# Bright Star

EDWARD WEBSTER

*Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art—*
*Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night*
*And watching, with eternal lids apart,*
*Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,*
*The moving waters at their priestlike task of*
*pure abolition round earth's human shores,*
*Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask*
*Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—*
*No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,*
*Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,*
*To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,*
*Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,*
*Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,*
*And so love ever—or else swoon to death.*

*—John Keats*

BIVOUACKED three hundred feet up the side of the Diamond on Long's Peak, I watched the pink hues of evening rise up like vapors from the flat, eastern plains of Colorado and color the brush-stroke clouds upon the horizon. Lights of small ranches and hamlets flickered on in the valley, while the evening star, alone, and first to greet the night, sparkled directly above. Curled up for warmth in my sleeping bag, I relished the timelessness of my solitary view.

My final conversation with Lauren came to mind; only two-and-one-half months had passed in the interim, but our words felt a lifetime away. The memory of our talk stabbed at my heart, but I fended off the pain, protecting the wound from further injury, and recalled instead the tone of her voice, soft, melodic, and idly content.

"Next time we go away on a climbing trip, Ed, let's try to relax a bit more, OK?" Lauren began, "Maybe not do quite so much climbing?"

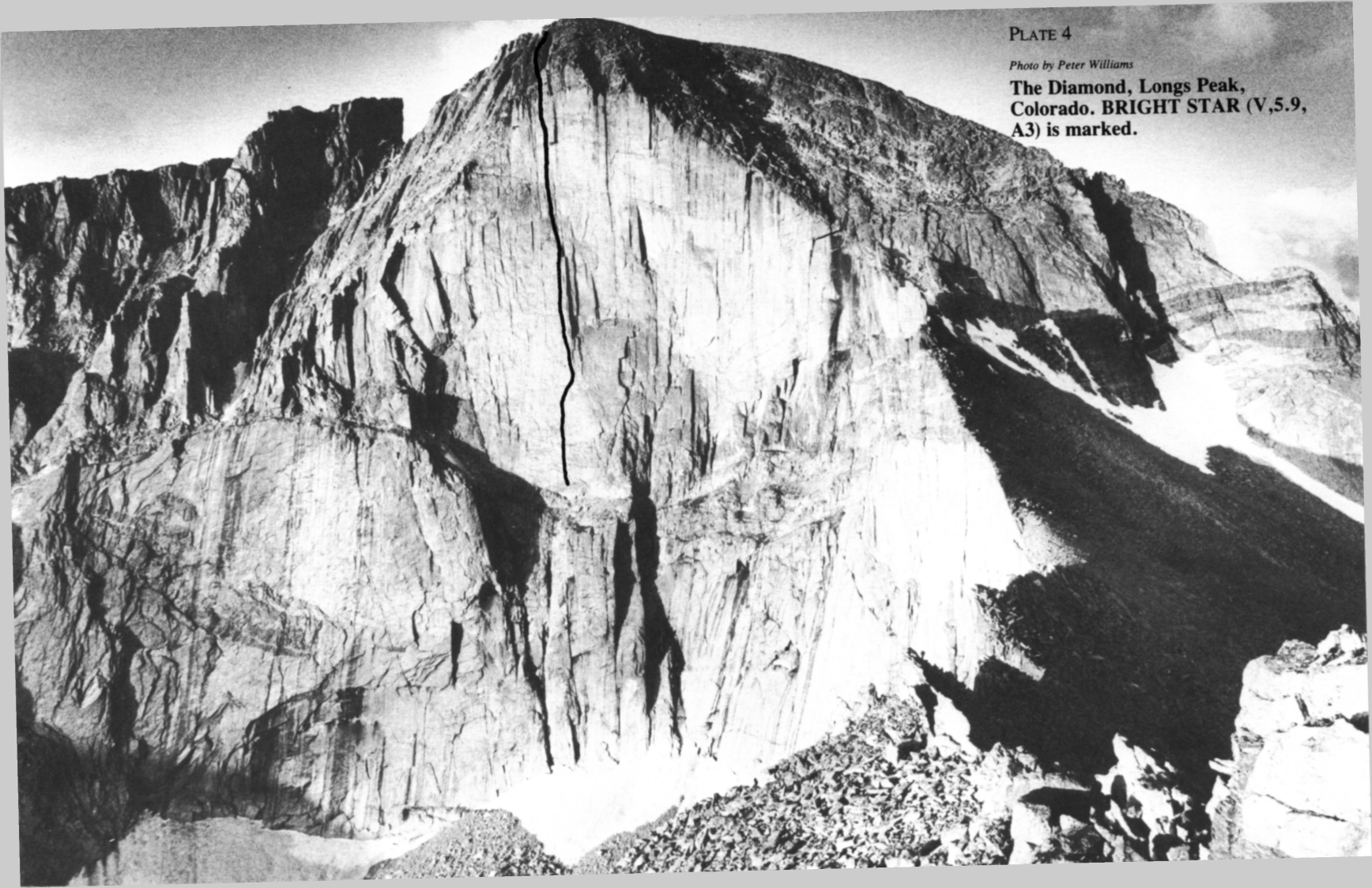

PLATE 4

*Photo by Peter Williams*

**The Diamond, Longs Peak, Colorado. BRIGHT STAR (V,5.9, A3) is marked.**

Her smile was tired. We were both worn out and thirsty after our long climb out of the depths of the Black Canyon.* Sitting beside her, I nodded in agreement. Earlier we had made the mutual decision to continue unroped across the final 200-foot traverse separating us from SOB Gully and the climb's end. Although exposed, across fourth-class ledges, the traverse didn't appear very difficult.

"Maybe we shouldn't do any climbing at all," I said, "We'll have plenty of time to go for hikes in the mountains this summer." It was Lauren's turn to nod approval: she loved the alpine flowers more than anything.

"I wonder what time it is," she speculated, "maybe three o'clock? Wouldn't it be nice to drive home leisurely tonight, and stop by the side of the road for a picnic? Why don't we?"

"Sounds great," I answered, then we paused, sitting silently, catching our breath, looking at each other as only lovers can. Minutes later, I slapped my hands on my knees—"Shall we?" I said, rising.

"Let's go," Lauren answered.

A little over an hour later, as the hot, amber sun sank towards the western rim of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Lauren died, her head cradled lovingly in my lap, her young and athletic body broken after a 200-foot fall. On her face lay the look of an angel, eyes fixed towards heaven. Serene and at peace, her heart quieted and her breathing became imperceptible. Then, moment by engraved moment, all was still and my anguished, tear-filled eyes reached out to understand why and hold her close.

In the past two-and-one-half months the memory of that day had haunted my every living moment. How many times had I relived our last words, the decision to unrope, the traverse across the ledge system, her right hand pulling off the loose handhold, her shout of suprise, the unafraid look on her face, the fall, and her sudden, inexplicable death?

Hanging in a portaledge in the center of a nearly featureless vertical wall at 13,000 feet, I had been driven there by a seemingly unquenchable conflict. How could I find peace in my own life now that she was gone? Tears flowed to my eyes just in forcing my brain to form the question. Life was too tragic, too unfair, and time too relentless. I swallowed hard, trying to deny the past, but couldn't. Lauren had lived each of her twenty-two years with such unbridled vitality that I had resolved to celebrate our year together by soloing a new route on the Diamond. Nothing less would do.

On that fated day, Lauren had been so incredibly strong, and I, so humanly weak. But she didn't have an option, did she, once the wheels had been set in motion? I felt precisely the same way about this climb. And if I perished in the trying? Grief had pushed me beyond the brink of caring.

Fancifully, the climb had existed in my mind's eye for seven years. I had glimpsed the weakness during my first solo of the Diamond, the D1, in 1977 when I was twenty-one years old—an inspired (or was it frustrated?) youth. This summer, remembering the faint vertical crack system, I searched through guidebooks and pictures, looking for that perfect illumination, the sharp contrast of

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* See *Climbs and Expeditions* section.

light and shadow which would dictate whether the climb was in fact reality, or merely a dream.

One night it flashed on me: I had taken a black-and-white print looking up the Diamond from Broadway in 1977. Retrieving the print from a box of old photos, I nearly danced a jig! There it was, the crack system, clear as day.

A week later, Layton Kor materialized on my doorstep one evening like a ghost. For two years we had conversed by phone, but had never met. "Could he come in?" he asked politely. Not recognizing him standing in the darkened doorway, I nearly fell over in astonishment. . . "Please, Layton, come on in!" I stammered, trying to connect this living man with everything I had ever heard or read about him.

Later in the evening I showed him my secret photograph and told him of my plan to do a new route between the Yellow Wall and Grand Traverse. I did not add that I intended to go alone.

"I never noticed that one before," said Layton, his eyes lighting up, his curiosity obviously piqued. "Looks like a nice line, too, doesn't it? Straight up."

The moment's religious intensity hovered in the air, then quietly passed. My endeavor had been blessed by the Master himself: Kor. All I had to do now was climb it.

After a long August monsoon in Colorado, the weather finally cleared in the first week of September. Buttressed by a perfect forecast, three faithful Sherpas—Larry Benson, Denny Eberl, Jan Srodon—and I picked boletus mushrooms, shouldered one hundred pounds of equipment and five days of supplies and headed to Chasm View and the rappels to Broadway.

Strong forces were at work on Long's Peak during the next three days that I spent alone on the wall. Not a single drop, or flake, of precipitation fell. The weather was perfect: clear and crisp, with very little cloud build up. The only danger, in fact, came from missiles of ice, chunks melting out of the summit cracks and whistling down the face in unexpected barrages.

Above the bivouac cave on Broadway, a thin, vertical crack system beckoned skywards. I relearned my favorite technique of rope-soloing, protecting myself with a clove hitch and a figure-of-eight knot as a back-up, clipping both knots to hefty, locking carabiners on my harness. After two time-consuming pitches of A2 to A3, I cut loose from Broadway and set up a hanging bivouac complete with all the modern conveniences—a portaledge, tape deck, gortex bivy sac, the works. At least I would be comfortable!

Everything had gone perfectly so far. It was my turn to be idly content. One crack system had merged with the next in an unbroken chain, and I had overcome an improbable section without bolts.

Day three was tough: five pitches of 5.9 jamming, A3 aid climbing, and hauling the bag got me to the Yellow Wall bivy with a rope fixed to Table Ledge. I was drained. Mechanized, solo, aid climbing was a paradox: on the one hand captivating, on the other, extremely tedious. Climbing alone up a high, alpine wall, there was no room for error. That lesson I had been taught all too sternly. Every few minutes I scanned the horizon searching for a hint of the storm I knew must be lurking stealthily behind Long's Peak. Cold and tired (I had opted not

to carry a stove), I meditated at the Yellow Wall bivy, struggling hard to capture my wandering thoughts and direct them to Lauren, the next day, and the top.

Lauren! Lauren! I was climbing for you. You gave me such unfathomed strength. It is unlikely I ever would have consciously put myself under such duress without such a cause—the celebration of your life. I was no longer the same person I once was.

Looking up from Table Ledge the next morning, I found my stomach churning at the realization of the choice before me: to escape left along Table Ledge (a poor option, alone with a haul bag), or to persevere straight up, through the center of the bank of roofs next to the Yellow Wall finish. I recalled glimpsing an elegant, shining, white crack above the roofs from the guidebook picture and began climbing up in a numbed condition, one placement at a time. After some shaky A3 aid, I belayed directly under the roofs—a wild position to find myself in!

When I swung out around the lip of the roofs, I knew I had it made. A beautiful, straight crack led towards the top. Pennant clouds streamed over Long's jagged crest, as they had all day, adding urgency to my already frantic train of thought.

When I was forty feet below the top, an old climbing friend of mine from Colorado College, Peter Gallagher, peered over the edge and shouted, "Webster! What the hell do you think you're doing up here all alone, you lunatic! The rangers told us to check up on you. Need a hand?"

I had never been so glad in all my life to see other human beings. Peter and his partner, Russ Johnson, helped me get my haul bag up some easy ground, then we descended the north face and split up—they to retrieve their bivouac gear by Chasm Lake, I to hobble back to the ranger station. Carrying my gargantuan sack in the latening day, I was spurred downhill by my success in an endless series of short, agonizing sprints.

Alone again, I watched an immense blanket of clouds steamroll up the back side of Long's Peak, and enshroud the Diamond in a matter of minutes. After four days of perfect weather, the storm had arrived. It began to hail in sheets, each one moving closer towards me, the wraiths of clouds embracing the rocky summit. I glanced back from the trail through the Boulder Field, no longer recognizing the darkened, gloomy wall that I had spent the last four days climbing.

Propping my 80-pound haul bag against a convenient boulder, I sat down and laughed and cried. Only this time, my tears were not from saddness, but rather, from strength. Unseen hands—God's, Lauren's, or both—had just seen me through one of the most positive experiences of my life.

"Life surpasses all," Lauren had written in her beloved journal, "and that is why I want to climb."

So simple and so true! Lauren had known the answer all along: that the only way to live life was intensely and completely, choosing energy over despair. A bright star she was, and shall be everlasting, in my heart and upon the Diamond.

*Summary of Statistics:*

NEW ROUTE: Long's Peak, Colorado. The Diamond, *Bright Star* (V, 5.9, A3). Of 9 pitches, 7 were new. September 3 to 6, 1984. (Ed Webster, solo).