The Pit

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HE SAT on the ledge, wondering what to do next. His headlamp pierced the darkness, faintly illuminating the opposite wall of the cavern. He shifted his position. The dampness of the ledge was already soaking into his clothing. He could hear Sullivan above him. Looking upward, he could see a lamp bobbing back and forth in the darkness. It would shoot out when Sullivan kicked away from the wall and come hurtling toward him until the rope came back toward the wall. Sullivan’s legs would absorb the shock and again he would kick away and descend further. He moved to one side as Sullivan eased his way onto the narrow ledge. They stood there in the eternal darkness, their headlamps vainly probing the depths of the pit. He glanced up and saw a speck of light belonging to one of the other party members. Then it was gone.

“Shall we go on?” His voice surprised him. It seemed loud and out of place in this lonely emptiness that seemed to detach a person from reality. Sullivan didn’t utter a word. He just stood there looking down and scratching his whiskers. It wasn’t like Sullivan to be so quiet. When they were with the party, Sullivan was always talking — giving orders or telling glowing stories of adventure to the novice explorers. He wasn’t a particularly big man, but he had a way with people. When he talked you wanted to listen. In fact, that was how Bob had first gotten acquainted with him. His mind drifted back a year to New Orleans, the Mardi Gras and, in particular, the small club just off Bourbon Street.

A few celebrants staggered past him as he entered. He was anticipating a good, long, lost weekend so he could forget his thesis problem for a while. Through the smoke, he could vaguely see musical instruments swaying back and forth as
the band members sought vainly to bring back the music of Storyville. By the time he had taken a couple of drinks, the music sounded better. Next to the mirror behind the bar were several pictures of a man whom he recognized as the bartender. On the glossy prints he was dressed in everything from a skin diving outfit to an Eskimo parka. One in particular interested Bob. It showed the bartender being lowered into a gaping hole in the ground.

The next time the bartender came around, Bob said, “You must be quite an explorer.”

“Done quite a bit of it. You go for it too?”

“When I have the time. I stick mainly to caves.”

“Say that’s great! I’m a spelunker myself.”

“Actually, I haven’t been in any caves for a couple of years. My thesis has been keeping me pretty busy. Last one I was in was in Virginia. I’m convinced it connects with the Luray Caverns but I reached an impassable pit and didn’t have the equipment to descend down into it.”

“I’d sure like to have a crack at that one,” Sullivan declared. “Nothing I like more than a good spine-tingling adventure. I remember several years ago when I was up in Skagway. That’s in Alaska. Ever been there? . . . Oh, that’s too bad. Oughta go up there some time. Great country. Well, this farmer came in one day and wanted me to guide him back into the Ellis range. That was an experience. You haven’t seen any mountains till you’ve seen those.”

Bob listened to Sullivan all night. Finally, the band got up and went home or wherever jazz combos go during the day. As he left, the sun was just coming up.

Bob had almost forgotten about Sullivan until he received a letter from Washington six months after their meeting. Sullivan’s confident air and easy enthusiasm sold Bob on trying the Virginia cave again. Sullivan was to handle all of the details.

Bob turned his gaze from the pit and toward his companion. Sullivan hesitated while he stood looking at Bob. Then his voice cut the darkness. “Let’s go on. We’ll be okay.” Bob felt a little better as he absorbed some of Sullivan’s confidence. Sullivan took out a piton and hammered it into the wall.
“Maybe we’d better go back. I don’t think we have enough rope,” Bob ventured. The rope dangled twenty feet below them. He could tell that the end of it was still far above the floor. Sullivan didn’t say a word. He just went on working. A few minutes passed and he turned to Bob.

“We’ll tie this end of the rope to the piton and have them throw the other end of the climbing rope down. We can climb back up on the safety rope.”

Surely Sullivan knows the danger. The thought flashed across Bob’s mind. They would be making the remainder of the descent without a safety rope. Sullivan sensed his thoughts.

“No harder to climb without a safety rope than with one,” he said. Bob waited for Sullivan to start out, but Sullivan just stood there with a forced smile on his face. Bob looked down into the vastness and waited. Then Sullivan spoke again. “I think it would be better if you went first. I’m stronger and it will be easier for me to pull you back up if you can’t make it to the bottom.” Bob couldn’t understand Sullivan. Sullivan had always insisted on leading and being first. Now, here was his chance to really test himself on a difficult descent into an unknown area. Then again Sullivan did have the fate of the entire party in his hands. He had to do what was best for everyone.

Bob looped the rope around his back and slid over the edge. He waited for a second, feet braced against the wall, leaning into the rope. Then he eased himself down, slowly at first, letting the free end of the rope slip slowly through his left hand. Gaining confidence, he kicked away from the wall. Letting the rope slide freely in his hand, he vaulted through the empty void, the beam of the headlamp sketching crazy patterns on the wall. The wall came back suddenly. He kicked and was again catapulted into the darkness. Sullivan’s lamp was now a speck on the wall far above. Bob felt the coil of rope running out. He came to a stop and waited braced against the rope. The coil was very small and the bottom was still out of sight. He was beginning to tire. The rope cut savagely into his back. He jerked on the rope twice, the signal for Sullivan to start pulling him up. There was no response. He jerked the rope again. Nothing. He couldn’t
climb hand over hand to the top. It was physically im-
possible, even for a man who wasn't exhausted. He had to 
find a ledge somewhere close, so he could rig the rope for 
climbing by means of movable loops. He peered along the 
wall. He could make out a small ledge about ten feet off to 
the left. He kicked at the wall and began to move back and 
forth across the limestone wall, a human pendulum lost in 
eternity. Each oscillation brought him closer to the ledge. He 
grabbed the wall and managed a foothold. Taking up the 
slack in the rope, he tied it around his chest and collapsed 
exhausted onto the ledge. A projecting rock prevented him 
from seeing Sullivan's position. It was getting harder to 
think. What was wrong with Sullivan? He jerked on the 
rope. Still there was no response. The dim light of his helmet 
lamp grew dimmer and dimmer, then blackness enveloped 
him. The water soaked into his clothes and brought him 
back to consciousness. His arms and legs were cramped. The 
rope cut sharply into his chest. Whatever happened, he knew 
he had to move. He jerked twice on the rope with no luck. 
"SULLIVAN!" his voice pierced the air. "SULLIVAN, . . . 
Sullivan . . . sullivan . . . sullivan." His words re-echoed 
throughout the chamber and faded away in the depths. Still 
there was no response. Slowly he got to his feet and untied 
the rope around his chest. Taking the three shorter ropes 
from his pack, he tied them to the climbing rope so that the 
downward pressure would tighten the knots and a release 
of pressure would loosen them. The top rope he looped 
around his chest. He put his feet into the other two loops. 
Shifting his weight, he moved the loops upward one at a 
time. Slowly and laboriously, he made his way a few inches 
at a time, up the rope. After what seemed an eternity of 
limbing and hanging from the rope half conscious, he 
gained the ledge. "Sullivan, give me a hand." There was no 
answer. He pulled himself up and onto the overhanging 
ledge. He lay there breathing heavily. Where was Sullivan? 
He couldn't see his light. What did it matter? All that mat-
tered now was resting.

A steady dripping of water in his face brought Bob back 
to reality. He had to move. The water dripping on his fore-
head was maddening. He put his hand out, trying to see if
the ledge extended further. Thank God, it did. He inched along the ledge, his hand probing the darkness, seeking hidden danger. It came to rest on something cold and yielding. “Sullivan!” he shouted, almost in terror. The shock seemed momentarily to clear Bob’s tired mind. “Sullivan! What’s wrong?” Sullivan didn’t answer. Sullivan’s dead—he tried to force the thought from his mind. He moved closer and felt Sullivan’s chest. Sullivan was still breathing, although it was faint and irregular. He had to have some light. Searching through Sullivan’s coat, he discovered two candles. Lighting one, he held it to Sullivan’s face. What he saw sent a shiver up his back. Sullivan was cowering against the wall with the safety rope tied securely under his arms. It was Sullivan’s eyes that held Bob’s attention. They were open, staring out into the black void of the pit. Recovering from his initial shock, he shook Sullivan. Sullivan tried to say something, but all Bob could hear was a mumble. “For God’s sake, Sullivan, say something! What’s happened?” Sullivan crouched in the corner staring into the blackness. His lips moved, but no words came. He jerked twice on Sullivan’s safety rope. He could hear the bell jingle above. Then lights appeared at the edge of the pit. Feeling Sullivan’s rope grow taut, he backed away and watched Sullivan disappear in the blackness above him. The flickering candle flame seemed to emphasize the empty feeling in his stomach. He sat down on the ledge and blew the candle out. Darkness enveloped him. The dripping of water was the only sense impression that reached him. He felt as if he could jump out and drift forever in the emptiness. He tried to fight the feeling of loneliness. Then he felt a rope strike his head. “Thank God.” he muttered. “Thank God.”

They pulled him up and placed him along side of Sullivan in the tunnel. He turned his head and looked at Sullivan. Before their eyes met, Sullivan rolled over and stared at the wall. The only sound to be heard was the steady dripping of water in the pit.

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