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Philadelphia, Pa. 19119
July 24, 1989

Mr. Richard McManus, Editor
The Accident Reports
National Alpine Club
25 Gladd St.
Boston, Mass. 02108

Dear Richard:

Although I realize that letters to the Editor are unprecedented in the Reports, I must ask you to print this full account of what befell my party on Mt. Aspera last year. You may argue that you have already described the episode—and with my cooperation at that. But my earlier letter, coming so hard upon the event, was written in a state of distraction which I trust you can understand. And while I cannot comment upon whatever “information” Leonard Skinner may have provided (of course we have not spoken since the inquest), his influence on your Report is all too clear. No doubt you did your diplomatic best to present a coherent narrative, but the result does the truth scant service.

All three of us were determined to climb the East Wall before late autumn snowfall made the attempt prohibitive. Roger Close was even more eager than Leonard and I, because he was about to be married (a point made much of by the media) and feared a diminution of his mountaineering activity. We were happy to adjust our schedules to meet his. Yes, he was the least experienced of us three, but he was by no means the untried youth some people took him for. Indeed, I wondered whether we could keep up with him. No doubt Leonard wondered as well. Roger had climbed Robson, you recall, as well as a number of other major Canadian peaks. He was a college graduate, held an M.A. in computer science, and had spent two years in Colombia for

For the Record

STEVEN JERVIS

from Ascent, 1989

his church. He was twenty-six years old.

And on the subject of ages: you are mistaken about Leonard and me. We were both thirty-nine. Not only our birthdays but our birthdates are identical: March 23, 1949. When we discovered this, ten years ago on one of our first trips to the Tetons, we concluded that some hidden logic had made us a team. My wiry build seemed to match his stockiness, and our skills were complementary as well—he being strong on rock, I on snow and ice. Of course, our personalities differed a good deal. I was the intellectual of ineradicable East Coast origin, he the forthright Oklahoman. But the mountains bound us together—permanently, it once appeared. Even our wives came to accept our partnership: the lengthy winter correspondence, crowded with plans for the Andes, and the frequent visits once we had all moved to Portland.

No doubt Roger seemed fresh and athletic next to Leonard and me: that blond, clean-shaven look. His parents are Mormons, as you know, and seem to have raised him in an atmosphere of unremitting optimism. Roger was hopeful in the most oppressive situations (including, sadly, Mt. Aspera). Of course, he neither smoked nor drank, not even a beer after a hot day's climbing (a considerable contrast with the likes of Leonard and me). "It's goable," he would say about some improbable succession of overhangs or ice-choked cracks. He was often wrong, but he was never daunted. His language added to the impression of a golden naïf: "My goodness." "Oh, golly." (That was for distress.) Even "Gee willikers." From anybody else it would have sounded ironic or ridiculous.

To begin with the "analysis" section of your report: "It was late in the season for so formidable a route." We packed in to Hidden Lake on the 15th of September. There had been several storms, but the snow they left was a mere dusting, soon melted. The previous year had seen two September ascents that I know of and one in

October. You detect "an element of haste in the assault"? To be sure, Leonard and I had our jobs to return to, and Roger his graduate school. Contrary to your implication, this did not sway our judgment: we had every reason to suppose that an early start would carry us up the couloir and the face, down the Southeast Flank, and return us to Hidden Lake by nightfall.

"An early retreat would have been in order." How glibly you assume the prerogatives of hindsight! I can imagine you, in your comfortably appointed office, composing the phrase. The Common is visible from your window, is it not? I have observed an Olympian tone disfiguring the Reports since you assumed the editorship, I must say. "They were less than halfway up the couloir when the storm struck." Here you yield to your sense of the dramatic—or is it to Leonard's? I informed you that the storm settled in very slowly. Being on the east side, we had no view of incoming weather. Dawn had been clear, in a promising, autumnal way, and it was some time before the first clouds drifted over. Perhaps we tried to move a trifle faster when we saw them, that was all. The terrain is quite difficult. You might have a look yourself someday, if you still climb at that level. The couloir is indeed what Beckey's guidebook terms a "natural line," but it is so wide and complex that choices, of the kind usually associated with large-face climbs, are unavoidable. Twice we diverged to one side or the other. It was on the second such occasion that our disagreements began. Leonard wanted to attempt the right wall to avoid an icy section straight ahead, which I knew could be climbed. "We're not here to show off our technique on ice," he said. They were the sharpest words that had ever passed between us. Roger, as usual, said nothing at all. He just coiled the rope and waited for us to get down to business, telling us what a privilege it was to be part of such a great climb. I will not quote him: reduced to print, his words would sound fatuous. Animated by the openness of his

personality, they were—genuinely—inspiring.

We did the wall. Leonard led the first pitch, Roger the second. And we made good progress, I admit that. We could see the confluence of the couloir with the crack systems above. They looked tremendously inviting: sharp, clean granite, built for climbing. But by now cloud and drizzle had turned into cold rain, and only a few hundred feet above, it was snowing. Yes, at this point it might have been "in order" to descend. Yet the possibility was not even mentioned. Remember that, as you grudgingly concede, we were an experienced and well-equipped party. And the more forbidding the conditions, the stronger Roger appeared.

It was during my next lead that the weather, and with it our summit prospects, began to deteriorate sharply. The clouds enveloped us, and the water began icing into verglas. As soon as Leonard and Roger reached my belay stance, we paused to take stock. Although uncomfortable, our situation did not seem dangerous. We had the tools and the strength for adversity: the only question was whether the summit was worth the freezing effort. Wet snow was gathering on the ropes. My feet stayed warm in their Kastinger boots, but my fingertips were numb from the last pitch. Leonard's beard, which had been graying for several years, was dotted white with flakes. Perhaps, had we been by ourselves, we would have turned back. A half-dozen rappels into the mist would have returned us to the lake. But there was Roger, pulsing with eagerness and energy. "My goodness, John, the top can't be more than 600 feet up," he said, with a kind of childish longing. Six hundred feet might have been 6,000 in those conditions; but it would have been cruel to deny him.

The weather was deceptive. A wind came up, chilling us to the bone (no exaggeration) yet momentarily dispersing the clouds. Leonard said, "Well, folks, I think we've lucked out." We did climb two quick pitches, but then the clouds

closed in once more. We felt past the point of no return.

... Richard, I am returning to this account after a lapse of several hours. If I let these memories accumulate, they become unbearable. I spent the interval wandering, if that is the word, around this small apartment that I rented last winter. I have had to start a new life. But first I must make peace with the old one. I can't tell you how difficult it has been to perform even casual consulting, although many schools and foundations have requested my services. (Please do not, of course, print this paragraph.)

Although the resumption of the storm was very abrupt, it was some time before we felt its full impact. After belaying Leonard, I tried to get to my feet and nearly stumbled off the mountain. My toes had lost all sensation. We were so caught up in our resolve—and also, I suppose, in our unspoken anxieties—that we had not noticed how the clouds had returned and the temperature had dropped: to twenty degrees, I would estimate. The wind turned vicious. Even Roger looked a little worried. His forehead, caked with snow and ice below his climbing helmet, was creased by lines I had never seen. At this point, with scarcely a word being said, he assumed the lead. Your criticism on this matter, while more muted than some I have heard, still requires comment. Although the least experienced, Roger was the strongest in the party. Leonard and I were already fatigued, even though it was scarcely noon (everything seemed timeless in that gray-white). Our clothes were weighted with ice, our muscles had lost resiliency. No doubt the night drive from Portland had been more draining than we had realized. Once we had made such trips quite casually: leave Friday evening, taking turns at sleep, and head back late Sunday. Middle age arrives unannounced, as you must have noticed some time ago. I envied Roger his youth. I admit it.

We had emerged from the couloir onto the face

proper. Under ordinary conditions, the terrain would have been exhilarating, but everything had turned hideously slippery, especially the slabs—friction moves without any friction! At my suggestion Roger chopped nicks up an icy groove, thus avoiding a chimney that was spraying water like a broken fire hydrant. He was absolutely calm the whole way.

Considering the swirling snow, the verglas, and the gusting wind, we made amazing progress. The ridgecrest and the end of the hard climbing were soon very near. All possible routes had converged on a single, vertical crack. It was just the right size for fist jams, but clogged with snow and icy water. Roger managed the first thirty feet with remarkable agility; you might have thought him on warm practice rocks some Sunday afternoon. He paused to place a chock for protection, adding a wired stopper a little higher up. And then, after a short struggle that gained him no more than three feet, he came to a complete stop. The crack had become too narrow to jam, so he tried using his fingers in opposition. Through the blowing snow I could see the soles of his boots scraping against the rock. Leonard and I shouted encouragement into the wind. We knew that if Roger could not succeed, neither could we. The prospect of rappelling 1,200 feet down icy ropes was horrible: we had to reach the ridgecrest and thence the descent route. But all we really wanted was for Roger to complete his climb—for it was now truly his.

And, of course, he did succeed, by any reasonable definition, in spite of his fall. It seemed innocuous at the time, like a little jump or a slide: I scarcely felt it on the belay. The only hint of trouble was an uncharacteristic outburst of cursing. (There was no "cry of pain," Richard. He was very stoical in his boyish way.) He did not interrupt his struggle for an instant. The scraping of his boots sounded desperate, but somehow he propelled himself upward. He was fifteen feet above his last protection when he reached a foot-

wide ledge and easier ground at last. Leonard and I were too overwhelmed to cheer. And we did not know that his ankle was broken.

Naturally we felt tremendous relief to have reached the summit ridge, even with the wind screaming in our faces. It was coming right out of the ocean. (I read in the Seattle papers that it was the worst September blizzard they had had up there in years.) There could be no thought of proceeding to the summit, which was invisible in the swirling clouds somewhere, up to our right. Even Roger showed no interest in it; yet he betrayed no hint of injury. You can have no conception, Richard, what Roger was like in those moments. He reminded me of Andrew Irvine, only twenty-two when he was lost with Mallory on Everest.

We prepared for the descent of the Southeast Flank: 400 feet of gentle snowfields, followed by a rock outcrop, steep but broken, then more snowfields leading to the Morris Glacier. We would have little trouble circling back to Hidden Lake, in any weather. A bivouac seemed unavoidable, but by then we would be past any technical difficulties. In high spirits despite the overwhelming blasts of wind, we crouched behind a boulder to have some mincemeat, cheese, and a little of our remaining hot tea.

With our only ice axe, I took up the rear for the descent. The first steps revealed Roger's condition. He started to lead down the snowslope and collapsed, clutching his left ankle. Even before we removed his boot we could feel the blood seeping through the thick wool socks. It took some time to staunch the flow, which warmed our hands horrifyingly, and we feared he would go into shock. We depressed his head and wrapped him in all our spare clothing. (I say "we," but Leonard was too disordered to be much help. The most he could do was follow my instructions.)

We will never know whether Roger's fracture was originally compound or became so when he tried to step down on it. In either case he was a

seriously injured man. Given the storm and Leonard's emotional state, it was hard to make plans. All Leonard could do was pound the snow with his boots and say, "Goddamnit all to hell." There was no way to get Roger down by ourselves: one of us would have to stay with him while the other went for help. Leonard insisted the Vancouver Buttress was the fastest way. I told him that rappelling by oneself in the teeth of a blizzard would be not only risky but time consuming. What if he should hang up a rope and be marooned? Or be unable to find an anchor point under the new snow? I knew I could get down the Southeast Flank nearly as fast and with certain success. But Leonard could only scream, "We have to get help fast!" as though the point were in dispute. "It's worth a few minutes to make the right decision," I told him, as calmly as I could. "Guys, I'm real sorry about this," Roger said. He was apologizing for breaking his ankle! And Leonard and I were quarreling like children. I felt ashamed of us both.

It is an outlandish distortion to say that we "agreed" that Leonard would take the Vancouver while I remained with Roger. Rather, I was overwhelmed by his near-lunatic intransigence. "It's the fastest way, Goddamnit to hell!" I can still hear that irrational fire alarm of a voice. There was no agreement, Richard, as I thought I had made clear: no agreement. Leonard merely tore off with the ice axe and both our ropes. Soon he was out of sight in the raging storm. I don't think he even shouted goodbye.

Since Leonard's vow to have a rescue party by the next day was pure fancy, I steeled myself for a long wait. It was midafternoon Friday; we would be lucky to have help by Sunday morning. Although Roger seemed peaceful, I could sense his pain; despite the codeine I had given him. He swallowed a little of the tea but could keep down no food. He was wearing his down jacket, a once-gaudy yellow, with mine wrapped around his legs and Leonard's pillowing his head. He talked

cheerfully for a while, about Jeanine and his plans for graduate school; then he subsided into a sleep that I hoped, unrealistically, would be restorative. It grew dark, in that eerie way of whiteouts: the gray dimming out imperceptibly. Finally even the enveloping cloud was lost in its own darkness. The snow gradually abated, but the wind tore into us: those few boulders were no avail against it. After twelve years of climbing with nothing worse than a sprained wrist, I could hardly believe what was happening. I wondered what our mishap would look like in print, but the worst I expected was a tedious and expensive rescue, not the tragedy that ensued. (I had always read those reports of yours, Richard, as chronicles of the vast imprudence of other people.)

Too cold and anxious for sleep, I tried to hurry the night. Of course, I only retarded it. The storm had passed; a huge array of stars, icy and indescribably remote, glittered in the west. The wind had died down, but it was very cold. We were over 12,000 feet, remember. Since Roger had all the warm clothes, the best I could do was keep close to him for warmth. For a time I was reassured by the regularity of his breathing, but then he began to toss and thrust aside the down jackets. He was impervious to my words of caution, unreachable. He stared to talk, but not to me. If there was one thing he seemed, Richard, it was mean tempered. Yes, Roger, who had probably never uttered a disagreeable word in his adult life. He was using obscenities whose sound would have sickened him. I am amazed that he was even acquainted with them. Oh, I knew the symptoms, knew what they meant—hypothermia, that cold beyond cold, when the blood can no longer warm the body and the mind seeks refuge in delusion. Already I had kept the "patient" as warm as his restlessness would permit. But hot liquids? We had no stove, and when I pressed the thermos cup to his lips he shoved me off as though I were an assailant. His speech was only intermittently intelligible. Once I even imagined

I heard, "You bastards dragged me up here." Such ravings clearly meant the onset of a crisis. But, as you must see, there was not a thing I could do for him. Richard, I tried—tried pouring words instead of tea into that incessantly tossing young body: "If you ever want to see Jeanine again . . . If you want to have children . . ." Finally: "If you ever want to climb again . . ." Nothing worked: he was already in some other world.

Just before dawn I started down the Southeast Flank. Contrary to some insinuations, I was not thinking of my own safety. I was secure where I was, and without any ropes (Leonard had them both, you recall) the Flank was a hazardous undertaking. But Roger could not survive another night on the mountain. To have remained would have been to abandon him. For all I knew, Leonard was marooned somewhere on the Vancouver, which he had so heedlessly attempted. Despite my sleepless night I expected to manage the Flank quickly and easily. If only it had been I and not Leonard who had left the day before! Pure speculation, Richard, I know. Irrelevant to the Reports, you say? But surely everything that is not fact is hypothesis, including your own remarks about the retreat we did not make. And it is fact that I reached the highway only a few hours after Leonard. The Vancouver had been slow going indeed.

The snow had melted along the road, leaving it a shiny black. It felt incongruously like spring. At the ranger station Leonard looked very busy, pacing about and hovering by the telephone, but he was actually doing nothing. He looked shocked to see me. I gave my report and went back outside into the warming afternoon. Even before the helicopter set down, I knew that Roger was gone. I had felt the very moment of his death, just as I jumped the last of the little crevasses leading to the moraine near the bottom of the Flank.

In a sense none of this matters now. He has been dead almost a year. My life has reverberated with his absence. My own reputation means

nothing to me. Nevertheless, if anything is to be learned from this sad episode, it can only be on the basis of truth. The Accident Reports, in spite of their many failings and omissions, remain the official record as far as the climbing community is concerned. I rely upon you to let me set that record straight.

Sincerely yours,
John Bassett

1939 Warren St.
Portland
August 19, 1989

Dear Rich,

Well, I'm sure you were right to send me John's letter, but I didn't enjoy reading it one hell of a lot. The poor guy has some pretty queer ideas about what happened last year, and I don't think anybody can straighten him out. He's got too damn much invested in seeing things his way—and having everybody else see them that way too. You know he copied that letter, most of it anyway, to the whole goddamn Alpine Club board. He even sent it to Roger's parents! God knows what they thought of it. As far as John goes—well, I'm sorry for the poor bastard, even though he's no friend of mine anymore. You've heard that his wife left him soon after the accident, though he claims he was the one who went off. I feel sympathetic, having lately been through that little ordeal myself. But you get over it, you know. Well, maybe not John. From what I hear, he doesn't go near the mountains anymore.

What can I say about that damn letter? It's funny the way he calls us "my party." Sir John Hunt himself! And that talk about my gray hair! He really thought we were a pair of has-beens. I can't recognize half the things he claims to remember, but I sure do recall him saying that we

had lucked out. Not that it makes much difference, and maybe he didn't put it quite that way. You would think he had a tape recorder shoved up his ass. He's trying to look so damned encyclopedic, but he never admits that the helicopter did get to Roger on Saturday, and not so late Saturday at that. As for his description of my "emotional state," if anybody was in a state, he was—the sight of Roger's fouled-up ankle seemed to drive him crazy. First he was raving, then stubborn and irrational. Sure, I was a bit worked up myself. Who wouldn't have been, with the poor guy injured like that and the snow whirling around like a tornado.

Hell, Rich, I would have been happy to let John be the one to go for help, by any goddamn route he wanted. But all he could do was talk, like he was at some kind of committee meeting. He kept staring at Roger and babbling. Finally I had to take off. If I hadn't, we would still be up there today, I swear. He should have just trusted me and stayed where he was. That was certainly the idea, whether we actually said it or not.

The Vancouver was the obvious, direct route for a single climber with no load. John never gave me a chance to tell him what had slowed me up. Even at the inquest he wouldn't listen to me—I guess he had already settled on his own version of things. He kept buttonholing the coroner, a complete stranger, and never looked my way. The technical problems of the Vancouver didn't bother me at all. I had climbed it twice and been down it once before, so I knew exactly what I was tackling. Those four rappels didn't take me much more than an hour. But down below, where I expected easy going, the snow was over my knees. The storm had been much heavier on that side. I had to bivouac. Plowing through that stuff took hours the next day. I must have looked pretty desperate when I hit the highway—the first car I flagged down took me over to Portal. We got the rescue started immediately, but it was already much too late.

Of course, I was shocked to see John—he was supposed to be up on the mountain, with the kid. I never expected all those reporters! Maybe I said some hasty words. The blizzard was big news up there, and we were just a part of it. There was the whole business about Roger being abandoned. The papers had to make a hero out of him. Why couldn't they just call him what he was—a good climber, a decent guy whose luck ran out? I don't want to accuse John of anything, but I can't get over the way he makes himself out so calm and thoughtful. He must have been the one who was hallucinating that night, not Roger. Nothing anybody says will make any difference to him, but if you print his side of the picture, please do the same for mine.

Keep the faith,
Len

P.S. I just got back from Alaska, or I would have written sooner. Went to the Ruth Gorge with Tom Gregory and a bunch of young guys from California. I kept up with them fine, and we did two good new routes. Tom's writing them up for the Alpine Journal. John Bassett would never have tried anything that size. Our big plans for the Andes were never more than talk. You know, I never learned much from John, because he always took the best ice pitches for himself.

By the way, I was born in 1950, not 1949. John forgot, or I never had the heart to tell him.

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RICHARD MCMANUS SAT IN HIS OFFICE WHILE THE October wind shook its high windows. He wanted to start work on the 1989 Reports, and here was Mt. Aspera clinging like an illness from the year before. The correspondence, spread out on his desk, had become so distasteful he could scarcely look at it: the unreconciled letter from the boy's mother and the oddly serene one from his

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fiancée; the garish newspaper clippings; the police reports.

The mother's letter was troubling. Her religion had evidently failed to provide much consolation for the loss of her only son, and she even hinted at legal action against "the men who left my boy to die in the cold." The Accident Report, she claimed, had left the blame vague and diffused. Didn't the woman know that mountains are dangerous? What was the use, now, of saying any more? Let the dead lie in peace, and the living contend with their consciences.

McManus gazed out the window at the Common below. People were hurrying across it in the approaching darkness, their coats bellied out by the wind. "An Olympian tone"—how Bassett's phrase rankled! Fifteen years of editing the reports, of analyzing calamities in order to prevent their repetition, of—usefully, unavoidably—judging. Surely he had never been less than fair. The Mt. Aspera episode was the most disturbing he had encountered: two experienced climbers blaming each other in this unseemly, almost public way, when any beginner could see that both had betrayed their responsibilities—to the young man, to the world of climbing. And both had belonged to the Club—although Bassett, McManus noted with relief, had not paid his 1989 dues and could soon be quietly dropped from the rolls.

It was time to shut the books on this sorry affair.

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25 Gladd St.
Boston, Mass. 02108
October 3, 1989

Dear John, Dear Leonard:

I hope you will forgive my linking your names this one last time: what little I have to say applies to you equally. I see no purpose in trying to adjudicate your conflict, much less in printing any part of it in the Reports. The whole episode has already received too much publicity, largely of the sensational kind characteristic of the popular press. I will, of course, retain your letters for our files; they may one day have historical interest. For the present, I urge that the matter be dropped. No one is served by its prolongation.

The Club has established a Roger Close Memorial Fund—the interest to go annually to "a promising young climber of good character from the state of Utah." This is the first time such an honor has been accorded to a nonmember. I had hoped to engage at least one of you in the administration of the Fund, but after contacting the family I find such involvement inappropriate. I know, however, that you will wish to be contributors. Checks may be sent to the Club office, made out to the Fund as above. Since Roger was held in such very high regard, the Board expects a considerable sum to be raised.

Sincerely yours,
Richard W. McManus