

CHAPTER 1

LLEFT STERNS at 4:00 a.m., taking the dry wash north under stars banked heavy and distant in the sky. The bed was sand, gravel, and fist-sized smoothed nodules of granite and gneiss, the sand sides of the arroyo a darker shadow at each side, cutting the stars. For the first half hour I concentrated on my footing, half-stumbling a few times on watermelon rocks working their way toward the town. My pack always feels awkward during the first hour or so of walk, but I can make small adjustments on the straps and belt without pausing, working my shoulders against the load till it settles in, and clear my balance's acceptance of the new geometry without thinking much about it. The sky gradually lightened, and the silhouettes of mesquite and ocotillo mixed with yucca became more distinct. The raw form of The Moon filled a quarter of the skyline before me.

Three days passed in such a way: walk from 4:00 a.m. till after lunch, sometimes late into the afternoon, supper, sleep, and awake again, till The Moon took up half the sky, and the way began to

grow steep. I eat very little, and tea or water is my only drink, save for a sip of brandy at sunset. There is little need for shelter as one approaches The Moon, and my camps were the plainest. Water becomes no problem after the fourth day, for The Moon seeps light tears down its slopes in small springs. Higher on The Moon the wind can be an enemy.

It is not uncommon for canyons which appear to open the heart of a mountain to a walker to show resistance once the walker enters in. They narrow, throw down great boulders and raise dry waterfalls, sometimes moss wet in shade, and choke themselves with brush. My canyon was not uncommon, and did these things. Half a day in, I chose to leave the canyon and climb the east ridge, which, though waterless, permits advance, and clarifies the spirit with its view.

The ridge rose steeply for the rest of the day, then leveled as the sun set. I camped a mile farther on, where an outcrop fifty feet high posed its own problem in the growing dark, and a small group of pine offered their music in the air.

My name is Gasper, William Gasper, and I do nothing for a living but live, simply. My family is undistinguished, and my background ordinary. I prefer walking alone to all other steady activities. Doubtless such a vocation reflects a social inadequacy in my personality. However, since I have nothing to contribute to society of much worth, save an icy mind, I can imagine myself only a laborer or small clerk, a servitor as I was to

the military. It has never been of any importance to me to seek a means by which I might be more comfortable with others or others with me. I have walked in many places over the years, happy with my choice. For the past five years I have walked The Moon time and again, and no urge has come in me, as it has in the past, to seek new ground. The Moon suffices.

I once spent two years in the area around Mount Silverthrone and Fang Peak, and enjoyed the sweep of Klinaklini Glacier, but the winters are bad, and the brush a terrible chore, so I came south to The Moon, where the way is clear, in its way.

The night passed, as all my nights do, with dreams only of where I am. It is as though I possess some incorporeal eye which functions alone when I sleep, studying the land about with a dream's intensity, and which then informs my waking mind with a greater knowledge of the terrain than I might suppose was possible. My nights are nearly always such, and the eye works, and I find my way by sure anticipation.

This useful content to the night has kept me hale, though the only dangers walking as I do are wrong confidence, geology, weather, and those occasional objects which tumble out of my past, as unexpected but as natural as the meteors which pierce the night. More than once I have wakened before the first visible sign of a squall, followed my eye's foreseeing, and saved myself from undue wet or cold. Once such prescience saved

me from a rockfall. This is the pretty explanation I offer myself, though wiser souls might rightly claim there is no eye, but only a mind's sleeping consideration of small signs given the day before, openly, but unnoticed. As with most explanations, it is mainly chatter in the quiet, blackbird-words.

It was colder the next dawn, and after tea I scouted the outcropping and found an easy line up it. I climb hard only when I must, though bouldering in the late afternoon after a day's walk is like a little music, playful and relaxing. The crop ran back like a diminishing chevron on the ridge's sleeve; in two miles I might have skirted it, but lost height, and I do not like that. The ridge increased in steepness beyond, bare of much growth. Trees grow on north slopes and deep in canyons here, not where too much sun sucks up the water. On the northern back of The Moon were miles of ponderosa, aspen higher, juniper below. On the south, low brush, rock, mostly rock. I'd rather walk on good rock than grass, though in the north, tundra of the right sort is like kitten backs.

The Moon is the mountain of nowhere, ignored by those who live within sight of it, as well as by those who, in different times, might be fascinated by its isolation and difficulties. It is not a climber's mountain, nor a hunter's. There are some fine walls in two canyons, and half a dozen crags nearly worth the effort; there's some game. But its charms, like certain women's, are not obvious, and reveal themselves only to an occasional misfit.

You know these mountains of Nevada, or the Steens, perhaps. The Moon, as they do, covers itself with anonymity. It is a vague blue blur from the nearest highway, and one must be as devious as a cat to find any approach closer by car. Horseback or afoot, it's too far for what it seems to offer. It is a perfect mountain for our times, caught partly in an alien dimension, as unintelligible as most good novels, and as effortlessly boring to one who skims topographic maps with an eye to excitement. It is a perfect mountain for William Gasper.

I am William Gasper. And if it seems strange that I repeat my introduction so soon, remember that I am as plain as my cooking, have no friends to speak of, and blend, by practice, into any background. I am something like sea-level: a constant always in turmoil, never quite evident from observation. I move even when I sleep, though my name gives me demarcation. I came to Stern five years ago and persuaded Mary-Gail Henry, who runs the cafe there, to rent me the packing case which rests about one hundred yards behind the cafe. I have no knowledge of its original contents, mining equipment probably, but it now contains those personal effects of mine which I do not carry on my back, some score of magazines which I will eventually bequeath to the fire, and other odds and ends which even a scrupulous person may acquire unawares. I do not sleep in the packing case, having eschewed picturesque romanticism some time past, but I sleep beside it. In the worst weather I pitch my tent, but generally

that's a bother. I wash from a pot, and scurry a quarter-mile or so into the desert each morning to take my bowel movement. I piss after a shorter walk. All this, of course, occurs only when I am in residence. But as I told you, my vocation is walking, and Stern sees me no more than a dozen days a year.

How do I eat? The normal way. What you mean is how do I get what I eat. I eat little; my metabolism is happily abstemious, and I am, as are you, of an omnivorous species. But I am without the social conditioning of tastes I know is common to the rest. When I read of the inhabitants of the Danakil or Kalahari, I feel among compatriots: proteins and carbohydrates come in various guises.

I envy the herbivores' ability to digest cellulose, but that is a negligible impediment, given a mind (which I do not doubt). There have been days in which I wished the good Lord, or Whoever-What, had constructed my kidneys so as not to spill so much good water, and, like the kangaroo-rat and certain antelope, to be able to preserve and even metabolize the stuff. But I am what I am, and thankful for it. I have never been ill, or desperate, although that is probably a failing I must encounter eventually. I shall prefer a swift tempest to the body and the kindness of terrible violence, which I have seen take many men. But let that be. I eat what I eat, and there is little meaning in the differences between my diet and yours. My meaning lies in my walking, in my calm, and in The Moon.

By midday I had walked about five miles on the ridge, which had narrowed and steepened. A hawk, minding his ground, had passed overhead silently, and when I turned to look back down the ridge and out over the desert, I could not see Stern, though the hawk could. There was nothing of interest there for either of us, and my debility was not one to be lamented. The ridge was undistinguished save for its view: much talus, thankfully more solid rock, and deepening spaces to either side. Below, to the left, was the canyon I had deserted the day before. The ridge was new. I was growing thirsty, and would have to cut into the mountain in search of water unless I found the old snow bank which my eye had told me clung against the side of a north-facing cliff in a small side canyon. In another mile I had found it, tucked and hidden in a fold of the ridge with some scraggly white bark pine bent and shaped to their staying. In a pocket among the pine I found a nesting spot and decided to stay the night, though it was still early. The ice-heavy snow melted slowly, but tea speaks snow, finally, and the brooding of the leaves in warmth makes home.

I sleep on *The Moon* in a simple bivvy sack. The drip from the snow bank ceases as soon as night comes, the winds maneuver like switch engines among the outcrops, and whine in the short trees. The brilliance is not in the wind, but the stars. And I, William Gasper, listen.

