The Dharma Bums
Jack Kerouac

[The Dharma Bums is a 1958 novel by Beat Generation author Jack Kerouac. The semi-fictional accounts in the novel are based upon events that occurred years after On the Road. The main characters are the narrator Ray Smith, based on Kerouac, and Japhy Ryder, based on the poet, essayist and Buddhist Gary Snyder. The book largely concerns duality in Kerouac's life and ideals, examining the relationship that the outdoors, mountaineering, hiking and hitchhiking through the West with his "city life" of jazz clubs, poetry readings, and drunken parties. One of the most important episodes in the book is of Smith, Ryder and Henry Morley (based on real-life friend John Montgomery) climbing Matterhorn Peak in California. The real-life episode was Kerouac's first introduction to this type of mountaineering and would serve as inspiration for him to spend the following summer as a fire lookout for the National Park Service on Desolation Peak in the North Cascade National Park in Washington State.]

Chapter 11

At about noon we started out, leaving our big packs at the camp where nobody was likely to be till next year anyway, and went up the scree valley with just some food and first-aid kits. The valley was longer than it looked. In no time at all it was two o’clock in the afternoon and the sun was getting that later than more golden look and a wind was rising and I began to think. “By gosh how we ever gonna climb that mountain, tonight?”

I put it up to Japhy who said: “You’re right, we’ll have to hurry.”

“Why don’t we just forget it and go on home?”

“Aww com on Tiger, we’ll make a run up that hill and then we’ll go home.” The valley was long and long and long. And at the top end it got very steep and I began to be a little afraid of falling down, the rocks were small and it got slippery and my ankles were in pain from yesterday’s muscle strain anyway. But Morley kept walking and talking and I noticed his tremendous endurance. Japhy took his pants off so he could look just like an Indian, I mean stark naked, except for a jockstrap, and hiked almost a quarter-mile ahead of us, sometimes waiting a while, to give us time to catch up, then went on, moving fast, wanting to climb the mountain today. Morley came second, about fifty yards ahead of me all the way. I was in no hurry. Then as it got later afternoon I went faster and decided to pass Morley and join Japhy. Now we were at about eleven thousand feet and it was cold and there was a lot of snow and to the east we could see immense snowcapped ranges and whooee levels of valleyland below them, we were already practically on top of California. At one point I had to scramble, like the others, on a narrow ledge, around a butte of rock, and it really scared me: the fall was a hundred feet, letting you bounce a minute preparatory to a nice goodbye one-thousandfoot drop. The wind was whipping now. Yet that whole afternoon, even more than the other, was filled with old premonitions or memories, as though I’d been there before, scrambling on these rocks, for other purposes more ancient, more serious, more simple. We finally got to the foot of Matterhorn where there was a most beautiful small lake unknown to the eyes of most men in this world, seen by only a handful of mountain-climbers, a small lake at eleven thousand some odd feet with snow on the edges of it and beautiful flowers and a beautiful meadow, an alpine meadow, flat and dreamy, upon which I immediately threw myself and took my shoes off. Japhy’d been there a half-hour when I made it,
and it was cold now and his clothes were on again. Morley came up behind us smiling. We sat there looking up at the imminent steep scree slope of the final crag of Matterhorn.

“That don’t look like much, we can do it!” I said glad now.

“No, Ray, that’s more than it looks. Do you realize that’s a thousand feet more?”

“That much?”

“Unless we make a run up there, double-time, we’ll never make it down again to our camp before nightfall and never make it down to the car at the lodge before tomorrow morning at, well at midnight.”

“Phew.”

“I’m tired,” said Morley. “I don’t think I’ll try it.”

“Well that’s right, “ I said. “The whole purpose of mountain climbing to me isn’t just to show off you can get to the top, it’s getting out to this wild country.”

“Well I’m gonna go,” said Japhy.

“Well if you’re gonna go I’m goin with you.”

“Morley?”

“I don’t think I can make it. I’ll wait here.” And that wind was strong, too strong, I felt that as soon as we’d be a few hundred feet up the slope it might hamper our climbing.

Japhy took a small pack of peanuts and raisins and said “This’ll be our gasoline, boy. You ready Ray to make a double-time run?”

“Ready. What would I say to the boys in The Place if I came all this way only to give up at the last minute?”

“It’s late so let’s hurry.” Japhy started up walking very rapidly and then even running sometimes where the climb had to be to the right or left along ridges of scree. Scree is long landslides of rocks and sand, very difficult to scramble through, always little avalanches going on. At every few steps we took it seemed we were going higher and higher on a terrifying elevator, I gulped when I turned around to look back and see all of the state of California it would seem stretching out in three directions under huge blue skies with frightening planetary space clouds and immense vistas of distant valleys and even plateaus and for all I knew whole Nevadas out there. It was terrifying to look down and see Morley a dreaming spot by the little lake waiting for us. “Oh why didn’t I stay with old Henry?” I thought. I now began to be afraid to go any higher from sheer fear of being too high. I began to be afraid of being blown away by the wind. All the nightmares I’d ever had about falling off mountains and precipitous buildings ran through my head in perfect clarity. Also with every twenty steps we took upward we both became completely exhausted.

“That’s because of the high altitude now Ray,” said Japhy sitting beside me panting. “So have raisins and peanuts and you’ll see what kick it give you.” And each time it gave us such a tremendous kick we both jumped up without a word and climbed another twenty, thirty steps. Then sat down again, panting, sweating in the cold wind, high on top of the world our noses sniffing like the noses of little boys playing late Saturday afternoon their final little games in winter. Now the wind began to howl like the wind in movies about the Shroud of Tibet. The steepness began to be too much for me; I was afraid now to look back any more; I peeked: I couldn’t even make out Morley by the tiny lake.

“Hurry it up,” yelled Japhy from a hundred feet ahead. “It’s getting awfully late.” I looked up to the peak. It was right there, I’d be there in five minutes. “Only a half-hour to go!” yelled Japhy. I didn’t believe it. In five minutes of scrambling angrily upward I fell down and looked up and it was still just as far away. What I didn’t like about that peak-top was that the
clouds of all the world were blowing right through it like fog.

“Wouldn’t see anything up there anyway,” I muttered. “Oh why did I ever let myself into this?” Japhy was way ahead of me now, he’d left the peanuts and raisins with me, it was with a kind of lonely solemnity now he had decided to rush to the top if it killed him. He didn’t sit down any more. Soon he was a whole football field, a hundred yards ahead of me, getting smaller. I looked back and like Lot’s wife that did it. “This is too high!” I yelled to Japhy in panic. He didn’t hear me. I raced a few more feet up and fell exhausted on my belly, slipping back just a little. This is too high!” I yelled. I was really scared. Supposing I’d start to slip back for good, these screes might start sliding any time anyway. That damn mountain goat Japhy, I could see him jumping through the foggy air up ahead from rock to rock, up, up, just the flash of his boot bottoms. “How can I keep up with a maniac like that?” But with nutty desperation I followed him. Finally I came to a kind of ledge where I could sit at a level angle instead of having to cling not to slip, and I nudged my whole body inside the ledge just to hold me there tight, so the wind would not dislodge me, and I looked down and around and I had had it. “I’m staying here!” I yelled to Japhy.

“Come on Smith, only another five minutes. I only got a hundred feet to go!”

“I’m staying right here! It’s too high!”

He said nothing and went on. I saw him collapse and pant and get up and make his run again.

I nudged myself closer into the ledge and closed my eyes and thought “Oh what a life this is, why do we have to be born in the first place, and only so we can have our poor gentle flesh laid out to such impossible horrors as huge mountains and rock and empty space,” and with horror I remembered the famous Zen saying, “When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing.” The saying made my hair stand on end; it had been such cute poetry sitting on Alvah’s straw mats. Now it was enough to make my heart pound and my heart bleed for being born at all. “In fact when Japhy gets to the top of that crag he will keep climbing, the way the wind’s blowing. Well this old philosopher is staying right here,” and I closed my eyes. “Besides,” I thought, “rest and be kind, you don’t have to prove anything.” Suddenly, I heard a beautiful broken yodel of a strange musical and mystical intensity in the wind, and looked up, and it was Japhy standing on top of Matterhorn peak letting out his triumphant mountain-conquering Buddha Mountain Smashing song of joy. It was beautiful. It was funny, too, up here on the not-so-funny top of California and in all that rushing fog. But I had to hand it to him, the guts, the endurance, the sweat, and now the crazy human singing: whipped cream on top of ice cream. I didn’t have enough strength to answer his yodel. He ran around up there and went out of sight to investigate the little flat top of some kind (he said) that ran a few feet west and then dropped sheer back down maybe as far as I care to the sawdust floors of Virginia City. It was insane. I could hear him yelling at me but I just nudged farther in my protective nook trembling. I looked down at the small lake where Morley was lying on his back with a blade of grass in his mouth and said out loud “Now there’s the karma of these three me here: Japhy Rider gets to his triumphant mountaintop and makes it, I almost make it and have to give up and huddle in a bloody cave, but the smartest of them all is that poet’s poet lying down there with his knees crossed to the sky chewing on a flower dreaming by a gurgling plage, goddammit they’ll never get me up here again.”
Chapter 12

I really was amazed by the wisdom of Morley now: “Him with all his goddam pictures of snowcapped Swiss Alps” I thought. Then suddenly everything was just like jazz: it happened in one insane second or so: I looked up and saw Japhy running down the mountain in huge twentyfoot leaps, running, leaping, landing with a great drive of his booted heals, bouncing five feet or so, running, then taking another long crazy yodeling sail down the sides of the world and in that flash I realized it’s impossible to fall off mountains you fool and with a yodel of my own I suddenly got up and began running down the mountain after him doing exactly the same huge leaps, the same fantastic runs and jumps, and in the space of about five minutes I’d guess Japhy Ryder and I (in my sneakers, driving the heals of my sneakers right into sand, rock, boulders, I didn’t care any more I was so anxious to get down out of there) came leaping and yelling like mountain goats or I’d say like Chinese lunatics of a thousand years ago, enough to raise the hair on the head of the meditating Morley by the lake, who said he looked up and saw us flying down and couldn’t believe it. In fact with one of my greatest leaps and loudest screams of joy I came flying right down to the edge of the lake and dug my sneakered heals into the mud and just fell sitting there, glad. Japhy was already taking his shoes off and pouring sand and pebbles out. It was great. I took off my sneakers and poured out a couple of buckets of lava dust and said, “Ah Japhy you taught me the final lesson of them all, you can’t fall of a mountain.”

“And that’s what they mean by the saying, When you get to the top of the mountain keep climbing, Smith.”

“Dammit that yodel of yours was the most beautiful thing I ever heard in my life. I wish I’d had a tape recorder to take it down.”

“Those things aren’t made to be heard by the people below,” says Japhy dead serious.

“By God you’re right, all those sedentary bums sitting around on pillows hearing the cry of the triumphant mountain smasher, they don’t deserve it. But when I looked up and saw you running down that mountain I suddenly understood everything.”

“Ah a little satori for Smith today,” says Morley. . .

* * *