhythmic unison of footsteps and arms swinging, across the rocky footing of the trail. Peterson had taken off like the wild ram he was—leading the three of us by at least a distance of 100 meters and was gone, unseen over the first plateau. By the second escarpment, Kris and Thor passed me, with no words exchanged but the steady huffing and chuffing of Viking breath, as if rowing in unison along this transom of an outcropping of the mountain trail, leading upwards. The ascent immediately changing by the end of the flat landing to a 30-40% grade in climb.

My mind drifted, with the thinning of air, to the many mountains I’ve climbed. Many lifetimes ago, in the hills of the Catskills, along the Shawangunk ridge by Mohonk Mountain as a child. That great metamorphic creation tilted in time to its side like a giant sleeping amidst the trees. Lost in a sea of pinxter blooms of wild azaleas, my father trailing me and my brother, letting us explore just enough to the edges of the ridge, the mountain house far below. My brother would never be my best friend when we grew up, like I had hoped—losing time in that distance, from traveling abroad on deployments frequently to this place, I’d sooner end up calling my home.

Of times in college, with my best friend Andrew Bacevich, getting lost in early October’s winter on the Presidential Mountain Range in New Hampshire—he and I with only a daypack, no winter weather cloths, and stuck in places like the naked outcroppings of Jefferson’s Knee—awash in a no notice squall of snow—wind swept. And of running the Boston Marathon, twice, with Andy, not giving up when he hit a wall at the 18-mile mark in Kenmore Square once—“Never leave your battle buddy,” a spectator yelled to us. Andy died, killed in action, eight years later in Iraq—a bomber with children strapped with suicide vests. His humanity giving him

pause, hesitating in shooting them before they could self-detonate. His reluctance, an act of kindness, having killed him in the end.

Of an infinite number of setting suns seen, over the years, preparing my autistic son, also named Andrew, after Bacevich in honor of his memory, to one day hike the Appalachian trail alone together—as a team, father and son.

The trail narrowed, trotting, walking, hiking, and then trotting again, up the vertical ascent of Mentor Mountain. Shards of shale jutting and pointing up at the trails edge, encouraging me forward, and warning me not to stray—a sheer drop, two feet to my right, and a sloping untenable plunge to my left—there was no way out but forward. No detour, no bypass, just I and trying to touch the emptiness above.

I laughed to myself when facing the final ascent, it was as if I were climbing up, rather than skiing down, a double black diamond run. So steep that I could no longer see the summit, and the brick transformed, infinitely heavy on my back. My vision became black around the edges, and I thought of my daughter, Ella, dead for six years, how her tiny hand felt as she tried to hold and squeeze mine, just before she had passed.

Vision. Blackness at the outer edges, air thinning, and like a cone of darkness, sight began to circle in on my central focus point—upward. The periphery now gone, I thought of the unborn child we had almost had, a miscarriage, the week I left for this deployment. Lungs burning, gasping for air, thighs beyond aching—it was my past and all of my pain, leaving the body with each heaving step, each forceful exhale to draw in one last maximal breath. One foot in front of the other, gloved hands clenching and clawing at gravel and loose rock and up toward the top.

Then I could see a solitary structure rise before me. A peak of square rock, growing into a rectangle in form with each step—I could not give up. A fully formed narrow wall of brick, like an obelisk, stood before me, as I summited the pinnacle of the mountain. Breathless.

Peterson sat at its base, smoking another Marlboro, gazing out at the expanse below us. You could see as far as Ghazni Province from atop Mentor Mountain, the city of Kabul, the size of Manhattan, tiny and far below. Thor shook my hand, “I knew you could make it.”

“There is an old saying in Norway,” said Kris, “On the uphill slope, the uphill is going up.” he said, with a hint of cheeriness to his voice; and, then he tapped at his stopwatch and was gone, the three of them disappeared from the summit, and for a beat, I was alone.

I pulled the brick out of my rucksack, felt its sandy edges in my hands, a connection to something before me, anchored in nothingness, and climbed the partially built Obelisk—seating my brick atop, careful to ensure it was set well. Its weight added to the untold many stacked below it. I left some of my past and pain and loss there, a part of me on that hill top, set into that tower of stone on the mountain that had indeed mentored me along a path of pain and sweat and memory; and, then looked out, from the highest peak in the region. For that briefest of moments, before turning to make my descent, all the loss in my life had swept away with the wind, there standing atop the world, in Afghanistan. The Obelisk did not speak, but there was virtue there, and no evil, and no loss, and no justice—no righteousness or glory in that which cannot be seen, touching the void.