

JOHN SMELCER

Savage Mountain

Brothers Sebastian and James Savage have summited at 16,237 feet on Mount Sanford in Alaska's interior, and are on their way back down.

The tent walls were flailing hard when the boys awoke. They took their time getting up, their muscles stiff and sore. Both had headaches from mild dehydration. After a leisurely breakfast of pancakes, powdered eggs, and instant coffee, Sebastian got dressed and crawled out from the tent and stretched.

He stood on the ledge and surveyed the world.

The cloud cover seemed denser than it had been the day before. Sebastian studied their ascent route, which looked less perilous than the knife-sharp ridge they had climbed the day before. The snowy slope was steep, but not technical, meaning that it could be climbed without establishing a main line with pitons. He couldn't see what lay above the slope, but he knew from the map that they'd be within a couple thousand feet of the summit once they got beyond whatever lay hidden from view. His only concern was the snow load, which looked heavy. He could see an overhang at the top and where little avalanches had already slid down the chutes and runnels, natural gullies that channeled avalanches like a riverbed.

James crawled out from the tent and stood beside his brother on the narrow ledge, looking at the perilous 3,000-foot drop.

"First step's a doozy," he joked.

"That's for sure," replied Sebastian.

"Whew! Chilly," said James, pulling on his wool cap over his ears.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked.

"I think we can summit today. We'll work our way over there, around that snow chute, and then cross over to there," replied Sebastian, tracing their proposed route in the air with his index finger. "Once we make it above this slope, we should be able to reach the summit in an hour or two."

"We gonna pack up camp?" asked James.

"No. We'll leave it here. We should be able to make summit and climb back down just in time for dinner, with maybe an hour or two to spare. We'll travel light and fast, carrying our packs with just our climbing gear and some quick-energy snacks."

"Speaking of lightening the load," said James, unzipping his pants and whizzing over the edge, the stream of pee traveling over half a mile to the bottom of the cliff.

Sebastian joined him.

Once again, a rope connected the two brothers, who stopped often to catch their breath, leaning over their ice axes, beholding the amazing scene below.

“Hey,” he said with a grin. “I bet we’re setting a world record for the longest pee.”

James laughed.

Leaving the tent set up with the sleeping bags, pads, cooking stove and pot, stainless-steel dishes and utensils, food, and extra clothes inside, the boys struck out for the summit. They used their ice axes to help as they made their way up the slope through deep snow. Once again, a rope connected the brothers, who stopped often to catch their breath, leaning over their ice axes, beholding the amazing scene below. At almost 14,000 feet, they were above the neighboring mountains as well as the clouds on the horizon.

The view was spectacular, but time was too short to spend on sightseeing.

Suddenly, a loud rumble bellowed from above. Both brothers looked up just in time to see a wall of snow coming at them down the chute.

“Use your ax!” Sebastian shouted, dropping to his knees and planting his ice ax into the snow and hanging on for dear life.

James managed to use his ax just in time.

But their actions were futile against the wall of snow thundering toward them. The avalanche engulfed the brothers, tumbling them head over heels down the high

ridge for a thousand feet. Sebastian still gripped his ice ax, but it was worse than useless, more likely to impale him than to aid him. When he finally came to rest, Sebastian was only partially buried. He had lost his wool cap and one of his gloves. After pulling himself out of the compacted snow, he looked around and discovered he was only a couple hundred feet from the edge of the precipice. Then he looked for his brother. James was nowhere to be seen on the jumbled field of snow.

“James! James!” he yelled in a dizzy panic, frantically looking in every direction and digging snow out from his ears and nose.

Sebastian felt for the rope around his waist. It was still tied securely, which meant that his brother might still be on the other end. He grabbed the rope and began to yank. As each foot of the rope emerged from the snow, he followed it. In some places the rope was buried a couple feet deep and Sebastian had to yank hard to pull it out.

Occasionally, he’d stop, shout for his brother, and blow the shrill whistle hanging from his parka zipper. But he heard nothing except the wind. Sebastian knew that with every passing minute his brother, buried somewhere in the haphazard snowfield, could be freezing to death—or worse, suffocating.

Feverishly, Sebastian yanked out the rope until finally, sixty feet from where he had pulled himself free, he felt the weight of his brother beneath him. He quickly removed the shovel from his pack and began to dig his brother out.

“I’m here! Hold on!” he screamed as he dug, careful not to strike his brother with the sharp blade of the shovel.

While digging, Sebastian wondered what he would tell his parents if he didn’t come home with his brother. How would he tell them that his frozen corpse was buried somewhere on the side of a mountain?

Finally, almost three feet deep, Sebastian saw the red of his brother’s parka. Using his bare hands, he kept digging until he was able to pull James upright, his lower body still buried. James opened his eyes.

“Wha ... what ... to-took ... you ... s-so ... long?” he said through chattering teeth.

Wrapping his arms beneath both armpits, Sebastian pulled James out from the snowy grave. He had lost both of his gloves, his cap, and his ice ax. His parka hood was packed with snow, and the force of the avalanche had

pulled his snow pants down around his ankles, kept on only by the bulky bunny boots. His blue jeans were soaking wet.

James was shivering uncontrollably.

Sebastian had to get his brother back to their tent quickly if he was going to save him. He knew the dangers of hypothermia. A year before, he and James had spent a week enduring an Arctic survival training course during January, the coldest time of the year. Temperatures reached fifty below zero for much of the week. The instructors had shown movies about the effects of hypothermia, replete with footage of people whose hands or feet, nose or ears were so frozen that they would have to be amputated. Sebastian remembered vividly the images of grotesquely swollen blackening toes and fingers, engulfed in huge blisters called *blebs*. One of the first symptoms of hypothermia is disorientation and the inability to speak clearly or to make sense. The incapacity to think rationally is also symptomatic of the onset of hypothermia, as the body begins to freeze from the outside inward. Shivering is one of the body's only defenses. But it's a feeble defense against such bone-cracking cold. In its attempt to save the brain and the heart, the body shuts down everything that is not vital to survival.

The history of mountaineering is littered with tales of hypothermic victims, many of whom have been found frozen to death with much of their clothing removed, as if they were overheating. The truth is, they were so cold that their body no longer felt anything, and they misinterpreted the lack of sensation as no longer needing their coats and hats and gloves. In their delirium, many victims have simply walked off the side of a mountain into oblivion. Some report having suffered bizarre hallucinations. Many climbers who have lost a finger, a toe, or a bit of an ear to frostbite wear their wounds like a badge of honor, proof of their near-death experience and tenacity in the face of extreme hardship and peril.

A few years earlier, while snowmobiling on a cold day, Sebastian had suffered frostbite on the skin between his eyebrows and the bridge of his nose. The skin had never fully healed and likely never would.

Fearing for his brother's life, Sebastian acted quickly.

He pulled up his brother's snow pants, brushed the snow away from inside his parka hood, and pulled it over his brother's head, making sure it was on securely. He

rooted through both packs for extra gloves. The whole time he spoke to James to keep him awake.

"Stay with me," he said, gently slapping his brother's red cheeks. "I'm gonna get you back to camp. You're gonna be alright."

Then he lifted James to his feet, steadying him until he could balance on his own.

Sebastian tied one end of a short piece of rope around his brother's waist and the other around his own. Mustering all his strength, he short-roped his brother, leading the way and pulling James whenever he lagged behind, trying to coax him back to camp. Sometimes he had to fall back and half carry him. On several occasions, James lost his balance, fell face-down into the snow, and lay there, not even trying to get up.

"Get up! You gotta help me!" Sebastian shouted above the wind while standing over his brother.

"I just wanna sleep here for a while," James replied wearily, his voice raspy.

"You can't sleep now," said Sebastian, struggling to pull James to his feet. "I can't carry you. You have to walk. Get up!"

It took almost an hour for the two to get back to their tent on the precarious ledge. Once inside, Sebastian stripped James of his boots and crampons and wet clothes and helped him into his sleeping bag, placing his own bag on top for added warmth. He heated water for hot tea to warm their insides. The cooking stove warmed the small tent, but Sebastian knew he couldn't let it burn for too long. The carbon monoxide fumes could kill them just as surely as the cold.

James slept for several hours while Sebastian read his book, stopping frequently to check on his brother. More and more, he sympathized with Hamlet's circumstance. Who could he talk to? Who could he trust? What power did he have, if any, to change the way things were? And worse of all: Was death the only escape?

Finally, James opened his eyes and sighed.

"What happened?" he asked, looking around, confused.

"We got caught in an avalanche. You were buried for half an hour before I found you."

"I remember seeing the avalanche coming at me," said James, licking his dry lips. "I vaguely remember waking up and realizing that I was buried. I couldn't move at all.

It was like I was in cement. I remember thinking I was going to die.”

“Well, you didn’t, Bro, not yet,” Sebastian said with a smile.

“Now we’re even,” said James. “I saved your life and you saved mine.”

James pulled his hands out from the sleeping bag and studied them, wiggling his fingers and balling his fists.

“They’re okay,” said Sebastian, understanding his brother’s concern. “I got you back here in the nick of time.”

James put his hands back inside the warm sleeping bag.

“So, what do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” replied Sebastian, looking at his wrist-watch. “You’re in no shape to climb right now, and, besides, it’s too late to make another summit attempt today. Besides, we need to decide if we even want to keep on going.”

“Because of me?” asked James.

Sebastian nodded but added, “That too.”

“I feel okay. A bit tired still.”

“But why should we go on at all?” Sebastian asked, while he poured a cup of hot tea and handed it to his brother. “I mean, what are we risking our lives for? We both could have died. Maybe next time we won’t be so lucky. We could just head back down and go home.”

James took a long drink of tea before responding.

“Because of Dad,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Because we *need* to.”

Neither brother spoke for a minute. Outside, the wind was raging. Sebastian worried the pitons might come loose or the guy-lines snap, sending the tent right off the mountain.

“Just for once, I wish he’d be proud of us, you know what I mean?” Sebastian said, loud enough to be heard above the machine-gun rattle of the tent walls flapping in the barbarous wind. “I’ve done everything to make him proud of me, and I don’t even know why. He’s a jerk. Why should I care? Why am I risking my life to prove something to him?”

“Because he’s our father,” replied James.

“Yeah,” Sebastian said softly, looking down at the tent floor strewn with packs and clothes and gear.

“So, what are we gonna do?” asked James, trying to rally his brother. “Let the bastard win, or show him what we’re made of? We’re more men than that bastard any day.”

Sebastian was impressed by his brother’s enthusiasm, especially after surviving the avalanche. “I say we keep going. Let’s eat, hydrate, get a good night’s sleep, and boogie up this mother in the morning—that is, if this wind lets up,” he said, listening to the tempest outside. “What do you want for dinner: dehydrated Chili Mac or Top Ramen?” Sebastian asked, holding up two packets.

“I vote for noodles,” said James, remembering what happened after eating chili the last time.

Savage Mountain is **John Smelcer**’s fiftieth book. His other award-winning novels include *The Trap*, *The Great Death*, *Lone Wolves*, and *Edge of Nowhere*. The 25th Anniversary Edition of *The Raven & the Totem* is also forthcoming in summer 2015.