

Russell's a Glory-Seeker

Russell enjoyed rustic tours. He loved to feel blood slamming through his ventricles and skin prickling up in excitement. To repeat an experience was to waste valuable time. No one lived forever.

He awoke to a burning sensation on his right side; so hot it was cold. He peeled his sleeve away and some of his skin came with it. While he slept, the steel door of the helicopter had cooked him alive. His neck stung too. Russell found that the blue nylon seatbelt had carved such a deep trench into his skin that hot blood pooled out and scabbed around it, fusing them together. He pulled it away anyway, accidentally biting through his lip with his canines.

The dangling helicopter in which he was trapped hung vertically with its landing skids lodged between the wall of the mountain and a jutting tree trunk. Russell had a first-class view of the fatal drop down the valley of the Kohala Mountains. He wondered what the tour guide would have said here. Would he have stayed in character? Would he have mentioned the wild cows and described how the jutting topography came to be?

Moments before a rogue gust of wind sent them reeling into the cliff, the pilot/tour guide had been smiling and cracking dry jokes that sent the old folks behind him into a fit of laughter. The pilot was gone now. He must have taken out the windshield on his way down because the cockpit was empty and the windshield a gory mess.

There used to be three live passengers in the backseat: an older man, his wife and her sister. Their names escaped him now. Russell reached back and shook the man by his limp shoulder. His forehead was cut but otherwise he looked intact. Unfortunately, he wasn't drawing breath. The two women wouldn't be missing him. They weren't breathing either.

Russell daren't make too much commotion. If he did, he risked changing the weight distribution dislodging the skids. The whole helicopter would fall down the cliff with him strapped inside it. *What a wild ride that would be!*

The radio and intercom system was a mess of smoldering circuitry. He saw no sense in trying to repair it, especially with one arm burned so badly that he couldn't wiggle his fingers. He thought he might try climbing down to the basin if he were a younger man without a melted limb. Climbing up to the top was simply impossible. There were no footholds and the cliff actually moved outward toward the top meaning the climber must defy gravity in two ways. Russell thought about each option in turn. They all ended in tragedy.

I should wait here for rescue, he thought with disappointment. *No sense trying anything stupid.*

All his life he'd waited for a moment like this, to be a survivor, to do something grand and miraculous that made other men wonder, *would I have been able to do what Russell Larsen did?*

He'd heard stories of men sawing off their own limbs to escape a fallen tree. The story of Alive especially struck him; where the men had to eat their comrades for sustenance. Russell thought desperately of ways to escape the helicopter without assistance.

A faint click came from his seatbelt clasp. *Was it not clicked the whole time?* He realized a second later that it was just the opposite...

The belt released at once and Russell's stomach flew into his throat. He stretched his arms and legs to their full extension and hit the spider-webbed windshield. The glass supported Russell's weight but its cracks fanned outward. Russell reached up and grabbed the seatbelt and circled it around his arm three times.

The glass gave way. Russell fell out of the helicopter awkwardly and shards gouged his chest, legs and back on his way down. He fell to the length of the seatbelt and felt a violent jerk on his arm. The torque pulling something in his shoulder and may have dislocated the joint.

Out in the open air, Russell heard only wind and water falling. He swung by his burned arm with hundreds of feet of freedom below him. His stomach stayed in his throat, his heart fluttered, his arm went numb but the shoulder felt as if it could detach at any moment. Russell's eyes were coated with painful microscopic glass chips the cut him each time his gaze shifted.

Russell smiled and began to kick his feet like a child on a swing set. He made himself swing in wide circles fixing his poor eyes on meandering valley streams, secret ledges full of roiling mist and soaring white birds whose proper names he'd forgotten. He didn't even listen to what the tour guides said these days. If you couldn't jump from it, shoot at it, swim in it, or catch and eat it, he didn't care.

Receiving the thrill he paid for and more, he decided to make an attempt at glory. It was within his grasp now. Russell reached upward with his free hand to grab the seatbelt. One pull-up and he could get his feet hooked into the helicopter window and get back inside. *That would be a fantastic story! Dangling in a freefall, with my last ounce of strength, I managed to...* His arm slipped from the seatbelt mid-thought and he fell silently, refusing to scream as the fall tickled his insides. He joined the pilot at the bottom of the valley, not unhappy.

