

Courageous Pulls Through

By Kevin McCarthy

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I paid \$247.50 for Courageous, planning, with little actual enthusiasm, to fix her up eventually. It was typical of me in those days to bestow a grand title on marginal transportation. I was feeling expansive, having just moved from spectacular Idaho to spectacular Oregon and a good, semi-outdoor job in Salem. So I named the 1958 GMC pickup after a racehorse famous for its heart. This rusty anachronism would be my steed.

A business trip loomed, so I coaxed the old rattletrap out to the Portland airport the next day. A couple of friends were to meet me there a few days later. We'd planned to take one of their vehicles out to climb Mount Adams on Easter while Courageous cooled her heels in the parking garage. As I nosed the blocky old relic through rows of sportier rides, somehow I fell for her. I might've expected that. You can't give anything – even a sorry old beater – a preposterously romantic name and not want to love it. As usual, my intentions were clear, though not to myself.

“Rosinante” might've been a more apt moniker, in honor of Don Quixote's faithful mount. For, as it turned out, I was one Panza and a tumbledown windmill away from epic absurdity. The former came in the unlikeliest of packages. Dan Erfurdt was a large, bearded, musical, athletic, culinary gonzo maniac. He met me at the airport on Easter eve with bad news. Scott, the guy with reliable transportation, couldn't make the trip. Dan had driven his girlfriend's car. It looked good to go.

“Let's take Martha's car.”

“It's a Peugeot.”

“Come on. I'll grab my gear.”

“It's a PEUGOT. – Besides, Martha needs it.”

I was out of ideas and enthusiasm. Dan was never out of either. “Let's take Courageous.”

“The tires are bald.”

“The weather looks good.”

“But the battery ...”

“We'll do Mount Hood instead. Much closer.”

There was no arguing with Dan after he'd shifted gears. We tracked down the object of our faith in the garage. She was easy to spot, capsized as she was in a sea of sleek. Dan was careful to express wry reverence as I gave her the once-over. I tried to ignore the oil slick on the concrete. I'd been warned about the rear main bearing seal, and the solution for the time being was just to keep the oil topped off. The battery was a six-volt job that had obviously come new in the vehicle. But it was charged up at the moment and adequate water quivered in the cells. I squatted and poked at steel threads that protruded from cartoonishly treadless front tires. The rear tires were made for snow, but so old that the rubber had morphed into a kind of slabby plastic.

Dan had zero trepidation, in spite of all this, and I loved him for it. I had and have plenty of friends who are captains of caution, willing to tackle the outdoors only in large groups or on strictly defined terms. Dan was not foolhardy, but he was determined to have a wilderness weekend, and so

was I. I didn't feel resigned to cruel fate or even particularly concerned as I followed Dan into Portland to drop off the Peugeot. I felt only keen anticipation, tempered by a twinge of compassion for Courageous. I caught a glimpse of my windmill – Mt. Hood's glistening cone. Something waited for us up there.

We made ourselves slow down at Martha's house, where we inventoried and stowed our gear. Then Dan hopped in, proclaimed "No regrets" our mantra, and off we sputtered. The silver greens and greys of the Columbia Gorge further mellowed the mood. Then we veered onto the mountain road, and deeper into Middle Earth. The healthy trees and healthier volcanoes along the route seemed conically perfect. The rain and refulgence softened and blurred any conceivable Earthly deficiency.

I was feeling softened and blurred myself, strictly from sensory overload, and cranked a cracked window to drink it all in. I was just realizing that I'd been olfactory deprived growing up in the dry Rockies. The Cascades treated my underused nose to a cornucopia of sharp and subtle aromas: fresh-cut vegetable, new-mown hay, vanilla, fir, and unidentified spices that set me dreaming. The truck's previous owner had installed a cassette deck and, via some time warp synchronicity, I had a Leon Redbone tape. So we rolled along in our '50s cocoon, wrapped in the bluesy jazz of the '30s. The serpentine road gave us ample opportunity to bare our souls. By dusk, when we passed through the little hamlet of Mount Hood, there wasn't a conundrum in the world we hadn't unraveled.

Except mountain weather. Instantly, we found ourselves in a swirling goulash of fog and rain. I closed the window and turned up the anemic defroster. The windshield wipers groaned awake, but proved to be short, atrophied, and hypnotically slow. We craned forward to peer through cracked glass and undulating sheets of water. As it continued to get darker and wetter, we focused on our mantra. Redbone and a workhorse little heater dispensed all the remaining comfort required.

So we might have steadily ascended in our bubble of light, except for the inevitable. Rain plus altitude equals snow, and black ice. I downshifted as Courageous began to fishtail, and, via meticulous asphalt route-finding, silent prayers, and muttered encouragement, we got along all right for several miles. But just as switchbacks loomed, the ancient brogeens once again lost their feeble grip. Determined not to lose momentum, I bore down on the accelerator and managed the slewing, I thought, with some alacrity. But after the old tailgate pulled even with us a couple of times, I had to sacrifice thrust for control. We slowed to a crawl and I heard the door slam. Somehow, we gained a toehold and began to pick up speed. I glanced to the side and there was Dan, all teeth and beard, framed in the side mirror. He was bouncing gleefully on the rear bumper.

"Come on Courageous!" he hollered, the ear flaps of his wool hat flapping ridiculously. He hung onto the bed with one hand and leaned into space like a regatta sailor. "You can do it!" I had to laugh, in spite of the pucker factor. On we lurched, yawing and whooping.

As we neared Timberline Lodge, the pitch and glaze were finally too much. Courageous shimmied sideways onto what I hoped was a wide shoulder and I shut her down, tossing the key in the ashtray. We shouldered our packs and trudged the last hundred yards to the lodge, leaning into the wind.

In the latest version of our plan, we were to ski to a hut a mile or so farther up. But visibility was nil, and so were we, so into the lobby we stomped. Timberline Lodge was constructed during the Depression by locals hired by the Works Progress Administration. It must've been a hell of a tonic to work on something gargantuan after having so little for so long. You can feel a go-to-hell audacity in the cavernous lobby, with its massive rafters and Paul Bunyan fireplaces. One-of-a-kind art adorns every rustic cranny.

But the lodge was full and beyond our means anyway. We needed a bivouac. I'd hardly shed my gear when I found Dan in lively conversation with kindly, dark-haired Rhonda at the front desk. The man is a force of nature. Within five minutes, Rhonda was handing her house key to we dripping, grinning strangers. "My roommate will be home soon. The house is in Government Camp, so you'll have to catch the shuttle."

She gave us directions, then we were out in the weather again, charging around the parking lot looking for the shuttle bus. I nearly ran into a hypothermic little man in a thin business suit. He was struggling with frozen fingers to apply chains to a white sedan. I slid in to lend a hand. I'd like to think it's my firm belief in mountain camaraderie that had me inopportunely lying under the car untangling chains, but it may have also had something to do with the young woman looking on. There she stood, wild dark hair fluttering from under a colorful knit cap while big flakes stuck to her eyelashes. She supported her mother, who was having navigational difficulties. Mom's glasses were completely covered with snow.

Dad and I made quick work of the chains. When he ducked into the car to get warm, I saw my chance. "You look cold." Her shy response was a welcome surprise: peals of laughter. Maybe it was the general spectacle of the situation, or maybe it was the improvised samba she had just performed in trying to keep Mom upright. Whatever the cause, it had a profound effect on me. I suddenly realized that all I'd ever longed for was an honest, outdoor woman with a hearty laugh. Stalling for time, I cheekily brushed snow off her powder blue down sweater. Then somehow I managed to find out that her name was Patricia and that she was a forester, having just gone to work for the Mt. Hood Ranger District. Dad popped out of the car, looking more lifelike, and offered to buy me a drink. I paused coolly for a nanosecond before accepting.

As I marched back to the lodge, the only thing left in my brain was a languid calculation of how to arrive at the bar immediately while still seeming nonchalant. But there was Dan, waving from the shuttle where he had already stowed my gear. Not having a place to sleep, I couldn't construct a rational argument for remaining at the lodge, so off we crunched toward Government Camp. As we rumbled out of the parking lot, I caught a glimpse of Courageous being systematically walled in by a blinking snowplow.

Rhonda's house was comfy. Dan was already baking cookies when her roommate arrived. Sarah was blonder and more talkative than her friend, but just as generous. "Rhonda would love it!" she proclaimed as Dan pulled a tollhouse tray from the oven, and we had a new motto. We ate cookies, drank wine, rearranged furniture, and damn near remodeled the house under Dan's inspired leadership, all because "Rhonda would love it." And Rhonda did love it, when she came home.

Mt. Hood is generally attempted at about 2 AM or earlier to ensure the snow is hard enough to bear weight. The line of headlamps streaming up the mountain then is quite a spectacle. But by the time Rhonda got home, I figured Dan and I were not likely to be ascending the volcano within an hour or two. After we brought her blood sugar up to date, Rhonda suggested a moonlight ski. That iced our climbing plans. Having already dedicated the evening to her enjoyment, we could hardly refuse Rhonda. We would have done anything for her. Besides, it was still snowing like hell. We strapped on the boards and slid out into a sane asylum – oceans of silence, a conifer tang, and flakes as big as quarters, spinning straight down. Just as we reached a forest glade, the snow stopped, the clouds fled, and a gibbous moon presented herself. Narrative convention would have me describing some passionate – or cheap – affair that night, but our dalliance with these charming queens of Western hospitality amounted to a cheesy but profound-seeming group hug in the middle of the glade.

About seven hours later, Dan and I blinked awake on the porch under a skiff of snow. We'd missed the climb, but wouldn't have missed the evening, and the sky was full of promise. No regrets.

Shafts of light gilded our shelter, and a seductive fragrance seeped out of the kitchen. The snow brushed easily off our sleeping bags. After a hot breakfast and warm good-byes, we caught the shuttle back to the lodge. Courageous was barely visible behind a wall of compacted snow. We climbed aboard the bed and set to digging her out with ice axes. An ice axe is a great tool for climbing, but for shoveling snow, it's about as useful as a spork. We wielded our implements of futility with aerobic vigor, moving thimblefuls at a stroke.

A snowplow passed, and I could see we had brightened someone's day. Ten minutes later, the plow appeared again, but by now the driver's leather face had stiffened from glee to pity. He made straight for us. We abandoned ship and watched him clear the stiff slush. Then he pushed Courageous entirely around until she was facing downhill. He gave her a nudge and she gained momentum. We waved thanks and climbed into the cab. I optimistically turned the key, but, sure enough, the old truck was dead as disco. Compression starting was Plan B, of course, but that would have required traction. So on we rolled without a trace of spark or combustion. I was relieved, however, to discover the brakes were squishily serviceable. As we picked up speed, I gave up on popping the clutch. It was just doing alarming things to our angle of descent.

By now, Dan and I were not bothering to consult on anything. We just accepted in silence what presented itself. We were rolling and that was something. Probably, we figured we could get the old beast percolating on the fly. The central problem at the moment was the windshield. No combustion means no heater and no defroster, as pathetic as that was anyway. I scraped the windshield some, but blowing snow kept icing it over. Just in case our vision was not completely obstructed, a filigree of interior frost steadily thickened. I'd gotten down mountains many an exhilarating way, but this was the exhilaratingest. We hung our shaggy heads out the side windows. "Left!" yelled Dan. "No! Other left!" We got better at it as we went along, but never to the point where we could look beyond imminent disaster.

Now, if you're steering a block of ice down a twisty mountain road with only middling success, you might think this would be a bad time to pick up hitchhikers. You'd be wrong about that. As soon as I saw two innocently beaming skiers around a bend, I knew Dan would insist. The skiers, male and female, looked to be prototypical Olympians. I slid to a stop as casually as a cabbie. "Hop in!" Explanations seemed pointless. The Aryan grins faded just a shade as they climbed aboard. Dan ensured the muscular glutes were optimally positioned near each rear wheel. In spite of their clear-eyed mountain cheer, it must've been disconcerting to them when our heads popped out of the side windows as if we were a couple of golden retrievers and Dan recommenced barking orders.

The ballast helped, but we still had some serious flirtations with sudden death. At one point we had to get out and push the truck away from the edge. For the rest of the way, muted screams from the back provided helpful supplemental information. I tried to keep the aural feedback on the jovial end of the spectrum, but abject terror was occasionally conveyed. Still, through it all, no one suggested by word or deed that our assumptions and approach might be trifle cavalier. As with all mountain adventures, there was the sheer entertainment value to consider. Assuming we lived. This was just a bonus Mister Chipmunk Ride for our endorphin-junkie Olympians – the vehicular group slalom stage of a great ski day.

After what seemed a careening, windburned eternity, the kinks in the road went away and we accelerated towards a deep depression. We bounced through the low point at a good clip, as I was trying to make it to a gas station just beyond. But we didn't quite make it. I hit the brakes as our momentum played out, and we began to slide backwards askew. I got off the brakes so I could steer. We rolled back through the little valley again. I stayed off the brakes, and this lent a surreal aspect to the finale. There was something sad about coasting forward and back, forward and back in diminishing arcs. We were like kids riding out a coin-operated bronco.

Finally, full stop. We sat there for a minute like decompressing divers. Then a cheer issued from the back. We jumped out and helped the skiers down. I felt like a carney releasing giddy teenagers from a Tilt-A-Whirl. We stood and watched them giggle their way toward the intersection and the next escapade. No regrets. I pulled the battery and carried it to the gas station. A couple of hours later, we were threading along fairy tale back roads through Molalla (preferring a Gallic MOO-lala pronunciation) and back to Salem. We kept the windows down to partake of evergreen pungency.

It had been no surprise to Patricia's parents when I didn't show at the Timberline bar. "He touched your stomach." said Mom. Through snow-packed glasses, she had seen all. Patricia was dismissive. "Oh, he's just a ski bum." They all stayed in a Hood River motel, where Mom and Dad presented their little big girl with a chocolate bunny. Patricia made it her confidante: *Here I am, 28 years old, going on 6, spending Easter with my parents. Why can't I meet someone like that guy in the parking lot?*

Two weeks later, I was returning from a business trip when the secretary I was with suggested we stop for lunch at the Hood River Inn. We walked in and there was Patricia. So we met again by chance, again at a place neither of us had been before. This time we managed to exchange information. I'm told it was somehow intriguing that I included my middle name on the lunch receipt.

Patricia Elizabeth Porter was and is a foursquare, botanizing, half-Italian descendent of Stonewall Jackson, and it all shows. I was ensnared in her careless curls and knowing smile. Our courtship centered around the eruption of Mount St. Helens. We actually climbed Mt. Hood on the day the volcano blew, but that's another story. I was sure that once Patricia got to know my amazing friends, she'd dump me like a load of fetid guano, and I resolved to be noble about it. But it never came to pass. It took me years to actually believe that this quiet, adventurous proto-timber queen was interested in me, of all people, for always. "I'm a constant," she said, and truer words were never spoken.

That summer, I started taking more interest in Courageous. I painted her and flanged her out with some treasures scavenged at the local Butcrack Brothers salvage yard. Fastidious, hilarious Dale Miller and I built a cedar camper on the bed. It was elaborate and too heavy, but Courageous handled it fine. With Patricia's border collie, Pokey, we conducted a hot spring tour of the West and ended up in Ouray, Colorado. There, we married in the stone church where my father had been baptized 60 years before.

We've weathered a lot over the last few decades – simultaneous layoffs, simultaneous hypothermia, bouts of knuckleheaded self-absorption, assorted softball agonies – even my tragic Fat Elvis Period. I attribute our share of joy and contentment to the energy and frequency of my Dulcinea's laugh. We live at 8600 feet, so the down sweater gets a lot of use, and it still looks great. We sold Courageous eventually, when it became impractical for primary transportation. The guy I sold it to had major restoration dreams, so I like to think she's still lumbering around out there. I pulled a lot of vehicles out of snow banks with that truck. And I must've replaced that rear main bearing seal half a dozen times.

Dan Erfurdt hasn't changed a bit. Thanks, Dan, for your gonzo audacity, for it jump-started my own. Thanks for insisting that Courageous would pull through. She did and we did, in ways I'm still learning to appreciate.