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# The moment of truth

for Ruth Anne Kocour came on an icy mountain ledge during the worst snowstorm in Alaska's history. "We were trapped on an ice shelf on the side of Mount McKinley for eleven days, flat on our backs in our tents at fourteen thousand feet, temperatures of minus forty-seven degrees," she says. "There were avalanches crashing down around us and the wind was roaring. Seven people died, one only a few yards from our tent.

"But we went on to reach the summit," says Kocour, who was 45 at the time, the oldest member of her team and the only woman. "And that," she says, with an unexpected note of elation in her voice, "was my vacation *that year*."

In fact, Kocour says, the ordeal was the high point of her life. Her sensations at the time—a heightened awareness, a complete concentration on the moment at hand, a vivid sense of what it means to be alive—are echoed by any number of other people who've been pushed to the limits of their fears and physical powers.

"What I did was extreme," says Kocour. "No one knowingly walks into the worst storm in recorded history. But I now have a whole different view of how I'm going to go through life. I have no fear. That doesn't mean I'm going to go out and tempt fate. I'm not a reckless person. But I'd rather live fully, take my chances. I came of age on Mount McKinley."

Kocour took her first steps on that road eight years ago. At the time she was feeling pretty sickly. "I'd had four major surgeries in as many years—my husband asked if I'd come with a warranty," she says. A medical illustrator by trade, she was living on the Nevada-California border near Lake Tahoe, but she wasn't doing the skiing she'd grown up with or the climbing she'd started during college. Physically, in fact, she wasn't doing much of anything. And then a friend who worked as a climbing guide asked if she'd like to go to Tanzania and climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

Kocour went for it. "I didn't train," she says. "All I did was recover from surgery." But a few months later, she made it to the 19,340-foot summit and found that something inside her had shifted. "It was a positive way to tell myself that I was still alive and able," she says. She asked her friend to lead her to higher and higher peaks, and she was hooked. That's how, six years later, in the spring of 1992, she found herself clutching her sleeping bag in 120-mile-an-hour winds on the frozen

**Maybe in our quest  
for a secure and  
comfortable life,  
we've neglected  
a need that runs  
just as deep.**

BY KARIN EVANS

slopes of North America's highest peak. Kocour has gone on to climb four of the world's major peaks and is aiming for more in the next couple of years.

"I love the changes I've made in my life," she says. "When you're out there on a mountaintop, you realize you're part of a natural process. I think being on the edge is the most alive place there is."

wreck at the same time," says Casey Dale, who runs bungee jumps in Oregon and Las Vegas. "Ecstasy and sheer terror rolled into one." The bungee jumper is completely in the moment, says Dale. "You're not thinking of that meeting in three hours or whether you left the stove on."

Like Kocour on the mountain, like Meryl Streep's character in the rafting

and hears her heart pound as if it had leapt to her head. There's a theory that those who terrify themselves regularly—race car drivers, combat photographers—can actually become addicted to adrenaline. When we venture out into danger, heart pounding, knees shaking, we're getting a chemical fix—that adventure writer Tim Cahill calls the biochemical reward edge.

"Our bodies have a taste for danger," says Ralph Keyes, who has studied risk-seeking behavior. "Over the millennia, we grew accustomed to danger and risk and we crave it to some degree. Our body wants the juice, wants the hormone."

Even people who seek lesser risks, subjecting their psyches to the lower stress of river running or rock climbing, get a chemical reward—from the milder hormone noradrenaline. "Its realm is pleasure, not panic," says veteran Sierra climbing guide Doug Robinson, who's at work on a book on the subject. "It's a much sunnier place, well short of unbridled fear. It gives a mood of alertness, often with joy seeping in around the edges."

That may be why the thrills business is booming. Richard Bangs, a former river guide, has parlayed the commodity of adventure into a thriving concern. Each year, his company, Mountain Travel—Sobek, sends thousands of schoolteachers, accountants, moms on a kid-break, and other home-bound types shooting through white-water rapids or scrambling up Himalayan peaks. And his company is just one of several dozen American outfitters leading hundreds of trips a year.

A decade or two ago, Bangs says, getting to the edge was a monumental undertaking, and most of those who did it were men. "Now you can sign yourself up with a toll-free number," he says. And at least half the people on Sobek expeditions are women.

**Y**ET THERE'S something contradictory about a seat-belt-wearing, vitamin-gulping, smoke-alarm-purchasing populace that so fears for its safety on the one hand and, on the other, pays good money to go churning down some unpredictable rapids or hurtling through the air on a rubber rope and a prayer. Isn't



CHRIS NOBLE

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**T**HAT EDGE holds a mysterious attraction for human beings, and it comes in many forms. Stand at the exit line of a roller coaster and watch the riders emerge. They've plunged downhill, been catapulted around turns, and spun upside down. They've screamed themselves silly, felt their hearts vibrate in their throats, gasped for air, and—if it's a successful ride—felt for a split second as if they really might die. And yet how do they look when they come out? Not so much exhausted as exhilarated. Elated.

A similar scene awaits the spectator who watches the bodies fall through 20 stories of thin air and bounce to a stop at the end of a bungee cord. "The best description I've heard yet was by one woman who said it was like having sex and being in a car

thriller *The River Wild*, the bungee jumper is experiencing that flush of complete focus and rapture that comes, strangely enough, when our bodies and minds get a big enough jolt of fear.

Part of the reason lies in our chemistry. In the grip of fear, extreme exertion, or panic, the bloodstream is charged with hormones released by the adrenal glands. These hormones—adrenaline and noradrenaline—trigger a cascade of events in the body that heighten alertness and boost stamina. The heart races, upping its pulse by as much as 200 percent, while blood vessels dilate to send the brain and muscles express deliveries of oxygen, sugar, and fatty acids. At the skin and digestive organs, blood vessels constrict, provoking an overall rise in blood pressure. The hiker startled by a bear feels an intense "rush"

# Where to Mix Thrills With Skills

"I've always wanted to be Gina Lollobrigida in the movie *Trapeze*, and for a fleeting moment I was." —EDWINA ARNOLD, *New York City*

**Trapeze School** The San Francisco School of Circus Arts offers day sessions. Write or call 400 Missouri St., San Francisco, CA 94107; 415/648-3006. Elsewhere: For a brochure on its trapeze programs, contact Club Med, 40 West 57th St., New York, NY 10019; 800/258-2633.

"Satisfaction comes from mastering the simple turn. The thrill comes from riding the edge of fear and pushing myself to new levels. It's so liberating." —KATHLEEN GASPERINI, *Montecito, California*

**Snowboarding** Jackson Hole Ski Resort in Wyoming offers its Wild Women Snowboard Camp from March 18 to 20 and 23 to 25, 1995. Write or call 131 N. 75th St., Seattle, WA 98103; 206/784-3266. Elsewhere: For a directory of resorts, order the *White Book of Ski Areas*, P.O. Box 9595, Washington, DC 20016; \$16.95 plus \$3 handling.

"All I could feel was this fabulous power surging beneath me. It's like driving a Lincoln without steering wheel or brakes, seat belt or air bag." —JEFF COPLON, *Brooklyn, New York*

**Bull Riding** The Leffew Rodeo School conducts 25 bull riding schools a year in 20 states and Alberta, Canada. Write or call P.O. Box 5175, Santa Maria, CA 93456; 805/929-4286. Elsewhere: Contact the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, 101 Pro Rodeo Dr., Colorado Springs, CO 80919; 719/593-8840. Request a copy of *Pro Rodeo Sports News*.

"It's like stepping into a waterfall and then, after you pull the cord, it's as if a giant hand plucks you from the sky and drops you in a cloud." —PEGGY NORTHRUP, *New York City*

**Sky Diving** Raeford Parachute Center, in Raeford, North Carolina, offers tandem jumps and accelerated-free-fall courses. Write or call Route 1, 519 Doc Brown Rd., Raeford, NC 28376; 910/875-3303. Elsewhere: For the name of the drop-zone nearest you, contact the United States Parachute Association, 1440 Duke Rd., Alexandria, VA 22314; 703/836-3495.

"Everyone dreams of flying, and scuba diving is flying."

—KEVIN KNIGHT, *Dallas*

**Scuba Diving** The Ocean Diving School in Pompano, Florida, offers a complete certification course. Write or call 750 East Sample Rd., Pompano, FL 33064; 800/874-6888. Elsewhere: For a free list of certified centers, contact the Professional Association of Diving Instructors, 1251 E. Dyer Rd., #100, Santa Ana, CA 92705-5605; 714/540-7234.

"Whatever else is going on in my life disappears. I'm totally focused on my next move." —DEBBIE SHERMAN, *Park City, Utah*

**Rock Climbing** The American Alpine Institute offers year round two-day beginner rock-climbing courses in five locations from British Columbia to Mexico. Write or call 1515 12th St., Bellingham, WA 98225; 206/671-1505. Elsewhere: Contact the American Mountain Guides Association, 710 Tenth St., Suite 101, Golden, CO 80401; 303/271-0984.

"Everything around you is moving, yet it's as if time and everything else is totally still." —JAMES McMULLEN, *Portland, Oregon*

**White-Water Kayaking** Hughes River Expeditions offers three- to seven-day trips in Idaho and Oregon. Write or call P.O. Box 217, Cambridge, ID 83610; 208/257-3477. Elsewhere: For a free directory of backcountry outfitters, contact America Outdoors, P.O. Box 1348, Knoxville, TN 37901; 615/524-4814.

—Valerie Fahey

modern life with its traffic mayhem, automatic weapons, and natural disasters quite enough?

Nope, says Bangs. "There's a flame that burns in all of us to transcend our passive lives, to get out and lean over the cliff and feel the hot breath of an animal." Keyes, the author of a book called *Chancing It: Why We Take Risks*, also says it makes perfect sense. "The scarier life gets, the more beyond our control, the more we want thrills that are under our control."

A historian by training, Keyes got interested in risk when he was in his mid-thirties and his own life seemed to lack it. "I'd just gotten my first mortgage, I had a kid, and I looked at myself and thought, Is that it? Is that the end of my adventurous life? There's nothing that makes you more wary of taking risks than being a parent. That sort of pushed me out of the house to go find out who takes risks and why."

The first person Keyes wanted to talk to was Phillippe Petit, the man who'd sneaked onto the top of New York's World Trade Center a few years back, managed to anchor a tight wire between the towers of the two buildings, and then walked across the wire, swaying in the wind, nothing but 100 stories of thin air between him and the city sidewalks.

When Keyes caught up with Petit, he asked, "How did you get to be such a risk-taker?" Petit bristled and said, "Excuse me, I planned that walk for a year. I don't take risks."

Keyes scratched his head. "If that's not risky," he asked, "what is?"

"Other things in life scare me more," said Petit. "Spiders, snakes, jumping into water."

And what scared the wire walker *most*? "Getting married," he said.

That answer—plus many others like it—is what led Keyes to decide that risk-taking is a very personal proposition, and that not all risk-taking is physical. Keyes has found, for one thing, that men are more prone to take physical risks; women emotional ones. "Starting a relationship can be scary," says Keyes, "or doing stand-up comedy, or writing a book."

Keyes has also concluded that everyone takes risks—no exceptions. Yes, he says, teetering at one end of the spectrum are daredevils who constantly take chances, while at the other end are people who seem most comfortable hugging the couch, trying to shield themselves from danger. (See "What Kind of Risk-Taker Are You?" page 67.)

But even the most retiring homebodies, Keyes has discovered, tend to dabble around

the edges of danger, regularly engaging in little hazards that Keyes dubs "risklets."

"When I've asked groups of people how many thought they were risk-takers, very few hands went up," says Keyes. "But when I asked some specific questions, I got a very different picture."

More than 80 percent of the people he queried had jaywalked. Nearly half had poked metal utensils into a plugged-in toaster. A quarter had turned on an electrical appliance while in the shower or tub. A substantial number had operated power lawn mowers barefoot, roller skated in heavy traffic, driven with the gas gauge on empty, or run red lights.

"These are the tiny acts of daring that pump little drops of adrenaline," Keyes says. "I think they come from a constitutional need to take risks. We all need that arousal."

**B**UT IF JAYWALKING isn't a deeply satisfying antidote to the tensions of modern life, there's a good reason. A risklet is just a low-voltage impulse, and a roller-coaster ride is not a true adventure.

"Americans are great at pseudo thrills," says Keyes. But they don't do the trick. You can see all the scary movies you want, get your adrenaline pumping in the safety of a movie theater, and it's not going to change your life. And even when you throw your body halfway into the bargain, in a passive thrill like bungee jumping, say, there's less potential for lasting satisfaction than if you climb a mountain using your own hands and feet.

Why? Because the rewards of risk require more than a momentary jolt of adrenaline, says psychotherapist Joseph Ilardo, author of *Risk-Taking for Personal Growth*. According to Ilardo and other researchers, there's such a thing as a "quality thrill," and it comes from confronting your own fears, stretching your abilities, and tackling something worthwhile—with good odds of survival. (See "Where to Mix Thrills With Skills," page 68.)

In other words, risk plus challenge. Keyes is quick to point out that he's never seen a more control-oriented group than professional adventurers. "First, they challenge fate," he says, "then they try to whip fate to its knees." Far from passive partic-

ipants, they get pleasure not from danger alone but also from the skills they hone to hold risk at bay.

"For me, bungee jumping doesn't do it," Ilardo says. Though jumpers must face their fears, they're letting someone else's skill ensure their safety. The real secret to satisfaction is in sustained effort. That's what produces the sunny glow that climber Robinson talks about, the feeling that ad-

thought it would be," MacKenzie says. "One day we trekked thirteen miles and reached nine thousand feet. It tested my limits, but afterward I felt wonderful. I realized I could endure things I didn't think I could endure. I'm a mom, and all I do is drive kids back and forth all day. The trip renewed me physically. I've signed up to climb Mount Kilimanjaro and I can't wait."



You can see all the scary movies you want, but those **momentary jolts of adrenaline** aren't going to change your life.

venture guide Bangs describes as "vital, fresh, and energized."

Ruth Anne Kocour would be the first to agree. "In climbing, I learned that without risk, there's stagnation," says Kocour. "But I'm no adrenaline junkie. The important thing is to choose a risk that suits you," she says. "I go into the mountains because it's exquisitely beautiful and worth the discomfort and risk of being there, but also because it forces me to be prepared. Getting myself ready is a terrific path in life. It keeps me focused and keeps me fit."

A few years ago, Kocour started leading expeditions for her friends, week-long hikes into the wilderness for women in their forties. Linell MacKenzie signed up for a trip—to California's Desolation Wilderness. "It was more strenuous than I

"If most of us were to have these kinds of experiences, we'd discover we have reserves of strength and skill that have gone dormant," says Kocour, who will head up the Kilimanjaro ascent. She'll lead a group of 14 people, the oldest of whom is a 60-year-old grandmother. ("She won't be the fastest, but she'll be steady.")

In the spring of 1995, Kocour will take on Bolivia's 20,328-foot Huayna Potofi. The following year she plans to climb Tibet's Cho Oyu—at 26,750 feet, the world's sixth highest peak, 4,000 feet higher than she's ever gone before.

"I don't think people realize how much they need to test themselves," says Kocour. "Everyone has her own McKinley." ■

Karin Evans is a contributing editor.