

## Inherited

By Fraser Bell

*It is the wind that unsettles us the most. Tearing through the landscape it roars down onto the solitary climber on the coire floor. Above, glowering dark granite peaks fleetingly loom out from the clouds like ancient ministers summoning judgement. Despite the deep powder snow, the climber moves with a purpose beyond that of determination. There is a sense of fate in each step, for this emissary carries a summons from beyond this world.*

I stand by the window watching the snow silently begin to form on the stone cill. As I lift my eyes, the crow-stepped skyline becomes blurred by unexpected tears. I have committed now, there can be no retreat. I have come to be with him in these final hours.

He lies on his back, bathed in the sickly glow of the monitor. His face, riven by a lifetime of mountain weather and now medication, is still recognisable from childhood memory; sitting on the coarse gritstone of the old house's front step, a karabiner catching the sunlight as he turns it slowly in his large, brown hand.

Grey flecked eyes, identical to those that stare back at my own reflection, open momentarily and seek the folded map by the bed. I stare across at twenty years of absence, broken by a reluctant phone call, and cross an invisible line to sit gently by his bedside. A culture of stoic suffering can only hold out for so long.

*The climber peels away from the level ground and begins to ascend the steep west face to the foot of the gully. As the ground begins to slope, small pockets of powder snow slither from under his feet. He knows that the snow-pack is unstable, that the conditions are dangerous. He should not be here. Follow the bearing, trust the compass, count your steps. These are the pillars of faith in this hostile place.*

*The gully begins to emerge from the blizzard. A rock fin disentangles itself from the snow on either side and rises to the grey eternity above. The climber stops at the foot of the face, his hands hanging loosely by his sides, ice axes strapped redundantly to his pack. His world now reduced to monochrome. Black rock, white ice. A drifting vision of the funeral appears. White shirts, black ties loose around wrinkled necks. Two corbies watching from a snow-covered branch as a hip flask is passed between rock-hewn hands.*

*In the lee of the gully, the wind lulls to a murmur. Voices of those passed whisper across the snowfield as doubts manifest themselves like rising snow devils. A deep shiver confirms this is beyond him, obligation or none. Grade V the guidebook had said. But then, guidebooks can only tell you how things should be and not how they are. This could only be done alone, his heart had softly iterated. The climber takes a deep breath, tilts his head slowly upwards and then turns to answer the whispering wind,*

"Climbing".

*The indifference of the mountain remains silent.*

I take the open map and place it across the peaks and folds of the bed. Propped up against the pillows, the steady movement beneath the gown betrays his shallow breathing. Unable to speak now, it matters little. What stilted conversation there was between us has long passed. His eyes are alert now as he casts his gaze downwards and roams that thin landscape of memory. Those same hands that taught me my first hitch move slowly, seeking familiarity in its abstracted contours and tiny symbols. They pass over the scent of bog myrtle in the cool night air of a summer bivvy and across the coarse sting of rough granite on shredded skin. A raven's croak

breaks the silence of a warm day on the buttress as the shadow of his hand moves steadily westwards.

*The climber is moving slowly. Beneath the snow crust, the ice remains thin and unpredictable. A glance between his feet shows his approach trail has been covered by the whirling snow. Kicking the front points of his crampons deep into the ice, he lets the tools take his weight momentarily. Without a rope and partner it is near impossible to judge the height gained in these conditions. Leaning his face into the slope, he can feel the heat of his breath. Soon the lactic acid will begin to fill his trembling limbs. High above, invisible in the whiteout, the crux pillar broods like a dark sentinel.*

I too have run amok in the playground he claims as his own tonight. My own memory stirs as I remember sunny, dry days spent with friends on obscure slabs of pink granite, washing the mica schist from my hands in peat-tainted burns. Watching curiously as it turned and sparkled in the downward current. Our adventures were separate and I had no wish to be reminded of him. Only now do I realise I carried him with me. Like a Brocken Spectre; a magnified version of me fashioned and projected into a theatre of sky, rock, peat and snow. I watch closely as his hand settles on the map. His eyes rise to meet mine and I am held.

*Rising from the shelter of the gully wall, the climber moves tentatively out onto the projecting ice bulge. Spindrift lashes his face as he turns from the howling wind. Directly above him lies the pillar, a faceted rock column smeared in verglas. He now knows he must be over two hundred metres from the foot of the climb. Straining forward on aching legs he can just make out the line; a threadbare sliver of ice reaching over the face of the crux onto the safety of the frozen turf above. The cold is now unbearable. It creeps around him like a whispering darkness, offering release. Climbing upwards, his axe finds a crack in the rock face, twists and begins to pull. Front points teeter for a moment before emptiness takes hold. The lack of resistance is almost a relief as the air momentarily rushes through the climber's ears. A jarring pain screams through his arm as the axe holds, sparks fly out into the abyss as crampons instinctively flail against the rock.*

Only now do I see how alike our hands are. A landscape of calluses and scars stripped back to reveal the sinew beneath. The Spectre regards me closely before closing his eyes and returning to where I cannot follow, I consider this place he has chosen before gently laying my hand on his, feeling the faint pulse of life still buried deep within.

*The front points catch momentarily on a ledge. It is enough. Minutes pass as the climber collects himself. A flicker of movement. The sound of forged metal biting into ice resonates across the cliff face. From within that place that others cannot know, the exhausted climber peers out into the encroaching darkness and begins to delicately move up the pillar's exposed face. Poor ice shears at the touch of his axe as spindrift slithers viciously into his face, choking and blinding him. Higher still he goes, sobbing as he lashes out at his tormentor. Above the dark lip of the crux the sky is bruising to a yellowy grey.*

*The soft thud of frozen turf. A final pull and he lies half over the top of the pillar. Listen closely to the wind and we can hear it carry the sound of his gentle cries. Tears come. Slow at first, the hot salt cutting through ice forming on his face. And now a deep resonant howl as the waves of pain come from within. The slow filling of a lifetime's void rushing in like hot aches. In time, the convulsing sobs come with less frequency. Once hot tears now lie frozen to cold skin. The climber rises onto his knees and sees the cairn cast against the dying western heavens.*

*There is only one thing left to do.*

I sit there awhile longer. Our time together has not been enough. Though in this last request, there may yet be atonement. In time, I may welcome the Spectre as he dances across the cloud at my side. I untie the rope that binds us and walk out into the snow.

*The climber reaches into his bag and gently pulls out an ancient karabiner. Its battered surface glints in the remains of the western sun as he places it gently onto the cairn of that obscure winter peak. As he turns to descend, the snow is already caressing its up-turned face. In a few minutes, it will be buried.*